

THE ANATOMY OF
THE NOVEL
MARJORIE BOULTON

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ROUTLEDGE & KEGAN PAUL
London, Boston and Henley

*First published in 1975
by Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd
39 Store Street,
London WC1E 7DD,
Broadway House, Newtown Road
Henley-on-Thames
Oxon RG9 1EN and
9 Park Street,
Boston, Mass. 02108, USA
Reprinted in 1979
Set in Monotype Bembo
and printed in Great Britain by
Whitstable Litho Ltd
Whitstable, Kent*

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ISBN 0 7100 8135 9 (C)

ISBN 0 7100 8136 7 (P)

INTRODUCTION

This small book makes no claim to be more than an elementary and popular introduction to the study of the novel; but, though for such a purpose some simplifications are inevitable, I hope they are sensible and that the reader who explores further will not have much to unlearn. To experts it should all seem obvious; but I know from years of teaching and examining that it will be less obvious to the inexperienced students for whom I have written it.

The theory of the novel came of age very late in literary studies, within no more than the last four or five decades, just as the novel itself came of age very late in the history of literature. Thus not only schoolchildren working on prescribed books, or students starting literature courses, but many busy teachers, may have some use for a simple guidebook. I do not presume to tell anyone where to go, still less to identify some single strait gate; much better critics than I have still no ultimate authority to do that; my purpose is to describe some starting-points and directions that are reasonably useful. I have tried to show how the art of the novel is, like all major arts, multiform as well as complex, and to encourage the breadth of appreciation in which I believe *genuine discriminating judgment*, in contrast to literary sectarianism, takes root.

I believe too that genuine literary study, though a strenuous discipline, though sometimes demanding periods of difficult and even tedious effort, has its real roots in enjoyment; so I hope that this book will help some readers, not only to read novels rather more discerningly and to discuss them more profitably, but also to relish the reading more.

Introduction

Let me record my warm thanks for helpful information or ideas from William and Meta Auld, Douglas Gregor, Dr Kathleen Hall, Kenzo Hotta; and for patient and courteous assistance from members of the staff of the Bodleian Library, the English Faculty Library, Oxford, and the Horace Barks Reference Library, Stoke-on-Trent. I am especially grateful to Dr Kathleen Hall for her substantial and admirable help in compiling the index.

My quotations from material still in copyright are all brief; but with regard to the quotations from *The Secret Agent*, *Nostromo* and *Lord Jim* an acknowledgment to J. M. Dent and Sons, Ltd and the Trustees of the Joseph Conrad Estate allows me to thank them for their patience and courtesy at earlier stages of the preparation of this book.

M.B.

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I

THE CONCEPT OF FICTION

‘with a tale which holdeth children from play, and old men from the chimney corner.’

Sir Philip Sidney: *An Apologie for Poetrie*

The novel is a branch of fiction that developed late in history; but a relish for stories seems to be as old as recorded humanity.

We love stories mostly for two reasons: our readiness to comfort and entertain ourselves with fantasy, and our curiosity and desire for insight about reality. Though these seem like opposites, it is not always easy to separate them completely.

Children pretend, perhaps noisily, to be soldiers, cowboys, nurses, animals, parents; but most adults have some fantasy life too—or audiences could not have screamed with laughter at the film made from James Thurber’s wonderful story, ‘The Secret Life of Walter Mitty’. Placing ourselves in fictions in which our part is gratifying is for most of us our most unrestricted freedom. We are usually very shy about our fantasies, even ashamed; we know many of them are ridiculous, often ignoble, always selfish; but fantasy is not useless. It is a cheap, accessible pleasure and an emotional safety-valve; unlike many outlets, such as a blaze of temper or act of vandalism, it harms no one else; we may waste time daydreaming, but then we can waste too much time on any amusement; sometimes, when we observe our own fantasies, they may even teach us something about our real wishes, weaknesses and intentions. Our fantasies are harmful

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chiefly when we confuse them with reality: daydreaming may lead us to expect too much of other people, deceive ourselves about our own motives, expect problems to solve themselves, or feel grievances against the normal difficulties of life and imperfections of others.

Great novelists have often touched upon the danger of self-deceiving fantasy: it is a favourite theme of George Eliot:

Some day she will be able to wear any ear-rings she likes, and already she lives in an invisible world of brilliant costumes, shimmering gauze, soft satin and velvet, such as the lady's maid at the Chase has shown her in Miss Lydia's wardrobe. She feels the bracelets on her arms, and treads on a soft carpet in front of a tall mirror. (*Adam Bede*)

This is part of poor foolish Hetty Sorrel's dreams of a gentleman's love and a wealthy home: they bring her to shattering disappointment, disgrace and a sentence of transportation. In *Daniel Deronda*, Gwendolen Harleth dreams how marriage will solve her money problems, but ignores its real demands; her suitor, Grandcourt, has harsher fantasies about breaking a spirited girl; their unrealities combine to create the reality of a wretched marriage. Jane Austen often handled the dangers of fantasy enlighteningly; we can consider, for instance, Marianne in *Sense and Sensibility*. A lesser novelist who at her best wrote brilliantly on the deceptions of fantasy and the resulting disappointments is Mrs Margaret Oliphant, in for instance *Miss Marjoribanks* or *The Cuckoo in the Nest*. Probably the most famous novel stressing this theme is Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*; but most great novels include some element of how people are educated by life out of fantasy towards a better grasp of reality.

Novelists have given less attention to the aspect of fantasy as recognized self-indulgence and comforting self-entertain-

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ment; one early example is the set of imaginative drawings Jane Eyre shows to Mr Rochester. In this century some novelists, perhaps influenced by the insights of psychoanalysis, have treated the theme more fully. A well known example is Alan Sillitoe's account of the consolation of fantasy in routine factory work, in his *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*. Denton Welch wonderfully captures a schoolboy's imaginings:

He saw himself refusing to go to school and disappearing completely. He was alone in a small London room with a gas-ring. He was working on something at a desk. It might have been a book, or a painting, or even a wool mat. It didn't matter; it was real work, all alone, full of joy. And afterwards—lazy times cooking on the gas-ring, scraping long ringlets of chocolate into the saucepan of hot milk, tossing the omelets into the air to turn them over; or was it only pancakes that were tossed in the air?

All around the room his family and the school authorities were prowling like wild beasts. They had long teeth and claws like the mad Nebuchadnezzar; but they were powerless; for the door had double Yale padlocks and four bolts, and the windows bullet-proof glass.

He went out only at night, and then he climbed on to the roof of the building, where there was a contrivance rather like those aerial devices which waft money to the pay-desk in the old-fashioned drapery shops. He had only to hang on to this wire and wish, when he would find himself swishing through the air to his destination. The long-clawed, long-toothed relations and school authorities looked up and cursed as they saw him flying gloriously free a hundred feet above their heads. (*In Youth is Pleasure*)

James Joyce's *Ulysses* and many experimental novels depend much on our recognition of fantasy as part of our inner life.

Our very private habit of self-entertaining fantasy is one of

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the springs of artistic fiction. Good friends may console and amuse one another by shared fantasies, which need more coherence and sequence than private ones: the novelist creates fantasies for a bigger audience.

Because fiction tells of things that did not happen, and fantasy can mislead us, some moralists have seen evil in all fiction. Plato rejected poets from his ideal republic; the theatres were closed during the Commonwealth puritan régime in Britain; a Quaker, Arthur J. Naish, wrote in 1862, 'Indiscriminate novel-reading, or even frequent novel-reading, is about the most dangerous employment that can occupy a young person.'¹ He admitted that a Christian might sometimes read a good novel, perhaps by Scott or Fenimore Cooper, for its educational value; but in Edmund Gosse's Calvinist home no fiction at all was allowed and his own liking for inventing stories was condemned as sinful.² Jane Austen's pompous and hypocritical clergyman, Mr Collins, 'protested that he never read novels'. (If he had, he might have been more sensitive to the feelings of others.)

Yet most people know the difference between a *lie* and a *fiction*. A lie is meant to deceive; a fiction is meant to entertain.

I say of Tristram Trueman, a faithful husband with a gentle, sensible wife: 'Trueman is carrying on with that fast blonde in the chemist's; you mark my words, his wife will be on to it soon, and then we shall see the fur fly. Terrible temper she has—throws plates when she doesn't get her own way.'

This is a lie, wicked and cruel; it may be believed, and if it is it will do much harm. But perhaps I just say of his bald head: 'Heard the latest? The Bluebottles' and Clothes-moths' Sporting Syndicate has taken out a lease on Tristram's head. They're going to make it into a ski run, with a honey and ragburger stall on his left ear and a chute for the kids down his nose.'

Not very polite; but this is not merely a harmless, as opposed to a vicious, lie; it is not a lie at all; no one is going to

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believe it; it is meant as an entertaining fiction. We are not so silly as to take any novel as literally true; we are far more likely to be deceived by our own private fantasies, which spring from our own inner conflicts and wishes.

We are drawn to fiction not only by the fun of fantasy, but by our interest in reality. Even our dreams can sometimes throw some light on our emotions; people realized this long before psychoanalysis; artistic fictions are more conscious, controlled and objective than dreams. What Shelley contended of poetry is equally true of the novel:

A man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and of many others; the pains and pleasures of his species must become his own. The great instrument of moral good is the imagination; and poetry administers to the effect by acting upon the cause. (*A Defence of Poetry*, 1821)

A good novel is *true* in the sense that it gives a sincere, well observed, enlightening picture of a portion of human life. George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*, Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones*, Henry James's *Portrait of a Lady*, Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim*, William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, Graham Greene's *The Heart of the Matter*, tell us far more about realities of human experience than would seven evenings of 'truthful' but superficial chatter. Good fictional pictures of life widen our sympathies, help our sense of proportion, educate our moral judgment; they make human goodness, frailty, sufferings, needs, relationships far more real than abstract definitions or vague exhortations can. They may teach us more of consequences—an important part of learning to make wise decisions—for they show how character traits cause actions, and whither these lead. We may learn more about our selfishness and self-deceiving from Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James, Iris Murdoch, than from some

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tactless older person's rebuke, whose intrusion and ill-temper we resent. The best fiction is a supplementary conscience, a further education, a sometimes disquieting emotional experience.

We can make some distinction, though one with blurred edges, many overlapping bits and many doubtful areas, between the greatest fiction, which gives an essentially true and illuminating picture of life, and the great mass of lesser fiction that belongs rather to the realm of organized, intelligent fantasy and is not much more than entertainment. When the good and brilliant Benjamin Jowett of Oxford wrote to a friend, 'There are few ways in which people can be better employed than in reading a good novel'³ he was almost certainly thinking of the first category, something like *Adam Bede* or Tolstoy's *Resurrection*.

On the other hand, let us not be too priggish about those fictions that, nearer to mere fantasy, must be classed as 'escapist'. Pliny the Younger said that no book was so bad that some good could not be extracted from it. From light reading we may pick up a good many scraps of useful general knowledge and notions of lands, epochs, backgrounds and occupations different from our own; we may even find some sensible insights into character and motive and morality. In the detective tales of Arthur Conan Doyle, Dorothy Sayers, Agatha Christie, Ngaio Marsh, the police romances of John Creasey, even in the more callous thrillers of Ian Fleming, we may find nuggets of good sense, even of compassion, and reminders that our actions do affect other people. We are not mature readers until we can at least sense that George Eliot or Charles Dickens is much greater than Agatha Christie or Conan Doyle; and if we are serious students of literature we should be able to explain something of the distinction; but, other things being equal, the person whose reading never rises above the level of the better escapist fiction is likely to be better informed, better company, more tolerant and sym-

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pathetic and at least a little wiser than the person who never reads anything but a scrappy newspaper.

Moreover, need we totally scorn mere escapism? That person curled in an armchair with *The Clue of the Half-Baked Sausage Roll* may have been trying all day to teach negative or even aggressive pupils in an overcrowded school; made painfully uphill efforts as a probation officer to help the inadequate and the vicious; been doing the many unpleasant tasks a nurse has to do, among pain, fear and heavy responsibilities; or the trivial novel may be taking someone's mind off illness, injury, the loneliness of old age or the turmoil of adolescence. There are times when human beings need to put their feet up and relax.

A friend of mine, dying of cancer, had by his bed his Bible and the latest Agatha Christie. It was the Bible that really mattered to him; but if Agatha Christie can briefly distract someone in such a situation, she has not wasted her life. Mere entertainment does much to keep us sane, to provide a respite from reality that strengthens us to face it once more, and escapist literature at least does much to keep us out of mischief; the silliest, shallowest reader of something worthless is at least hurting nobody and giving no trouble. Yet great fiction, enlarging our awareness of human realities, can do much more for us than those lighter yarns we find easier to read but also easier to forget.

Should there be any censorship of literature? Totalitarian restriction of the exchange of ideas and information implies unreasoning tyranny and must be harmful to individual dignity and national civilization. But, just as some of our fantasies are downright beastly, some fiction may pander to our beastliest fantasies, and some people will supply anything for money.

It is odd that 'dirty books' mean books stimulating sexual desire, which may be linked with affection, kindness, gratitude; we are supposed to be scandalized more by pornography

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than by books instigating racial hatred, religious or political fanaticism, exaggerated nationalism, morbid fear, desolate cynicism, or contempt for human beings. Loathing hard-core pornography, I would still rather have *Fanny Hill* on my conscience than, say, *Mein Kampf* or a handbook on urban guerilla tactics. However, much pornography involves not friendly sex, but fantasies of hatred and degradation, and these might warp sexual feelings and make us less sensitive to the feelings of others. It is disquieting to know that when the totalitarian régime in Portugal fell in 1974 the police torturers were found to keep large stocks of pornographic magazines. It is also disquieting to ask ourselves who is wise and mature enough to be trusted with powers of censorship. I suspect that the best antidote to commercial pornography is the promotion of mental health and happy love, though that is more easily desired than achieved.

Can books put into people's heads ideas that are not at least almost there already? An insensitive oaf is not likely to read *Middlemarch*, let alone learn from it; a cool cerebral person may make little of D. H. Lawrence; I was not ripe to appreciate Henry James till I was over forty. The saddest thing about really evil books is that some people want them.

An account of lovely food may make me feel hungry. A fictional love scene may excite me; but most of us often feel hungry or sexy without the aid of books. No gloating over oysters would make me want one; no story about lesbians has ever stirred lesbian feeling in me. What a serious fictional treatment of lesbians can do for me is to show me how some women do love in this way, and can feel this as something complex, natural, partly unselfish, perhaps sacramental, as I feel heterosexual love. This is not depraving and corrupting me; it is enlightening and helping me; it is a moral gain to become kinder, more sympathetic and more informed about emotions we have not experienced. So serious literature should be allowed great freedom to treat all aspects of

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experience and explore various interpretations of morality. A thoughtful study of even warped and repugnant emotions may give us insights into problems and force us to painful honesties of recognition, though insincere commercial pandering to them is vile.

We do not yet really know how far pornography may stimulate borderline cases to active wrongdoing and how far it may be a safety-valve. I object to it; but we must remember it is not the only unwholesome reading. Some types have been mentioned; but also the gentle, idealistic love romance that is misleadingly unreal about its happy ending may do harm by causing disastrously unreal expectations from marriage; religious books may arouse neurotic guilt instead of educating the conscience; much ordinary advertising appeals to ignoble feelings—with the greed, envy and competitiveness a good deal more harmful than the appeals to the sex interest.

Worthwhile fiction has at its best one great and splendid function: to strengthen our imaginative sympathies and insights and so make us wiser and better. It has, at many levels, the relatively trivial but genuinely useful function of providing comfort and amusement through fantasy; and these functions are seldom wholly separated. The chief form of printed fiction in Britain today is the novel.

The novel is the last major literary form to have developed. Literature of some sort was available in China as early as 1000 B.C.; the Sumerian *Epic of Gilgamesh* was composed about 1400 B.C.; Homer was writing his epics by the sixth century B.C.; but novels, as we understand the term, did not flourish in any quantity until the eighteenth century A.D.! There was plenty of fiction: epics, ballads, anecdotes, fables, folk-tales, myths, legends. There was some prose fiction: sagas in Iceland in the thirteenth century A.D.; in late Greek, *Daphnis and Chloe* by Longus (probably third century A.D.) and a few other short romances; in Latin, *The Golden Ass* of Apuleius (born c. A.D. 127); in Renaissance France, the stories of

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Rabelais (? 1494–? 1553)—all still readable, but not novels as we should now define the term. English prose fictions, forerunners of the novel rather than real novels, included the slow-moving *Euphues* (1578) by John Lyly; *Arcadia* (1590) by Sir Philip Sidney; *Rosalynde* (1590) by Thomas Lodge; later, in Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* (1688) or William Congreve's *Incognita* (1692) there is some simple characterization. John Bunyan's wonderful *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678) is of course allegorical, though with many touches of lifelike human observation. Some critics would class Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) as the first real novel in English; others would specify Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740).

No one can completely explain why the novel developed late and then flowed so copiously. Some of the causes may be: it is a form for solitary reading, so requires widespread literacy and leisure; it must have been helped by improved techniques of artificial lighting; it may have answered the new needs of a large middle class, of a society growing more specialized and complicated; it reflects an increasing conscious interest in psychology and sociology; the rise in the eighteenth century of commercial circulating libraries encouraged the professional novelist and today the public library system is still an important customer for new novels. There must be other factors.

What is a novel? There is no one clear definition accepted by all.

To Samuel Johnson, in his Dictionary of 1755, a novel was just 'A small tale, generally of love'. This will do for, say, *Rosalynde* or *Incognita*, but not for *Robinson Crusoe* (no love), or *Pamela* (not small) or *Joseph Andrews*, *Tom Jones*, *Peregrine Pickle*. Gradually the novel came to be taken more seriously, and is usually thought of as reaching the height of its dignity in the reign of Queen Victoria (1837–1901). The *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* now defines it as 'A fictitious prose narrative of considerable length, in which characters

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and actions representative of real life are portrayed in a plot of more or less complexity.' *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* takes a similar view: 'An invented prose narrative that is usually long and complex and deals with human experience through a connected sequence of events.' So does *Cassell's English Dictionary*: 'A fictitious narrative in prose, usually of sufficient length to fill a volume, portraying characters and situations from real life.' The importance of character and relationship are stressed a little more in *Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary*: 'A fictitious prose narrative or tale presenting a picture of real life, especially of the emotional crises in the life-history of the men and women portrayed'; and in *Collins's Dictionary*: 'A fictitious prose tale dealing with the adventures or feelings of imaginary persons so as to portray, by the description of action and thought, the varieties of human life and character.'

Now, these definitions, even the last, will include not only *Clarissa Harlowe*, *Tom Jones*, *Moll Flanders*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Villette*, *Wuthering Heights*, *Vanity Fair*, *Daniel Deronda*, *Doctor Thorne*, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, *Ann Veronica*, *The Old Wives' Tale*, *The Wings of a Dove*, *Free Fall*, *The Masters* or *Lucky Jim*, but also *Ivanhoe*, *Frankenstein*, *The Woman in White*, *Westward Ho!*, *Lorna Doone*, *Treasure Island*, *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, *The Invisible Man*, *Kim*, *King Solomon's Mines* and perhaps even *The Nine Tailors* or *Goldfinger*; but many modern critics would put the first list in the class of novels and exclude the second.

The man in the street (or armchair) probably thinks of a novel as any long prose story. Public libraries often have one section for 'Fiction'—mostly somewhat serious novels—and separate sections for 'Mysteries', 'Westerns', and 'Science Fiction', three categories favoured by seekers of mere diversion, though a good novel is sometimes written in one of these genres.

However, as early as 1765 the *Complete Dictionary of Arts*