

WALTER ALLEN

THE
ENGLISH
NOVEL

*From The Pilgrim's Progress
to Sons and Lovers*



An extraordinarily good book' – *New Statesman*

PELICAN BOOKS

THE ENGLISH NOVEL

Walter Allen was born in 1911 in Birmingham and is a graduate in English of the university of that city. His novels include *Innocence is Drowned*, *Blind Man's Ditch*, *Rogue Elephant*, *Dead Man Over All*, and *All in a Lifetime*. He is the author of a topographical book *The Black Country*, the study of Arnold Bennett in the 'English Novelists' series, and of *Six Great Novelists*, and has also compiled the anthology *Writers on Writing*. His sequel to *The English Novel, Tradition and Dream*, a study of the English and American novel since 1920. His latest publications include *The Short Story in English* and *As I walked Down New Grub Street*. He has contributed critical articles and reviews to most of the leading literary journals and has broadcast frequently on books for the BBC and was a founder-member of *The Critics*. He has several times been a visiting professor of English in the United States, was Literary Editor of the *New Statesman* in 1960-61, and was Professor of English in the New University of Ulster from 1967 to 1973. Walter Allen is married and has two sons and two daughters.

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THE ENGLISH NOVEL
A SHORT CRITICAL HISTORY

PENGUIN BOOKS

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TO L. P. HARTLEY

in friendship and admiration

Contents

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	9
AUTHOR'S PREFACE	11
INTRODUCTION	13
1. <i>The Beginnings</i>	21
2. <i>The Eighteenth Century</i>	43
3. <i>The Early Nineteenth Century: the First Generation</i>	103
4. <i>The Early Victorians</i>	139
5. <i>The Later Victorians</i>	218
6. <i>The Novel from 1881 to 1914</i>	258
7. <i>1914 and After</i>	341
INDEX	365

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Author's Preface

IT was Sir Walter Raleigh, in his little book on the English novel, who noted that novelists had commonly been great readers of novels. No doubt it would be surprising if this were not so, and certainly novelists have not changed in this respect since Raleigh wrote his book sixty years ago. For my own part, when I look back, it seems that the main concern of my life since I was a schoolboy has been reading novels, discussing novels with friends, writing about novels, and trying to write novels myself; and all these activities exist in my mind as a single activity. This book, then, which has been written over a period of years spent also in reviewing contemporary fiction and writing fiction of my own, is primarily an account of what the history of the novel in England looks like to someone who follows the craft of fiction himself.

Even so, it is not the book I originally planned to write. That was to have taken the story down to our own times, to the novels of – to mention some obvious names – Miss Elizabeth Bowen, Joyce Cary, Mr Greene, Mr Waugh, Mr Hanley, Mr Hartley, Mr Henry Green, and even beyond. But I was then faced with the twin problems of length and scale. If in a book on the novel of 150,000 words there is room only for 6,000 words on Dickens, the greatest genius among our novelists, how much space is one to give Joyce Cary or Mr Greene? As put, of course, the question admits of no real answer. Our relation to Joyce Cary and Mr Greene is different from that to Dickens. Our immediate interest in Joyce Cary and Mr Greene is that they are our contemporaries, the material of their art our world, our lives. Because of this, we cannot hope to be able to judge them as we can novelists of the past. The critical approach to our contemporaries must differ from the critical approach to writers of the past, if only because we are too near our contemporaries and share too much with them the situation of our own time.

The obvious novelists with which to end my study seemed therefore to be Joyce and Lawrence, emerging as they did round about 1914, the year which marks a break in so many other things beside fiction. Joyce and Lawrence, with their lesser coevals, represent something like a watershed between the novel of the past and the contemporary novel. The contemporary novel has its own problems, its own excellences, and, I would say, its own masters, masters for us however different they may appear to our grandchildren. These are to be the subject of a later book.

My indebtednesses. Innumerable of course, and to a whole host of people and books and reviews; to friends with whom I have talked for years, and long before this present work was even dreamed of; to how many articles in periodicals and reviews of new fiction, those of Edwin Muir during his long spell on the *Listener*, for example, published during the past twenty-five years; to books on subjects formally quite unrelated to fiction. The critics who have shaped or influenced both my general view of the novel as a literary form and my opinions on individual novelists will, I imagine, be obvious enough to those familiar with the field. Wherever possible, I have given specific references in the text. Here, there is room only for a list of the books which I know have influenced me. I hope it may be useful to any who, having read this work, wish to consider the subject more widely and more deeply.

First, the classics of criticism of the novel. The introductory chapters to the eighteen books of *Tom Jones*; Sir Walter Scott's *Lives of the Novelists*; Hazlitt's *The English Comic Writers*; Trollope's *Autobiography*; the relevant essays in Walter Bagehot's *Literary Studies* and Leslie Stephen's *Hours in a Library*; Henry James's prefaces collected in *The Art of the Novel*, with R. P. Blackmur's introduction; the relevant essays in James's *Partial Portraits* and *Notes on Novelists*; and the correspondence on fiction between James and Stevenson edited by Janet Adam Smith under the title *Henry James and Robert Louis Stevenson*.

Then the books on what may be called the theory of the novel. *The Craft of Fiction*, by Percy Lubbock; *Aspects of the Novel*, by E. M. Forster; *The Structure of the Novel*, by Edwin Muir; Elizabeth Bowen's 'Notes on Writing a Novel' in *Collected Impressions*; *A Treatise on the Novel and Some Principles of Fiction*, both by Robert Liddell.

A few collections of essays on novelists or various aspects of fiction have been especially valuable because of the attitudes towards fiction that subsume them. *The Common Reader*, by Virginia Woolf; *Early Victorian Novelists*, by David Cecil; *In My Good Books*, *The Living Novel*, and *Books in General*, all by V. S. Pritchett; *The Great Tradition*, by F. R. Leavis; *The Liberal Imagination*, by Lionel Trilling; *Axel's Castle* and *The Wound and the Bow*, by Edmund Wilson; and *An Introduction to the English Novel*, by Arnold Kettle.

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WALTER ALLEN

Introduction

LITERARY historians, horrified it seems by the newness of the form, have commonly thought it necessary to provide the novel with a respectable antiquity, much as the genealogist fits out the parvenu with an impeccable family tree. In their own way they have been very successful; at any rate they have succeeded admirably in confusing categories. They have managed to write, for instance, of the *Chanson de Roland* and *Euphues* as though these works really had some connexion with the novels of Richardson and Dickens. They have devised such labels as the 'Elizabethan Novel', the 'Jacobean Novel', terms whose only fault is that they imply a relationship between the works so described and novels as we know them that does not exist. In their eagerness to supply the novel with a dignified ancestry they have behaved rather like a man who, setting out to write a history of the motor-car, should think it proper to begin by devoting a third of his space to the evolution of the ox-cart.

The historians have been guilty of a confusion: they have assumed that the words *fiction* and *novel* are synonymous and interchangeable. They are not. At the heart of the confusion is the fact that the story is common to both. So long as men have told stories there has been fiction, whether in verse or prose, and only to this extent is it true to say that any work of fiction written before about 1670 in England is in some sense an ancestor of the novel. But the novel itself is something new. True, it has never been found easy to define, but this does not prevent us from knowing a great deal about novels. How could we fail to, when for the past two centuries the novel has been the major prose literary form in England, France, and Russia? And we can date with complete accuracy the earliest books in English that today we habitually read as novels; books, that is, that we judge by the same terms of reference as we do the works of Jane Austen, Balzac, Turgenev, and E. M. Forster. In 1678, a tinker and itinerant preacher, in jail for his religious convictions, wrote *The Pilgrim's Progress*; in 1719 a failed haberdasher who had turned journalist and government spy wrote *Robinson Crusoe*, and, three years later, *Moll Flanders*; in 1740, a middle-aged master-printer wrote *Pamela*.

Even if we cannot define it, we know what to expect when we read a novel:

We find here a close imitation of man and manners; we see the very web and texture of society as it really exists, and as we meet it when we come into the world. If poetry has 'something more divine' in it, this savours more of humanity. We are brought acquainted with the motives and characters of mankind, imbibe our notions of virtue and vice from practical examples, and are taught a knowledge of the world through the airy medium of romance.

Thus Hazlitt, writing before the greater part of the world's major novels had appeared. With every major novel as it appears our interpretation of the novel as a literary form must to some extent alter; yet Hazlitt's statement of our expectations of a novel remains substantially true; as may be seen if we set beside it a statement from a modern critic, Lionel Trilling, in *The Liberal Imagination*:

For our time the most effective agent of the moral imagination has been the novel of the last two hundred years. It was never, either aesthetically or morally, a perfect form and its faults and failures can be quickly enumerated. But its greatness and its practical usefulness lay in its unremitting work of involving the reader himself in the moral life, inviting him to put his own motives under examination, suggesting that reality is not as his conventional education has led him to see it. It taught us, as no other genre ever did, the extent of human variety and the value of this variety. It was the literary form to which the emotions of understanding and forgiveness were indigenous, as if by the definition of the form itself.

We know, too, what the novelist sets out to do when he writes a novel. Like any other artist the novelist is a maker. He is making an imitation, an imitation of the life of man on earth. He is making, it might be said, a working model of life as he sees and feels it, his conclusions about it being expressed in the characters he invents, the situations in which he places them, and in the very words he chooses for those purposes. The word 'conclusion' is inescapable, though it does not follow that the conclusions are consciously arrived at. They may indeed be at odds with the novelist's avowed intentions. Novelists have given many reasons for writing novels: Richardson believed he did so to inculcate right conduct, Fielding to reform the manners of the age, Dickens to expose social evils, Trollope to make money by providing acceptable entertainment. The reasons were genuine enough,

but rationalizations after the event. Part of the impulse that drives the novelist to make his imitation world must always be sheer delight in his own skill in making: part of the time he is, as it were, taking the observed universe to pieces and assembling it again for the simple and naïve pleasure of doing so. He can no more help playing than a child can. And there is this further to be noted. The child cannot help but play; but how he plays is not under his conscious control, a fact made use of by psychiatrists in the psychological analysis of children. In play the child symbolizes, by the way he arranges his toys and so on, his emotional relation to the universe. In play he expresses a personal myth. The novelist does much the same through his 'choice' of characters and the actions they undergo. A partial proof of this may be seen in the fact that of all the enormous range of human types and their relationships to one another, to society, and to God theoretically available to any novelist, only a relatively infinitesimal number find their way into the work of even the greatest. It is, too, a matter of common observation that even the greatest seem to be exploring similar types and situations from novel to novel, exploring more deeply, doubtless, in each successive book, almost as though the exploration was the product of an obsession. This indeed is so. The novelist is free to choose his material only in a limited sense, and his choice is governed by the deepest compulsions of his personality. It is these that dictate both the nature of his novels and the conclusions about life he expresses through them. This is why in judging a novel we are faced with the task of assessing not only the author's ability to create characters, for instance, but also the values inherent in the characters and their behaviour. It is this latter which enables us to say that Jane Austen or Conrad is a greater novelist than such writers of the second rank as Trollope and Bennett, for all their generosity, breadth of canvas, or fidelity to the surface of observed life.

I have referred to 'characters and their behaviour'. To some critics the words would be illegitimate. 'This assumption,' writes L. C. Knights in his ironically titled 'How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?' in his essays *Explorations*, 'that it is the main business of the writer - other than the lyric poet - to create characters . . . long ago invaded criticism of the novel.' Character, it is contended, is the creation of the reader, not the writer. Doubtless it is no argument to say that novelists themselves have commonly believed that it was an

important part of their function to create characters. A novel is a totality, made up of all the words in it, and it must be judged as a totality. Of this totality characterization is only a part; yet it is plainly an essential one and the first in order of importance since, so far as the reader is concerned, without it the most profound apprehensions of man's fate count for nothing. Only through character can the novelist's apprehensions of man's fate be uttered at all.

When Mrs Leavis, in *Fiction and the Reading Public*, says that 'all a novelist need do is to provide bold outlines, and the reader will cooperate to persuade himself that he is in contact with "real people"', she is describing what goes on only in the reading of fiction of a low order of ambition and attainment. The more highly a novelist has organized his characters the less they can be reduced to 'bold outlines'. And the organization of a character is conditioned by everything in the novel. Hardy's characters, for instance, are simple enough; there is nothing particularly subtle about Gabriel Oak, Bathsheba Everdene, and Sergeant Troy; but the way we are made to see them depends not only on Hardy's rendering of them but on his execution of the novel as a whole. John Holloway has shown in *The Victorian Sage* how Hardy plants his vision of the nature of things, of which his characters are at once testimony and victims, and subdues his reader to it not by delineation of characters and action alone but also by every detail of natural description he uses, every comment he makes, and every metaphor or image he employs. Hardy's view of life, which dictates the way in which we react to his characters, is implicit in every sentence he writes. The reader is simply not free, as Mrs Leavis seems to imply, to fill the outlines of the characters as he pleases.

This is true of the characters of all good novelists. Part of the novelist's art is to mediate between his characters and the reader; and he does so with every word he puts on paper, for every word he chooses furthers his expression of his attitude towards his characters and the total situation he is rendering. This is plainly so with novelists like Fielding, Thackeray, and Meredith, who speak in their own persons, interpreting character and action, during the course of their novels; it is just as much so with novelists like Defoe, Richardson, Flaubert, and James Joyce in *Ulysses*, who appear studiously to keep themselves out of the actions they narrate. We say they are objective; in fact, they betray their opinions on their characters and situations