Arnold Kettle

An Introduction to the ENGLISH NOVEL 1

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VOLUME I

By the same author

An Introduction to the English Novel

VOLUME II: HENRY JAMES TO 1950

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE ENGLISH NOVEL

VOLUME I
TO GEORGE ELIOT

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PREFACE

The purpose of this book and its successor (which will bring the story up to the present day) is not to attempt a history of the English novel. But because the novel, like every other literary form, is a product of history, I have tried, in the first two Parts, to indicate something of the historical development of fiction and to face—if not to answer satisfactorily—the essential questions: why did the novel arise at all, and why should it have arisen when it did?

The third part of the book makes even less claim to exhaustiveness. I have taken nine well-known nineteenth-century novels (of which six are included in the present volume) and tried to bring out in analysis certain critical questions which emerge from a study of each. Three reasons in particular have led me to adopt this method: (1) the field, by the nineteenth century, has become so wide that an exhaustive treatment would be in any event impossible, (2) novels tend to be rather long and for any course of study in this subject it is useful to concentrate on a reading list that is both short and accessible, and (3) critics of the novel appear to have shirked, with a few honourable exceptions, the business of analysis and of disciplined critical evaluation. Although I would not for a moment claim to have said the last word about any of the books treated here I have consistently tried to get to the heart of each novel, to pose the questions: what *kind* of a novel is this? What is it about? It is not enough to consider a novel, any more than a poem or a play, simply in terms of plot-construction and characters. We have to see each novel whole before we can attempt to assess the parts or even to decide the criteria relevant to our judgments.

Of course the choice of my novels is somewhat arbitrary. I do not claim that they are the nine best nineteenth-century novels. I have left out plenty of books I would have liked to have included and I feel a particular pang in having represented Dickens, the greatest of the English novelists, by a book which is by no stretch of the imagination his best, though I believe it is underrated. My only claim for my chosen books is that they are all good novels (though not equally good), all readily accessible, and that they happen to raise a variety of critical problems which have a general interest and significance.

The original plan of this book meant stopping, with Conrad, at the beginning of the present century. And yet to leave off there was clearly unsatisfactory. Everything would be left in the air; to raise and yet not to attempt to answer any of the problems of our own contemporary fiction would seem irritating and somewhat cowardly. And so it was decided to bring the whole survey (it should not really be given so portentous a name) up to date and to divide it into two volumes. The present volume ends with *Middlemarch*. It is not an inappropriate break, for George Eliot's great novel is in a number of respects the culminating point of Victorian fiction. The volume that is to follow will begin with the consideration of novels by Henry James and Samuel Butler (very unalike and yet both somehow distinctly nearer to our own century than George Eliot) and go on to examine some of the tendencies and experiments in the fiction of the twentieth century.

I should like to thank many friends who, through their advice and conversation, have helped in the writing of this book; particularly Professor Bonamy Dobrée, Mr Douglas Jefferson, Mr Edward Thompson, Mr Alick West and Professor Basil Willey. My sense of gratitude to them is equalled only by my concern that they should not be associated with the book's many imperfections or with judgments (there are many) which they do not share. There is another debt too which I would not wish to be ambiguous or at least more ambiguous than all such debts are. I have used throughout the book to describe a particular kind of novel the term 'moral fable'. The phrase, so far as I know, is Defoe's, but it has been used and, so to speak, developed in recent years by Dr F. R. Leavis. I hope that in using the term, as I believe I have, in a sense rather more narrow than his habitual use of it I have not compromised a critic to whom anyone who has done any serious thinking about the English novel must owe a particular debt.

A. K.

PART I

Introductory

I

LIFE AND PATTERN

> Catching the very note and trick, the strange irregular rhythm of life, that is the attempt whose strenuous effort keeps Fiction on her feet. HENRY JAMES

We might as well start—when we have finished our preliminaries—with Bunyan and Defoe. The starting-point is neither original nor inevitable, but it is convenient. For Bunyan and Defoe are both great figures in their own right, the first writers whom no consideration of the English novel could possibly leave out, and they also happen to belong to two separate lines in the development of prose fiction which make useful, though by no means water-tight, categories.

This business of 'lines' and 'categories' is, we should realise, extremely dangerous. If it were not that its opposite—the refusal to differentiate, to recognise that, say, *Pride and Prejudice* and *Wuthering Heights* are as different in kind as *The Duchess of Malfi* and *Major Barbara*—has been one of the banes of novel criticism, one would be tempted to try to dispense with it altogether.

It is always dangerous to take a work of art apart and to abstract from it particular qualities. Once one has pigeon-holed a book or dissected it there is the danger that one may never again see it whole. Moreover, one aspect of a book is always closely connected, if not interwoven with another. You cannot really separate, say, 'character' from 'plot', 'narrative' from 'background'.

> People often talk of these things [wrote Henry James] as if they had a kind of internecine distinctness, instead of melting into each other at every breath, and being intimately connected parts of one general effort of expression. I cannot imagine composition existing in a series of blocks, nor conceive, in any novel worth discussing at all, of a passage of des-

cription that is not in its intention narrative, a passage of dialogue that is not in its intention description, a touch of truth of any sort that does not partake of the nature of incident, or an incident that derives its interest from any other source than the general and only source of the success of a work of art—that of being illustrative. *A novel is a living thing, all one and continuous, like any other organism, and in proportion as it lives will it be found, I think, that in each of the parts there is something of the other parts.*[1]

This is well said, definitively said perhaps, and chastening. It cannot be too often insisted that criticism, analytical or historical (and the terms themselves are not mutually exclusive), the tracing of lines of development, the setting of a book in its historical background, is useless and misleading unless it brings us to a fuller, richer, more complete view of the book we are considering. It may be to the purpose of the historian, the sociologist, the psychologist, to abstract from particular novels factors which illustrate and enrich his own study; it may even be to the purpose of the literary critic, in so far as he too is necessarily concerned with history, with placing and elucidating literary developments, thus to abstract. But we must always remember that the ultimate concern of the study of literature is evaluation, the passing of judgment on each particular work of art.

Yet it is impossible to evaluate literature in the abstract; a book is neither produced nor read in a vacuum and the very word 'value' involves right away criteria which are not just 'literary'. Literature is a part of life and can be judged only in its relevance to life. Life is not static but moving and changing. Thus we have to see both literature and ourselves in history, not as abstract entities. 'Criticism', as the nineteenth-century Russian critic Belinsky put it, 'is aesthetics in motion.' Though we must see each novel as a part of history and its value as the quality of its contribution to the achievement of man's freedom, yet it is important to remember that it is the book *itself* we are judging, not its intention, nor the amount of 'social significance' to be got out of it, nor even its importance as a measurable historical influence.

Uncle Tom's Cabin has been, in this last sense, a more important book than *Wuthering Heights*; but it is not a better book. For whereas *Uncle Tom's Cabin* can bring to the reader's attention facts he had previously ignored and has pricked men's consciences and urged them into action on behalf of what they knew to be just and necessary, *Wuthering Heights* has that within it which can *change*

[1] Superior figures refer to Notes and References, pp. 179–81.

men's consciousness and make them aware of what previously they had not even guessed. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* may enlarge the realm of our knowledge, *Wuthering Heights* enlarges that of our imagination. *Uncle Tom's Cabin*'s contribution to human freedom (which, heaven knows, one doesn't wish to undervalue) is in a sense fortuitous. Someone else might have written something else which had roughly the same effect. It was an act of courage rather than an act of art (and if an American Negro tells me it is worth more to him than *Wuthering Heights* I cannot argue). But no one else could have—or at any rate has—written anything very like *Wuthering Heights*, and no reader who has responded fully to *Wuthering Heights* is ever, whether he realises it or not, quite the same again.

This said, it may be permissible to suggest that there are in all novels which are successful works of art two elements, emphatically not separate and yet to some extent separable. These are the elements of life and pattern. Art, as T. E. Hulme has put it, is life-communicating; it must give us a sense that what is being conveyed across to us by the words on the page is life or, at any rate, has something of the quality of life. Novels which do not give us this sense of life, which we do not respond to with a certain quickening of our faculties, which we do not feel—in Keats' famous but never-bettered phrase—'upon our pulses', such novels may be worth an inquest but not a second edition. At the same time the good novel does not simply convey life; it says something about life. It reveals some kind of pattern in life. It brings significance.

It must be emphasised that the two elements—life and pattern—are not separate. If we ask of any particular novel that 'lives' the question, 'what is it that gives it vitality?' we shall find that the vitality is inseparable from the novelist's view of life, which is what decides what he puts into every sentence and what he leaves out.

In that wonderful first chapter of *Pride and Prejudice*, which 'comes alive' so immediately and gives so sharp and yet so subtle a sense of life, so that we know at once so much about the Bennet family, this 'life' would not be there but for Jane Austen's tone, her ironical opening generalisation, her choice of words, her italics, her decision at each point and moment as to just how and where her reader's attention shall be directed. Even a photograph involves choice—of subject, composition, light—which reveals something of the photographer's mind; with the writer—even the most apparently photographic in technique—the issue is infinitely wider because every word he uses involves a choice, a choice dependent

(though he may not be aware of it) on the kind of man he is, on his view of life, on the significance he attaches to what he sees.

And yet, despite all this, it will be generally agreed that in some novels 'life' is more obviously there than 'pattern'. There are writers, and great ones, whose books have more vividness than wisdom, more vitality than significance. *David Copperfield* is such a book. It is a novel almost completely lacking what I mean by pattern. The earlier parts, perhaps, have a kind of pattern, the pattern of David's struggles (passive as they tend to be) against the forces of darkness—Murdstone and the London factory; but once these struggles have been obliterated (not solved) by a *dea ex machina*, Betsy Trotwood, pattern disappears altogether and is replaced only by plot, anecdote, contrivance and an insistence on 'characters' (the inverted commas are inevitable) like the Micawbers.

The result is that though *David Copperfield* conveys something of life it tells us very little about life. It is hard to say what it is about, except that it is about David Copperfield, and there again David's life is not presented to us in a way that can reasonably be called significant. He is born, has a bad stepfather and a kind aunt, goes through a number of adventures, marries twice (the problems of the first, unsatisfactory marriage being conveniently shelved by Dora's death), gets to know a good many people including some delightful ones, and it is all (or most of it) quite interesting and frequently very amusing; but that is all. There is no pattern.

Pattern is not something narrowly 'aesthetic', something which critics like Clive Bell used to talk about as 'form' (as opposed to life or content). Pattern is the quality in a book which gives it wholeness and meaning, makes the reading of it a complete and satisfying experience. This is a matter partly, but only partly, discussable in terms used by the devotees of 'form'. Sometimes the pattern of a book does have a geometrical quality. Mr E. M. Forster has discussed Henry James's *The Ambassadors* in such terms;[2] *The Spoils of Poynton* has an even more strongly marked formal pattern. An early example of pattern of this kind is Congreve's *Incognita*, a pretty little story in which two pairs of lovers intrigue, pirouette and exchange partners with the kind of grace and precision one associates with a formal aristocratic dance of the eighteenth century.

The value of this kind of geometrical 'form' is an interesting question. In general we should, I think, treat it with some suspicion because of the tendency to use such forms for their own sake, that is to say for no good reason. To give your story the pattern of a figure of eight is only worth while in so far as that

pattern has a significance relevant to what you are saying. Abstract geometrical patterns do in fact have some significance in relation to life. So do such formal patterns as are evolved in dances which clearly have a direct relationship to courtship or harvest rituals.

Again, many mental processes have their fairly precise formal equivalents: the 'shape' of *The Ambassadors* which Mr Forster compares to an hour-glass is, in effect, the formal equivalent of what the Greeks called *peripeteia*, that reversal of a situation from which, as Aristotle noted, so much both of irony and tragedy has sprung. This, I think, is the point. 'Form' is important only in so far as it enhances significance; and it will enhance significance just in so far as it bears a real relation to, that is to say symbolises or clarifies, the aspect of life that is being conveyed. But form is not *in itself* significant; the central core of any novel is what it has to say about life.

When we say, then, that a novel has more life than pattern we are in fact making a criticism of the quality of perception of life which the novelist is conveying. For the pattern which the writer imposes is the very essence of his vision of whatever in life he is dealing with. To say of *David Copperfield* that it is of the kind of novel that has more vividness than wisdom, more vitality than significance, is to say something which, though not meaningless, has (unless we are quite conscious of the way we are using words) many misleading overtones. For such a statement might well imply an actual separation of vitality and significance, a suggestion that significance or pattern is something to be spread like marmalade on a given surface of 'life'; whereas it is actually out of the writer's very perception of life that the significance emerges.

The vitality of *David Copperfield* is in fact limited by Dickens's failure to master and organise significantly the raw material of his novel. Mr Murdstone is more vital than Agnes precisely because Dickens's perception of him is more profound, morally and aesthetically (you cannot separate the two). The last half of the book is—except for odd snatches of idiosyncratic observation—a bore precisely because it lacks a convincing conflict, that is to say, moral significance, to give it pattern.

What, then, is the point of labouring this admittedly rather artificial distinction between life and pattern? Simply that a great many writers have, in practice, tended to separate the two and almost all have approached the business of novel-writing with a bias towards one or the other direction. They have either begun with a pattern that seemed to them valid and tried to inject life into

it, or they have begun with a fairly undefined concern with 'life' and tried to make a pattern emerge out of it. One would not for a moment suggest, of course, that this is anything but a crude simplification of the infinitely subtle and complicated question of the springs of artistic creation.

Exactly how an individual novel, or any work of art, comes into being is a fascinating problem far outside the scope of this book. What one would here stress is that there is one line in the development of the novel in the eighteenth century—a line which includes, for example, *Gulliver's Travels* and *Jonathan Wild*—in which pattern is clearly the novelist's supreme and prior consideration. In this kind of novel it is not unfair to say that the author starts with his pattern, his moral vision, and that the various elements of the novel, character and plot in particular, are continuously subordinated to and in a special sense derived from the pattern. Gulliver, for instance, though he is a convincing enough figure for Swift's purposes, has no existence of his own. We do not feel any temptation to abstract him from the story in the way that we might abstract, say, Mr Dick from *David Copperfield*.

The type of novel I am referring to has been excellently described as a 'moral fable'. Now the author of the moral fable is not necessarily more concerned with morals than other novelists. Joseph Conrad, for instance, whose novels certainly do not come within this category, saw the essential feature of a story as its 'moral discovery'. The distinction—an important one—is that in the moral fable the central discovery seems to have been made by the author prior to his conception of the book. In other words, the fable-writer starts off with his vision, his moral 'truth', and, so to speak, tries to blow life into it. In the course of this process the original 'truth' will no doubt be deepened and enriched, made living instead of abstract; but the original abstract concept will have its effect on the book.

All good novels, like all other good works of art, are concrete, not abstract, but to describe the original concept of a novel as abstract is not necessarily to condemn either the concept or the novel. A writer has to start somewhere and there is no obvious reason why the germ of his novel should not be an abstracted 'truth' capable of generalised expression. That the subject of *Candide* is the fallacy of the belief that 'all is for the best in the best of all possible worlds' does not invalidate Voltaire's novel, though it does determine the kind of novel it is. But it is clear that, if the tendency of the novelist who begins, as I think Dickens does in