The Story of the Novel

George Watson

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This book started life as a series of lectures for undergraduates reading English at Cambridge, and has profited in more ways I can easily count from their questioning attention. It was the lack of any book appropriate to student needs that first stirred me to this attempt.

Most of the works (I cannot seriously hope all) to which I feel indebted in argument are listed in an appendix as 'Notes for Further Reading'. I hope this arrangement will look more useful than a series of interruptions to my own text, and none the less grateful.

In the course of writing I have grown variously indebted for advice, most often to Cambridge friends and colleagues such as Elsie Duncan-Jones, Michael Beddow, Patrick Boyde, Peter Croft and Colin Smith, as well as to P. G. Boucé of Paris and Robert A. Day of New York. And to my dedicatee, Vivienne Mylne of the University of Kent at Canterbury, I owe the rewards of twenty years of talk about European fiction, and an irreverent eye for exposing some general law that an individual case has obstinately failed to observe.

St John's College, Cambridge G.W.
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Preface

A story is the best thing about a novel. But the title of this book, which is deliberately ambiguous, is meant to suggest something more than that. 'Novel' is the name of a literary kind, and there is a story to tell about how, over the centuries, its substance has widened and its conventions changed. This book is about both: it is at once a study of nrrative, and a history of the novel since its emergence some three centuries ago.

Its pattern differs, however, from older histories like Ernest Baker's or Walter Allen's, which moved chronologically from novelist to novelist. In this book I shall move rather from one aspect of narrative to another, though some chapters are broadly historical within themselves. Since no two readers have read the same novels, the best way to use it might be as a framework: a sort of clothes-horse to hang one's own instances on – relating what one has read, or means to read, to the outline offered here.

Critical debate suggests that the study of fiction now needs just that. The problem of narrative by now represents a highly sophisticated inquiry – so much so that it is sometimes hard to find one's way back to the starting-point, or to get at the facts that a reader of fiction now needs in order to acquire a sense of what is exceptional and what is ordinary. That is because it is always a temptation for critics to write with the object of impressing other critics: and one worth resisting, if hard to resist. My first impulse was to write an elementary book rather than an original one; though originality sometimes comes unlooked for, and elementary arguments have a way of turning irresistibly into something else. And any working historian knows that it is easier to be original than to get it right.

Henry James, in an excited moment, called the novel 'independent, elastic, prodigious', and its story is as untidy as some of its masterpieces. It is already hard to achieve a 'poetic' of it, or working

handbook, and it will doubtless get harder. If Aristotle had ever read any novels, he would have needed a far wider canvas than he allowed to tragedy in that surviving fragment of analysis known as the *Poetics*. My own view is that the novel none the less calls for analysis in something like the Aristotelian style, even though it now amounts to some three centuries of endeavour in all the great literary languages of the Western world. By Aristotelian here I mean a tradition which is analytically concerned with formal elements considered as ways of representing realities, or as mimetic devices; and one hospitable to historical reference, too, since those devices change from age to age. The study now needs a sense of form that is not merely formalistic. All that could help in contemporary judgement too. Twentieth-century novels are powerfully reminiscent of their origins, to an informed eye, and especially of that highly formative century between Defoe and Scott, Lesage and Balzac.

It is in this spirit that I am concerned here with form: as a complex of devices for representing reality. That is why I have devoted a first chapter to the defence of realism: a doctrine that dogmatically upholds the claims of fiction to represent the real, and in my view fundamentally right. All that has meant shifting the argument from single novels or novelists towards a sense of how novels relate to one another in long ancestral lines. The sympathetic reader will have to expect to shift his interests in a similar direction. It is one thing to read novels, as most of us do; another to reflect efficiently about the novel as an evolving literary kind, much though the one activity depends upon the other. In that sense, this book is about the Novel rather than novels. It considers how a great literary species was moulded into a recognisable life of its own, and how its conventions have evolved since the seventeenth century.

A European community existed in fiction before statesmen were inspired and encouraged to make institutions of it, and no boundaries of nation or period can reasonably limit this inquiry, though my main emphasis falls on novels composed in English and in French. The twentieth century, as I see it, has been rich above all in its faculty to revive and adapt, and many of its experiments are best seen as reflections of preceding ages. That reminder could be salutary: one odd effect of the cult of the New since the 1950s has been to exalt as original some narrative practices that Diderot or Sterne would have found unsurprising; and some fashionable arguments about meta-fictionality strike me as ignorant, and perhaps wilfully ignorant at that.

The *nouveau roman* of the 1960s was nothing like as *nouveau* as its name suggested. Post-war fiction has plenty of lively and original elements to boast of; but seeing what is original calls for some widely shared knowledge of the sources out of which modern techniques have grown. That is the first object of this book.

By and large, and with that object in mind, I have concerned myself with novels that are famous, or at least known; and some of my assertions about the primacy of events may seem over-bold and omissive unless seen in the light of that guiding principle. To deal largely with known books is a matter of courtesy, in the first instance, since any reader would prefer to hear about novels which he has read, or may soon read. It is also more useful. And it is compelled upon the historian, in any case, by a body of evidence so vast that his own knowledge is necessarily partial and imperfect. But masterpieces cannot be grasped in isolation, and my scope is rather wider than that. Great art, as F. Scott Fitzgerald once remarked in his notes, 'is the contempt of a great man for small art', and to feel that contempt one needs to know something about small art, and to widen one's interests beyond the best. If it has proved difficult to maintain a balance in this delicate matter, I hope that the general principle, at least, can be conceded.

Contents

1 *An Apology for Fiction*

A defence, or 'apologie', for fiction in the present age must mean one that upholds its claim to describe the real. That defence, by now, is inescapable. The descriptive claim is at once under heavy attack, and yet fundamental to the classic pretensions of the novel over three centuries. That is because the great novelists of the European past have claimed to describe, and even to describe accurately, and we do them little honour in praising them for having achieved something else. And since realism is by now the most familiar name for the descriptive claims of fiction, this argument will turn irresistibly into its defence, though it will run wider than the works of the great nineteenth-century realists.

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To practise realism, it is often argued, or to defend its theoretical claims, now belongs to a tradition that is quaintly antique and obstinately British. British novelists since the Second World War have somehow acquired a reputation for hostility to experiment and for a cosy, naïve assumption that novels are after all concerned with social accuracy. My own view is that the case for realism is better than this orthodox view allows us to see; that the argument about nationality has been misconceived; and that realism, far from being antique, is more modern than its rivals.

If experiment here means a playful awareness of fictional technique on the part of the novelist, or 'fictionality', then the British enjoyed their experimental period earlier than the French or the Americans. Fictions that exploit some logical absurdity in narrative existed in English at least as early as Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* in the mid-eighteenth century, or Robert Southey's narrative medley *The Doctor* early in the nineteenth. A sense of the 'fictive' in fiction is very far from

recent in the English novel: a fact that may help to explain why much that looks *nouveau* in Paris looks old-hat in London.

Nor has English fiction simply abandoned its fictive interests in favour of realism. On the contrary, the two have run sidelong and interweaving courses, where priorities are difficult to establish. Richardson, Fielding and Smollett published before Sterne, who parodies their descriptive pretensions; and Dickens, Thackeray and Trollope do not exclude fictive devices when they write realistic novels. Fictionality, being familiar to Rabelais and Cervantes, is older than Sterne, and it never died between *Don Quixote* and the French *nouveau roman.* In the present century, as early as 1925, André Gide wrote *Les Faux-monnayeurs,* a novel in which a novelist is writing a novel . . . ; so that fictive devices are not recent in French either, in this century, as deliberated forms, and they have a long if intermittent tradition in both languages. James Joyce was not an isolated phenomenon between the wars. Samuel Beckett's *Murphy* appeared in 1938. And in 1939, the same year as Joyce's *Finnegans Wake,* 'Flann O'Brien' (or Brian O'Nolan) produced *At Swim-Two-Birds,* a novel narrated by an Irish student writing a novel about a certain Trellis, who is writing a book about his enemies; they, in revenge, are writing one about Trellis. . . . And in 1962 Doris Lessing's *Golden Notebook* appeared: a long study by a novelist unable to write a novel, as commonly understood though still capable of setting out her convictions, and confusions, about the state of mankind.

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The real case against realism, however, is an argument about narrative.

The anti-realist, who by now is easily recognised by his habit of calling novels 'texts' and by an obsession with the fictive, may have been the source and origin of a good deal of nonsense, but he has undeniably performed two services to be thankful for. The first is to have drawn attention away from style and towards story. He has returned narrative, and rightly, to the centre of argument. The rewards of that new attention may still be something less than clear, but that is a deficiency that may be repaired with time. I take it that story in fiction, like melody in music, is at once fundamental, and fundamentally baffling. There is still no general theory that accounts for its potency, and no general system to which instances can be

efficiently related. Quest or pursuit, love requital, or what V. S. Pritchett once memorably called the Principle of Procrastinated Rape – all this does not yet amount to an effective taxonomy of the subject. And yet, whatever the difficulties, it cannot be acceptable simply to leave story out. The French New Critics of the 1960s may have been rash in rejecting the claims of realism, and inconclusive in their attempts to create a general theory of narrative. But at least they could see that story matters. We can all stop apologising for it.

The second, and consequent, service has been to restore an interest in form: the conventions by which novelists shape the stories they have to tell. That interest is not new. Form was the grand, echoing obsession of Henry James's New York prefaces of 1907–9, written in his mid-sixties for a revised collection of his novels. It was a brisk launching, but the half century that followed showed little progress in the question. Perhaps it was felt that James's own tentative solutions to formal problems were too intimately inbound with his own fictions – fictions of a highly analytical kind that novelists in the 1920s and 1930s were no longer even trying to write.

More recent formalism, at all events, has not been Jamesian. As it re-emerged in the 1950s, mainly in French and Anglo-American criticism, it was the work of academics rather than of novelists, and it arose out of a post-war fashion for structural linguistics. Structuralism was a doctrine of patterns within language and, more recently, in anthropology and literature, based on a concept of symmetries of which binary opposition was the simplest. It has proved a poor exchange, however, for the rich suggestive impulses of James's essays. For one thing, a novel is too untidy an object, often, to be seen as regulated in its entirety, and the patterns offered can be impoverishing: the figure in the carpet is not itself the carpet, or anything like it. For another, the lineage of fiction needs to be studied with some sense of historical chronology: it is one thing to write a letter-novel in the late eighteenth century, when the form was in vogue – quite another to attempt it in the late twentieth. And again, a novel is a fund of knowledge as well as a literary form; and any pure and exclusive formalism, whether structuralist or other, flies in the face of much of the ordinary experience of reading fiction. People still read novels, thank goodness, but many critics now read texts. That is parody, but a parody with too much truth for comfort. To the extent that it is true, it poses an odd problem. The need now is less to turn people into critics than critics into people.

My present task is to construct an historical diagram of the novel over three centuries that will work as a frame of reference, enabling the reader to relate what he knows of novels, or may some day know, to a sense of how forms were created, and how they evolved.

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The knowledge that fiction offers is of life itself. It would hardly be worth bothering with otherwise.

> Were there not a matter known,
> There would be no passion,

as Herrick once put it; and the novel has undeniably excited passion – whether anxiety, detestation or love. 'As a people, the novel is educating us',[1] an American poet told a Baltimore audience in 1881, holding up to view a copy of James's recent novel *The American* which he had borrowed from a local library, and which already bore on its covers the signs of wear. Novels can inform on some surprising subjects, what is more, such as the naval expedition to Carthagena in Smollett's *Roderick Random*, or the Highland revolt of 1745 in Scott's *Waverley*, or Napoleon's invasion of Russia in Tolstoy's *War and Peace*; or more general truths, as Melville in *Moby Dick* informs us about the corrosive human obsession with evil as well as the mating habits of the sperm whale. Proust tells us about social manners in the Belle Epoque, C. P. Snow about how Britain was administered in the 1940s and 1950s, and Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* about what to do with things on, and by implication off, a desert island; and there are novels that will tell you how to cook a meal, or win a lover or an argument. Like other kinds of story, a novel is a way of learning about how things were or are – cognitive instrument; and those who distrust stories as evidence should consider how often in conversation we use them to make points or answer questions. 'In our lives we are always weaving novels', as Trollope aptly remarks in his *Autobiography* (1883) (ch. 9). A question in conversation like 'Is he reliable?' might well be answered: 'The last time he made an appointment with me, he never turned up, and he didn't even say he was sorry.' That is to tell a story, and a story more informative than the answer 'Yes' or 'No' would be.

Stories, whether true or fictional, instruct; and readers of novels over three centuries are very unlikely to have been wrong in thinking

they were learning about life as they read them. Professional critics who deny all that are merely labouring to disprove the obvious. Indeed the novel is so convincing an account of life that it even possesses the sinister power of misrepresenting it persuasively. And it could not misrepresent without representing. This is a much more reasonable complaint against fiction than the complaint that it tells you nothing. The English authoress who in 1810 protested that 'love is a passion particularly exaggerated in novels' could see all that very clearly:

> When a young lady, having imbibed these notions, comes into the world, she finds that this formidable passion acts a very subordinate part on the great theatre of the world; that its vivid sensations are mostly limited to a very early period. . . . Least of all will a course of novels prepare a young lady for the neglect and tedium of life which she is perhaps doomed to encounter. . . .[2]

The same point was shortly to be substantiated by six novels from the pen of Jane Austen. A century later Ford Madox Ford made it again in more cynical vein, when he remarked of his heroine in *The Good Soldier* (1915) that 'she had read few novels, so that the idea of a pure and constant love succeeding the sound of wedding bells had never been very much presented to her' (IV, i). It is surely as clear as anything could be that novels often mirror a real world, even granting that some mirrors distort. The mother of Brian Moore, the Ulster novelist, on being asked whether she enjoyed reading her son's novels, once replied: 'How *can* I enjoy them? I keep waiting for *me* to come in.'

The simplest and clearest explanation of this mirror function, and an old one, is to call the novelist a kind of historian. That explanation is older than Fielding, who was playfully fond of it. In his essay on Trollope in 1883, James seized on it anew to justify the status of fiction, claiming that the whole dignity of the novel as a convincing fund of knowledge must in the end depend on it. 'It is impossible to imagine what a novelist takes himself to be', he wrote indignantly of Trollope's fictive whimsies such as 'Dear reader', 'unless he regard himself as an historian, and his narrative as history. It is only as an historian that he has the smallest *locus standi*', adding that 'as a narrator of fictitious events' the novelist is simply nowhere. 'To insert into his attempt a backbone of logic, he must relate events that are assumed to be real', and he compares Trollope's nudging apostrophes

to the misbehaviour of an actor who disconcertingly pulls off his disguise on stage.

James's argument here is in essence so good that one can learn even from the ways in which it goes wrong. Of course it is true that readers commonly demand of novels that their characters and events should be credible, and of course that kind of credibility is much like what we look for in life itself: whether in the life that goes on around us, or in what the historians tell. Real life, after all, can be bewildering and incredible, in the sense of requiring explanations, and the mere fact that one saw or heard something does not guarantee much in the way of understanding. 'Why on earth did he say that?' one hears people remark, meaning they cannot understand it; or even 'How on earth can he have said it?', meaning that though they heard it they can scarcely believe it. The business of the novelist, to that extent, is like the business of the historian or of any ordinary man. It is to *make sense* of what happens. Macaulay, whom James himself instances here, writes under a demand from his readers that is much like that of a reader of novels, and the parallel grows even closer in fictions that are themselves historical. The Chevalier, or Bonnie Prince Charlie, whether in a history book or in Scott's *Waverley*, needs to be a convincing portrait of an historical personage. It seems not only lunatic to deny this, but profoundly disrespectful to Scott's historical genius and purpose as well.

James's argument is less telling when he attacks Trollope's whimsies or fictive devices. It is interesting to note that James's mistake here is based on a premise similar to that of the post-structuralist critic today, though he would prefer to speak of texts rather than of novels. James believed that the novelist must choose between a descriptive function and a self-regarding or autonomous status, and he disapprovingly quotes a highly fictive remark in the last chapter of Trollope's *Barchester Towers*: 'The end of a novel, like the end of a children's dinner-party, must be made up of sweetmeats and sugar-plums.' That is a plain directive from Trollope to the reader that his novel is a novel, and not a record of real events. But does it represent as complete a difference from history as James or his successors have imagined? Historians frequently signal to their readers that what they are writing is history; and lecturers have been known to begin or end with 'In the present lecture . . .'. In ordinary conversation, in a similar way, it is possible to remark: 'I've something to tell you.' Critics have

made such heavy weather of those elements in fiction that announce themselves to be just that, that it is by now difficult to persuade them that such devices, which are at least as old as Rabelais and Cervantes in prose fiction, are in no way peculiar to novels, or even to literature. To use language significantly is to work within contexts; and it can be useful as well as amusing to remind the reader or auditor what that context is. A novelist may find it helpful as well as playful to remind his reader that he is reading a novel: all that can be an essential part of the descriptive force of what is occurring. The fictive is not, or not necessarily, an enemy of the realistic.

As an element in fiction, there is nothing recent about such directive reminders. James, writing in 1883 in his essay on Trollope, abused the device as old-fashioned, which by then it undoubtedly was. But a delight in the fictive would have seemed less surprising to an eighteenth- or nineteenth-century critic than it does to many today. That is perhaps because we are less familiar than they with the rabelaisian and cervantic traditions. Hazlitt, speaking of that riotous compendium on imaginary convents in the Lake District, Thomas Amory's *John Buncle*, which began to appear three years before *Tristram Shandy*, justly remarked that the soul of Rabelais must have passed into its author. Nowadays, if anything like that appeared in English, it would be judged a characteristic product of some *avant-garde* American novelist not yet middle-aged and living west of the Rockies.

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There is a further weakness in the argument against realism. How far can we confidently assert something to be false without claiming to know what is true? To say that Proust gives us a false picture of the Belle Epoque in Paris, for instance, implies that in some degree we know what an accurate picture would be like. But at this distance in time, we can only know that by report, and one of those reports is Proust's novel. The French New Critics, like other knowledge – sceptics, are inclined to contradict themselves here without noticing it. If fiction never tells the truth about anything – if the claims of literature to describe reality always disappoint, as Roland Barthes once rashly suggested[3] – then we need to be told what better sources of knowledge there are, and on what grounds their claims to superiority

rest. Sometimes the sceptic of realism will be able to do just that. But to make his case he will have to be able to do it in every instance, and one counter-instance would be fatal.

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To restore a community of interest between critic and reader in the present age, then, we need a new Apology for Fiction, and one that respects its power to inform and to instruct. That need not mean any abandonment of interest in narrative form. Form is the *way by which* realities are described: a necessary condition of truth-telling, whether in fiction or elsewhere. Not a sufficient condition, of course. A great liar, like a great artist, needs to be a master of language; and as a contrary we sometimes feel, as in George Orwell's early novels, that the novelist is not a good enough liar – a fumbling sense of form retarding a tale accurate in its general character and worth the telling. But to see form as somehow counterpoised or opposed to the truth of fiction is to miss its point. 'The novel is always subject to a comparison with reality', a critic has remarked of social fiction, 'and therefore found to be illusion'.[4] On the contrary: it is a comparison that honours fiction, which at once needs it and can well sustain it. The difficulty is that some critics have lately demanded too much of description. Indeed, they have put impossible demands upon it. A wider tolerance of its constitution might lead us to demand less.

The first step is to realise that descriptions omit. A map of the London Underground, for instance, describes only the relations between its stations in a linear code, and omits countless details irrelevant to the business of guiding passengers from one station to another. A caricature of a statesman omits more than most oil portraits would do, and still more than his presence would tell us; but if it is a good caricature, or even a merely adequate one, we do not deny that it describes him. The *Mona Lisa*, it seems reasonable to guess, does not reveal everything about the aspect of a Florentine lady living around 1500, and reveals more than that at the same time; but it would be odd to deny that it describes her. Lewis Carroll, in a brilliant summary of the modern argument against realism in *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded* (1893), tells of a map-maker who had 'the grandest idea of all' – a map of a country 'on the scale of *a mile to the mile*', though the farmers objected to spreading it out: 'So now we use the country itself, as its own map, and I assure you it does nearly as

well' (ch. 11). A novel that told everything would be about as helpful as Carroll's map. Reality is all the more usefully and efficiently described by selecting the evidence and leaving things out.

The second step is to see that a misdescription is a kind of description. Realists have long been under attack for allegedly failing to notice that the novelist himself is a victim of some scheme of values: a theory, a point of view, a conceptual framework, an ideology. It is by now a conventional assumption among the critics of realism that a novelist is always a victim of theory, never its master: an odd assumption, surely, when one considers that many reflective minds such as Flaubert and George Eliot have chosen their convictions in a highly deliberative mood, and that the evidences for their choice survive in what they wrote. Odd, too, in the sense that critics of realism rarely pause to consider that a novelist might understand his world all the better for possessing a conceptual framework or ideology by which to do so. It is still glibly assumed that ideologies can only distort. But it is one thing to accept that they can sometimes do so, and another to assume that they always must. Sometimes, often, we understand the world all the better because of the concepts we bring to that understanding. A map-maker may draw maps all the better for using an inherited framework of latitude and longitude, and it would not be persuasive to object that the lines he draws on his maps are not to be observed on the ground.

The same tolerance should extend to fiction. A novelist may use terms descriptive of social rank in distinguishing his characters, and it would not be much of an objection to protest that such terms would not be understood by those he describes. He might be justified in answering that he claims to be a social novelist precisely because he understands such matters better than others. That claim might prove unfounded, on examination. But it is not in principle absurd. After all, in most areas of human knowledge, such as the physical sciences, we accept without cavil that a professional performance requires a framework of concepts within which to work. The difficulty in accepting something like that in the field of social observation is not impossibly great.

The issue of skill also concerns readers, and the variety of their response is sometimes offered as a reason for doubting the descriptive status of fiction. 'Everybody knows that competent readers read the same text differently', it has been argued, 'which is proof that the text is not fully determined. . . .'[5] But that is a very easy view of what