

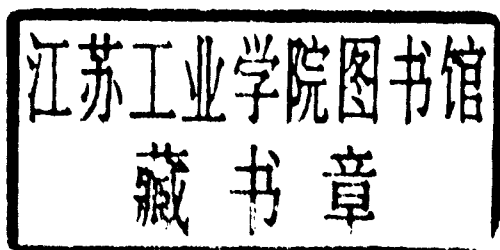
E.M. Forster

Aspects of the Novel



Aspects of the Novel

E. M. Forster



Hodder & Stoughton

in association with Edward Arnold

LONDON SYDNEY AUCKLAND

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Forster, E. M.

Aspects of the Novel. – New ed

I. Title

808.3

ISBN 0-340-55233-6

Copyright © 1927, 1974 The Provost and Scholars of King's College,
Cambridge

First published by Edward Arnold 1927

Edward Arnold Abinger edition, edited Oliver Stallybrass,

first published in 1974

Hodder and Stoughton/Edward Arnold edition first published in 1993

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or any information storage and retrieval system, without either prior permission in writing from the publisher or a licence permitting restricted copying. In the United Kingdom such licences are issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency, 90 Tottenham Court Road, London W1P 9HE.

Published by Hodder and Stoughton, in association with
Edward Arnold.

Hodder and Stoughton Ltd,
Mill Road, Dunton Green, Sevenoaks, Kent TN13 2YA.
Editorial Office: 47 Bedford Square, London WC1B 3DP.

Printed in Great Britain by T.J. Press (Padstow) Ltd,
Padstow, Cornwall

Author's Note

These are some lectures (the Clark Lectures) which were delivered under the auspices of Trinity College, Cambridge, in the spring of 1927. They were informal, indeed talkative, in their tone, and it seemed safer when presenting them in book form not to mitigate the talk, in case nothing should be left at all. Words such as "I", "you", "one", "we", "curiously enough", "so to speak", "only imagine" and "of course" will consequently occur on every page and will rightly distress the sensitive reader; but he is asked to remember that if these words were removed others, perhaps more distinguished, might escape through the orifices they left, and that since the novel is itself often colloquial it may possibly withhold some of its secrets from the graver and grander streams of criticism, and may reveal them to backwaters and shallows.

Contents

	PAGE
<i>Author's Note</i>	ix
1 Introductory	I
2 The Story	17
3 People	30
4 People (<i>continued</i>)	45
5 The Plot	58
6 Fantasy	73
7 Prophecy	86
8 Pattern and Rhythm	102
9 Conclusion	117
<i>Index</i>	121

chapter one

Introductory

This lectureship is connected with the name of William George Clark, a Fellow of Trinity. It is through him we meet today, and through him we shall approach our subject.

Clark was, I believe, a Yorkshireman. He was born in 1821, was at school at Sedbergh and Shrewsbury, entered Trinity as an undergraduate in 1840, became Fellow four years later, and made the college his home for nearly thirty years, only leaving it when his health broke, shortly before his death. He is best known as a Shakespearean scholar, but he published two books on other subjects to which we must here refer. He went as a young man to Spain and wrote a pleasant lively account of his holiday called *Gazpacho*: gazpacho being the name of a certain cold soup which he ate and appears to have enjoyed among the peasants of Andalusia; indeed he appears to have enjoyed everything. Eight years later, as a result of a holiday in Greece, he published a second book, *Peloponnesus*. *Peloponnesus* is a graver work and a duller. Greece was a serious place in those days, more serious than Spain, besides, Clark had by now not only taken Orders but become Public Orator, and he was, above all, travelling with Dr Thompson, the then Master of the college, who was not at all the sort of person to be involved in a cold soup. The jests about mules and fleas are consequently few, and we are increasingly confronted with the remains of classical antiquity and the sites of battles. What survives in the book—apart from its learning—is its feeling for Greek countryside. Clark also travelled in Italy and Poland.

To turn to his academic career. He planned the great Cambridge Shakespeare, first with Glover, then with Aldis Wright (both librarians of Trinity), and, helped by Aldis Wright, he issued the popular Globe Shakespeare. He collected

much material for an edition of Aristophanes. He also published some sermons, but in 1869 he gave up Holy Orders—which, by the way, will exempt us from excessive orthodoxy. Like his friend and biographer Leslie Stephen, like Henry Sidgwick and others of that generation, he did not find it possible to remain in the Church, and he has explained his reasons in a pamphlet entitled *The Present Dangers of the Church of England*. He resigned his post of Public Orator in consequence, while retaining his college tutorship. He died at the age of fifty-seven, esteemed by all who knew him as a lovable, scholarly and honest man. You will have realized that he is a Cambridge figure. Not a figure in the great world or even at Oxford, but a spirit peculiar to these courts, which perhaps only you who tread them after him can justly appreciate: the spirit of integrity. Out of a bequest in his will, his old college has provided for a series of lectures, to be delivered annually “on some period or periods of English Literature not earlier than Chaucer”, and to be connected with his name.

Invocations are out of fashion, yet I wanted to make this small one, for two reasons. Firstly, may a little of Clark’s integrity be with us through this course; and secondly, may he accord us a little inattention! For I am not keeping quite strictly to the terms laid down. “Period or periods of English Literature.” This condition, though it sounds liberal and is liberal enough in spirit, happens verbally not quite to suit our subject, and the introductory lecture will be occupied in explaining why this is. The points raised may possibly seem trivial. But they will lead us to a convenient vantage-post from which we can begin our main attack.

We need a vantage-post, for the novel is a formidable mass, and it is so amorphous—no mountain in it to climb, no Parnassus or Helicon, not even a Pisgah. It is most distinctly one of the moister areas of literature—irrigated by a hundred rills and occasionally degenerating into a swamp. I do not wonder that the poets despise it, though they sometimes find themselves in it by accident. And I am not surprised at the annoyance of the historians when by accident it finds itself

among them. Perhaps we ought to define what a novel is before starting. This will not take a second. M. Abel Chevalley has, in his brilliant little manual,¹ provided a definition, and if a French critic cannot define the English novel who can? It is, he says, "a fiction in prose of a certain extent" (*une fiction en prose d'une certaine étendue*). That is quite good enough for us, and we may perhaps go so far as to add that the extent should not be less than 50,000 words. Any fictitious prose work over 50,000 words will be a novel for the purposes of these lectures, and if this seems to you unphilosophic will you think of an alternative definition, which will include *The Pilgrim's Progress*, *Marius the Epicurean*, *The Adventures of a Younger Son*, *The Magic Flute*, *A Journal of the Plague Year*, *Zuleika Dobson*, *Rasselas*, *Ulysses* and *Green Mansions*, or else will give reasons for their exclusion? Parts of our spongy tract seem more fictitious than other parts, it is true: near the middle, on a tump of grass, stand Miss Austen with the figure of Emma by her side, and Thackeray holding up Esmond. But no intelligent remark known to me will define the tract as a whole. All we can say of it is that it is bounded by two chains of mountains neither of which rises very abruptly—the opposing ranges of Poetry and of History—and bounded on the third side by a sea—a sea that we shall encounter when we come to *Moby Dick*.

In the first place, let us consider the proviso "English Literature". "English" we shall of course interpret as written in English, not as published south of the Tweed or east of the Atlantic, or north of the Equator: we need not attend to geographical accidents, they can be left to the politicians. Yet, even with this interpretation, are we as free as we wish? Can we, while discussing English fiction, quite ignore fiction written in other languages, particularly French and Russian? As far as influence goes, we could ignore it, for our writers have never been much influenced by the continentals. But—for reasons soon to be explained—I want to talk as little as possible about influence during these lectures. My subject is a particular kind of book and the aspects that book has assumed in

¹ *Le Roman Anglais de Notre Temps*, by Abel Chevalley (Milford, London)

English. Can we ignore its collateral aspects on the Continent? Not entirely. An unpleasant and unpatriotic truth has here to be faced. No English novelist is as great as Tolstoy—that is to say, has given so complete a picture of man's life, both on its domestic and heroic side. No English novelist has explored man's soul as deeply as Dostoyevsky. And no novelist anywhere has analysed the modern consciousness as successfully as Marcel Proust. Before these triumphs we must pause. English poetry fears no one—excels in quality as well as quantity. But English fiction is less triumphant: it does not contain the best stuff yet written, and if we deny this we become guilty of provincialism.

Now, provincialism does not signify in a writer, and may indeed be the chief source of his strength: only a prig or a fool would complain that Defoe is cockneyfied or Thomas Hardy countrified. But provincialism in a critic is a serious fault. A critic has no right to the narrowness which is the frequent prerogative of the creative artist. He has to have a wide outlook or he has not anything at all. Although the novel exercises the rights of a created object, criticism has not those rights, and too many little mansions in English fiction have been acclaimed to their own detriment as important edifices. Take four at random: *Cranford*, *The Heart of Midlothian*, *Jane Eyre*, *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*. For various personal and local reasons we may be attached to these four books. *Cranford* radiates the humour of the urban midlands, *Midlothian* is a handful out of Edinburgh, *Jane Eyre* is the passionate dream of a fine but still undeveloped woman, *Richard Feverel* exudes farmhouse lyricism and flickers with modish wit. But all four are little mansions, not mighty edifices, and we shall see and respect them for what they are if we stand them for an instant in the colonnades of *War and Peace*, or the vaults of *The Brothers Karamazov*.

I shall not often refer to foreign novels in these lectures, still less would I pose as an expert on them who is debarred from discussing them by his terms of reference. But I do want to emphasize their greatness before we start; to cast, so to speak, this preliminary shadow over our subject, so that when we look

back on it at the end we may have the better chance of seeing it in its true lights.

So much for the proviso "English". Now for a more important point, the proviso of "period or periods". This idea of a period or a development in time, with its consequent emphasis on influences and schools, happens to be exactly what I am hoping to avoid during our brief survey, and I believe that the author of *Gazpacho* will be lenient. Time, all the way through, is to be our enemy. We are to visualize the English novelists not as floating down that stream which bears all its sons away unless they are careful, but as seated together in a room, a circular room, a sort of British Museum reading-room—all writing their novels simultaneously. They do not, as they sit there, think: "I live under Queen Victoria, I under Anne, I carry on the tradition of Trollope, I am reacting against Aldous Huxley." The fact that their pens are in their hands is far more vivid to them. They are half mesmerized, their sorrows and joys are pouring out through the ink, they are approximated by the act of creation, and when Professor Oliver Elton says, as he does, that "after 1847 the novel of passion was never to be the same again" none of them understands what he means. That is to be our vision of them—an imperfect vision, but it is suited to our powers, it will preserve us from a serious danger, the danger of pseudo-scholarship.

Genuine scholarship is one of the highest successes which our race can achieve. No one is more triumphant than the man who chooses a worthy subject and masters all its facts and the leading facts of the subjects neighbouring. He can then do what he likes. He can, if his subject is the novel, lecture on it chronologically if he wishes, because he has read all the important novels of the past four centuries, many of the unimportant ones, and has adequate knowledge of any collateral facts that bear upon English fiction. The late Sir Walter Raleigh (who once held this lectureship) was such a scholar. Raleigh knew so many facts that he was able to proceed to influences, and his monograph on the English novel adopts the treatment by period which his unworthy successor must avoid. The scholar, like the philosopher, can contemplate the river of time. He

contemplates it not as a whole, but he can see the facts, the personalities, floating past him, and estimate the relations between them, and if his conclusions could be as valuable to us as they are to himself he would long ago have civilized the human race. As you know, he has failed. True scholarship is incommunicable, true scholars rare. There are a few scholars, actual or potential, in the audience today, but only a few, and there is certainly none on the platform. Most of us are pseudo-scholars, and I want to consider our characteristics with sympathy and respect, for we are a very large and quite a powerful class, eminent in Church and State, we control the education of the Empire, we lend to the Press such distinction as it consents to receive, and we are a welcome asset at dinner parties.

Pseudo-scholarship is, on its good side, the homage paid by ignorance to learning. It also has an economic side, on which we need not be hard. Most of us must get a job before thirty, or sponge on our relatives, and many jobs can only be got by passing an exam. The pseudo-scholar often does well in examinations (real scholars are not much good), and even when he fails he appreciates their innate majesty. They are gateways to employment, they have power to ban and bless. A paper on *King Lear* may lead somewhere, unlike the rather far-fetched play of the same name. It may be a stepping-stone to the Local Government Board. He does not often put it to himself openly and say: "That's the use of knowing things, they help you to get on." The economic pressure he feels is more often subconscious, and he goes to his exam merely feeling that a paper on *King Lear* is a tempestuous and terrible experience but an intensely real one. And whether he be cynical or naïve he is not to be blamed. As long as learning is connected with earning, as long as certain jobs can only be reached through exams, so long must we take the examination system seriously. If another ladder to employment was contrived, much so-called education would disappear, and no one be a penny the stupider.

It is when he comes to criticism—to a job like the present—that he can be so pernicious, because he follows the method of

INTRODUCTORY

a true scholar without having his equipment. He classes books before he has understood or read them; that is his first crime. Classification by chronology. Books written before 1847, books written after it, books written after or before 1848. The novel in the reign of Queen Anne, the pre-novel, the *Ur*-novel, the novel of the future. Classification by subject-matter—sillier still. The literature of Inns, beginning with *Tom Jones*; the literature of the Women's Movement, beginning with *Shirley*; the literature of Desert Islands, from *Robinson Crusoe* to *The Blue Lagoon*; the literature of Rogues—dreariest of all, though the Open Road runs it pretty close; the literature of Sussex (perhaps the most devoted of the Home Counties); improper books—a serious though dreadful branch of enquiry, only to be pursued by pseudo-scholars of riper years; novels relating to industrialism, aviation, chiropody, the weather. I include the weather on the authority of the most amazing work on the novel that I have met for many years. It came over the Atlantic to me, nor shall I ever forget it. It was a literary manual entitled *Materials and Methods of Fiction*. The writer's name shall be concealed. He was a pseudo-scholar and a good one. He classified novels by their dates, their length, their locality, their sex, their point of view, till no more seemed possible. But he still had the weather up his sleeve, and when he brought it out it had nine heads. He gave an example under each head, for he was anything but slovenly, and we will run through his list. In the first place the weather can be "decorative", as in Pierre Loti; then "utilitarian" as in *The Mill on the Floss* (no Floss, no Mill; no Mill, no Tullivers); "illustrative", as in *The Egoist*; "planned in pre-established harmony", as by Fiona Macleod; "in emotional contrast", as in *The Master of Ballantrae*; "determinative of action", as in a certain Kipling story, where a man proposes to the wrong girl on account of a sandstorm; "a controlling influence", *Richard Feverel*; "itself a hero", like Vesuvius in *The Last Days of Pompeii*; and ninthly, it can be "non-existent", as in a nursery tale. I liked him flinging in non-existence. It made everything so scientific and trim. But he himself remained a little dissatisfied, and having finished his classification he said yes,

of course there was one more thing, and that was genius; it was useless for a novelist to know that there are nine sorts of weather, unless he had genius also. Cheered by this reflection, he classified novels by their tones. There are only two tones, personal and impersonal, and having given examples of each he grew pensive again and said: "Yes, but you must have genius too, or neither tone will profit."

This reference to genius is, again, typical of the pseudo-scholar. He loves mentioning genius, because the sound of the word exempts him from discovering its meaning. Literature is written by geniuses. Novelists are geniuses. There we are; now let us classify them. Which he does. Everything he says may be accurate but all is useless, because he is moving round books instead of through them, he either has not read them or cannot read them properly. Books have to be read (worse luck, for it takes a long time); it is the only way of discovering what they contain. A few savage tribes eat them, but reading is the only method of assimilation revealed to the West. The reader must sit down alone and struggle with the writer, and this the pseudo-scholar will not do. He would rather relate a book to the history of its time, to events in the life of its author, to the events it describes, above all to some tendency. As soon as he can use the word "tendency" his spirits rise, and though those of his audience may sink they often pull out their pencils at this point and make a note, under the belief that a tendency is portable.

That is why, in the rather ramshackly course that lies ahead of us, we cannot consider fiction by periods, we must not contemplate the stream of time. Another image better suits our powers: that of all the novelists writing their novels at once. They come from different ages and ranks, they have different temperaments and aims, but they all hold pens in their hands, and are in the process of creation. Let us look over their shoulders for a moment and see what they are writing. It may exorcise that demon of chronology which is at present our enemy and which (we shall discover next week) is sometimes their enemy too. "Oh, what quenchless feud is this, that Time hath with the sons of Men," cries Herman Melville, and

INTRODUCTORY

the feud goes on not only in life and death but in the byways of literary creation and criticism. Let us avoid it by imagining that all the novelists are at work together in a circular room. I shall not mention their names until we have heard their words, because a name brings associations with it, dates, gossip, all the furniture of the method we are discarding.

They have been instructed to group themselves in pairs. The first pair write as follows:

(1) I don't know what to do, not I!—God forgive me, but I am very impatient! I wish—But I don't know what to wish, without a sin!—Yet I wish it would please God to take me to his mercy!—I can meet with none here—What a world is this!—What is there in it desirable? The good we hope for, so strangely mixed, that one knows not what to wish for! And one half of mankind tormenting the other, and being tormented themselves in tormenting!

(2) What I hate is myself—when I think that one has to take so much, to be happy, out of the lives of others, and that one isn't happy even then. One does it to cheat one's self and to stop one's mouth—but that is only, at the best, for a little. The wretched self is always there, always making us somehow a fresh anxiety. What it comes to is that it's not, that it's never, a happiness, any happiness at all, to *take*. The only safe thing is to give. It's what plays you least false.

It is obvious that here sit two novelists who are looking at life from much the same angle, yet the first of them is Samuel Richardson, and the second you will have already identified as Henry James. Each is an anxious rather than an ardent psychologist. Each is sensitive to suffering and appreciates self-sacrifice; each falls short of the tragic, though a close approach is made. A sort of tremulous nobility—that is the spirit that dominates them—and oh how well they write!—not a word out of place in their copious flows. A hundred and fifty years of time divide them, but are not they close together in other ways, and may not their neighbourliness profit us? Of course as I say this I hear Henry James beginning to express his regret—no, not his regret but his surprise—no, not even his surprise but his awareness that neighbourliness is being

postulated of him, and postulated, must he add, in relation to a shopkeeper. And I hear Richardson, equally cautious, wondering whether any writer born outside England can be chaste. But these are surface differences, are indeed additional points of contact. We leave them sitting in harmony, and proceed to our next pair.

(1) All the preparations for the funeral ran easily and happily under Mrs Johnson's skilful hands. On the eve of the sad occasion she produced a reserve of black sateen, the kitchen steps, and a box of tintacks, and decorated the house with festoons and bows of black in the best possible taste. She tied up the knocker with black crape, and put a large bow over the corner of the steel engraving of Garibaldi, and swathed the bust of Mr Gladstone that had belonged to the deceased with inky swathings. She turned the two vases that had views of Tivoli and the Bay of Naples round, so that these rather brilliant landscapes were hidden and only the plain blue enamel showed, and she anticipated the long contemplated purchase of a tablecloth for the front room, and substituted a violet purple cover for the now very worn and faded raptures and roses in plushette that had hitherto done duty there. Everything that loving consideration could do to impart a dignified solemnity to her little home was done.

(2) The air of the parlour being faint with the smell of sweet cake, I looked about for the table of refreshments; it was scarcely visible until one had got accustomed to the gloom, but there was a cut-up plum-cake upon it, and there were cut-up oranges, and sandwiches, and biscuits, and two decanters that I knew very well as ornaments, but had never seen used in all my life: one full of port, and one of sherry. Standing at this table, I became conscious of the servile Pumblechook in a black cloak and several yards of hatband, who was alternately stuffing himself, and making obsequious movements to catch my attention. The moment he succeeded, he came over to me (breathing sherry and crumbs), and said in a subdued voice, "May I, dear sir?" and did.

These two funerals did not happen on the same day. One is that of Mr Polly's father (1910), the other Mrs Gargery's in *Great Expectations* (1861). Yet Wells and Dickens have the

same point of view and even use the same tricks of style (cf. the two vases and the two decanters). They are, both, humorists and visualizers who get an effect by cataloguing details and whisking the page over irritably. They are generous-minded; they hate shams and enjoy being indignant about them; they are valuable social reformers; they have no notion of confining books to a library shelf. Sometimes the lively surface of their prose scratches like a cheap gramophone record, a certain poorness of quality appears, and the face of the author draws rather too near to that of the reader. In other words, neither of them has much taste: the world of beauty was largely closed to Dickens, and is entirely closed to Wells. And there are other parallels—for instance their method of drawing character. And perhaps the main difference between them is the difference of opportunity offered to an obscure boy of genius a hundred years ago and forty years ago. The difference is in Wells's favour. He is better educated than his predecessor; in particular the addition of science has strengthened his mind and subdued his hysteria. He registers an improvement in society—Dotheboys Hall has been superseded by the Polytechnic—not any change in the novelist's art.

What about our next pair?

(1) But for that mark, I'm not sure about it; I don't believe it was made by a nail after all; it's too big, too round, for that. I might get up, but if I got up and looked at it, ten to one I shouldn't be able to say for certain; because once a thing's done, no one ever knows how it happened. Oh! dear me, the mystery of life; the inaccuracy of thought! The ignorance of humanity! To show how very little control of our possessions we have—what an accidental affair this living is after all our civilization—let me just count over a few of the things lost in one lifetime, beginning, for that seems always the most mysterious of losses—what cat would gnaw, what rat would nibble—three pale blue canisters of book-binding tools? Then there were the bird cages, the iron hoops, the steel skates, the Queen Anne coal-scuttle, the bagatelle board, the hand organ—all gone, and jewels, too. Opals and emeralds, they lie about the roots of turnips. What a scraping paring affair it is to be sure! The wonder is that I've any clothes on my back, that I sit surrounded by solid furniture

at this moment. Why, if one wants to compare life to anything, one must liken it to being blown through the Tube at fifty miles an hour. . . .

(2) Every day for at least ten years together did my father resolve to have it mended—'tis not mended yet;—no family but ours would have borne with it an hour—and what is most astonishing, there was not a subject in the world upon which my father was so eloquent, as upon that of door-hinges.—And yet at the same time, he was certainly one of the greatest bubbles to them, I think, that history can produce: his rhetoric and conduct were at perpetual handy-cuffs. Never did the parlour-door open—but his philosophy or his principles fell a victim to it;—three drops of oil with a feather, and a smart stroke of a hammer, had saved his honour for ever.

—Inconsistent soul that man is!—languishing under wounds, which he has the power to heal!—his whole life a contradiction to his knowledge!—his reason, that precious gift of God to him—(instead of pouring in oil) serving but to sharpen his sensibilities—to multiply his pains, and render him more melancholy and uneasy under them!—Poor unhappy creature, that he should do so!—Are not the necessary causes of misery in this life enow, but he must add voluntary ones to his stock of sorrow;—struggle against evils which cannot be avoided, and submit to others, which a tenth part of the trouble they create him would remove from his heart for ever?

By all that is good and virtuous, if there are three drops of oil to be got, and a hammer to be found within ten miles of *Shandy Hall*—the parlour door hinge shall be mended this reign.

The passage last quoted is, of course, out of *Tristram Shandy*. The other passage was from Virginia Woolf. She and Sterne are both fantasists. They start with a little object, take a flutter from it, and settle on it again. They combine a humorous appreciation of the muddle of life with a keen sense of its beauty. There is even the same tone in their voices—a rather deliberate bewilderment, an announcement to all and sundry that they do not know where they are going. No doubt their scales of value are not the same. Sterne is a sentimentalist, Virginia Woolf (except perhaps in her latest work, *To the Lighthouse*) is extremely aloof. Nor are their achievements on