

# THE STRUCTURE OF THE NOVEL

EDWIN MUIR



1967  
THE HOGARTH PRESS  
LONDON

# THE STRUCTURE OF THE NOVEL

*By the same Author*

*Fiction*

THE MARIONETTE  
THE THREE BROTHERS  
POOR TOM

*Poetry*

FIRST POEMS  
CHORUS OF THE NEWLY DEAD  
SIX POEMS  
VARIATIONS ON THE TIME THEME  
JOURNEYS AND PLACES  
THE NARROW PLACE  
THE LABYRINTH

*Criticism*

LATTITUDES  
TRANSITION  
SCOTT AND SCOTLAND  
ESSAYS ON LITERATURE AND SOCIETY  
THE ESTATE OF POETRY

*Biography*

JOHN KNOX  
SCOTTISH JOURNEY  
THE STORY AND THE FABLE  
AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

# THE STRUCTURE OF THE NOVEL

EDWIN MUIR

*Tenth Impression*

1967  
THE HOGARTH PRESS  
LONDON

Published by  
The Hogarth Press Ltd  
London

Clarke, Irwin & Co. Ltd  
Toronto

*First published* 1928  
*Reprinted* 1932, 1938, 1946, 1949, 1954  
*New Edition* 1957  
*Reprinted* 1960, 1963, 1967

Reproduced and printed by offset lithography  
in Great Britain by the Hollen Street Press, Slough, Bucks.

# CONTENTS

LECTURE	PAGE
I. NOVELS OF ACTION AND CHARACTER . . .	7
II. THE DRAMATIC NOVEL . . . . .	41
III. TIME AND SPACE . . . . .	62
IV. THE CHRONICLE . . . . .	88
V. THE PERIOD NOVEL AND LATER DEVELOP- MENTS . . . . .	115
VI. CONCLUSION . . . . .	134



# THE STRUCTURE OF THE NOVEL

## I

### NOVELS OF ACTION AND CHARACTER

THE object of this book is to study the principles of structure in the novel. Those principles, it is obvious, cannot be located in any one example of fiction, however great. The method I shall employ, therefore, is the following. I shall divide the novel into a few rough and ready but easily recognisable classes; I shall consider not merely one kind of structure but several, discover if possible the laws which operate in each, and find an æsthetic justification for those laws. In all their manifestations, I shall then try to show, those laws spring from a common necessity and postulate a general principle.

Before plunging into the subject, however, it



## 8 THE STRUCTURE OF THE NOVEL

will be best to limit our area by indicating what lies beyond it. In recent years three interesting books on the novel have appeared. They touch upon fascinating aspects of the subject and they are by writers of individual talent. *The Craft of Fiction*, by Mr Percy Lubbock, is concerned chiefly with "form"; but though the author says many good things, he does not quite divulge what form is: it is clear, however, that he means by it something different from what is meant here by structure. Form, as he conceives it, is evidently dependent on what he calls "the point of view," and consists in the writer's maintaining a severely limited, narrow, and undeviating attitude to his theme, as Henry James does for example. Mr Lubbock deals with a specific type of structure, then, rather than with structure in general. Mr E. M. Forster follows with *Aspects of the Novel*. Mr Forster does not hold much with form; he sees no reason why a novel should stick to one "point of view"; he is content so long as the novelist "bounces" us into a belief in his characters and gives us "life." Last of all appears Mr John Carruthers with his packed

little essay, *Scheherazade; or The Future of the English Novel*, proving that the novel must have form because Professor Whitehead says that life has it. Nineteenth-century materialism, with its denial of purpose, he maintains, is outmoded; we must believe now in "organic purpose." According to this, life has a pattern; therefore a novel must have a pattern. The novelist of the future "will have rid himself of the false beliefs oppressing the novelists of to-day, that the wholeness of things is 'not theirs in life,' and that all attempts to achieve wholeness in art must remain at best a sort of pretty-pretty deception. He will believe instead that in shaping his creation into an organic pattern he is working in the very spirit of life itself, and that the 'globed compacted things' he makes contain the same kind of reality, the same kind of truth, as he can find all round him in the world of hard, unadulterate fact. He will know that he selects only in order to reveal what *is*."

Of these three writers the one who keeps his eye most vigilantly on the object is Mr Lubbock. He is narrow, it is true; to please him the road

## 10 THE STRUCTURE OF THE NOVEL

must wind uphill all the way; and the more difficult it is the better; difficulty in a novel becomes to him, one might almost say, an additional source of æsthetic enjoyment. But he has the rare merit of being concerned with the novel as a specific form of art, not merely as one of the manifestations of life. There is a pattern in life, he would no doubt agree with Mr Carruthers, but he appreciates the fact that there is a difference between it and the pattern of a novel. The novel must give us "life," he would admit with Mr Forster, but what is life? he might ask, and what is the difference between life as we live it and life as we see it in Thackeray or in Henry James? In short, in a work on the novel he remembers the novel. Mr Forster argues that the novel must give us life because life does; Mr Carruthers maintains that the novel must present a pattern because life does. Both, no doubt, are right: what they forget is the novel.

To remember the novel the first thing one must do is to assume (that is, forget) such things as that it is about life and that life has a pattern. After all, the fact that the novelist writes about

life is not so very extraordinary; it is the only thing he knows anything about. Nor is it surprising that he should inevitably dispose life in a pattern when he writes, no matter what he may think of it. He does so because he makes a statement, and life does not. In that statement he may say that life is a chaos, or that life is an order; but unless he writes like Miss Gertrude Stein, the statement at any rate will be clear, and clearer than life. The point is obvious enough. We never think of complaining that Birmingham or Clapham has no form, or that Smith's life is without design; but we would complain if even the most mediocre novel about Birmingham or Smith had not some approach to coherence. It is axiomatic that the pattern of no novel, however formless, can ever be so formless as life as we see it; for even *Ulysses* is less confusing than Dublin. What Mr Carruthers really wants the novel to live up to is a new philosophical conception of the universe, not its own laws. New philosophical conceptions may no doubt be of use to the novelist; they may help him to see the world more completely; and ideally they should be part of his knowledge. But however long

## 12 THE STRUCTURE OF THE NOVEL

he listens to them, they will not tell him what the laws of the novel are. He may write a novel structurally good, imagining that life is a chaos, and one structurally false, thinking it an order.

The reason for this is that the laws of the novel, the laws of imaginative creation in prose, are not within his control. He may not know them; all that matters is that he should observe them. Theories about them may help him, or hinder him; and ignorance equally. If he modifies those laws consciously to his purpose, as James did, he is likely to narrow them; if, like Dickens, he knows little or nothing about them, he will go on writing with equal enthusiasm whether he is observing them or not. Nothing, however clever, that he may do to them can modify them essentially. The Jamesian novel is not a resumption or a fulfilment of the previous tradition, or an improvement on it, but a minor offshoot. *The Ambassadors* does not supersede *Wuthering Heights*; it is in a tradition exactly as important as its author, and a great novel is always in a tradition greater than that of any author. The danger of a practising theorist on the novel like James is that he ends

by doing exactly what he wants to do. He excludes three-quarters of life where another would make some effort to subdue it. His plots will no doubt be very neat; but they will not have the organic movement, the ebb and flow, of a plot in the main tradition. They will be quite without those "formidable erosions of contour" which Mr Forster, quoting Nietzsche, admires so much. "All that is prearranged is false," Mr Forster ends by exclaiming. There could not be a better criticism of the Jamesian novel.

Nevertheless, the novel is rich in offshoots, and these are of considerable secondary importance. They include some of the works of Flaubert and James. The fate of such novels follows a general course. At first they are accepted by the few as the last word in fiction, as the best and newest form. Then they fall into their place, and are absorbed into the tradition as minor elements. They add something to it which remains there for general use.

Having admitted the value of those offshoots, however, we may leave them; for the purpose

## 14 THE STRUCTURE OF THE NOVEL

of this book is to trace the general and given structure of the novel rather than the many interesting varieties of form which have evolved from it. Many of those forms are controversial still, and I wish to remain as far as is practicable outside controversy. As instances of works controversial directly or indirectly, Mr Lubbock's book and Mr Carruthers' may serve very well. To Mr Lubbock certain forms of the novel are good and others bad, and the best of all is that which was used by Henry James. To Mr Carruthers all novels, no matter what their subject-matter, their aim, or their style, should have a clear and definite pattern. I shall start with the assumption that all the main forms of the novel are good: those whose pattern is definite, those whose pattern is vague; those which proceed by strict development, those which seem to have hardly any development at all. I shall not enter into the present controversy; I shall try rather to contribute a few general considerations which should be relevant to it.

The first difficulty is that almost all the terms which it is usual to apply to the novel at present are controversial or semi-controversial.

I mean such terms as "pattern," "rhythm," "surface," "point of view," and so on. It is customary, for example, to find pattern in Henry James, and whenever a critic uses the word he is putting in an indirect plea for the Jamesian novel. Mr Forster finds "pattern," inevitably enough, in *The Ambassadors*, and "rhythm," more originally, in Marcel Proust. Mr Lubbock, again, quite fails to find his "point of view" in Tolstoy, and is somewhat dismayed. There is something a little precious in writing about the novel in this way. We assent lazily to those terms, but we do not really believe that a novel has a pattern like a carpet or a rhythm like a tune. When Mr Forster mentions "pattern" and "rhythm" we know what he is talking about, but we know, too, that it is neither pattern nor rhythm. James is the father of most of those question-begging terms; he was an incurable impressionist; and he has infected criticism with his vocabulary of hints and nods. Applied to works of the first rank, that vocabulary is ridiculously inadequate. "Pattern" may suffice quite well for *The Ambassadors*; "rhythm" is incapable of indicating the quality of Proust. It



## 16 THE STRUCTURE OF THE NOVEL

sentimentalises him, as it would sentimentalise any really first-rate novelist. In the same way it would be obviously absurd to speak of the “pattern” of *Crime and Punishment*, though it has a pattern, or of the “surface” of *Tom Jones*, though its surface is admirable. Criticism tacitly admits this by never attempting to do so.

The term “plot” stands outside these dangers. It is a definite term, it is a literary term, and it is universally applicable. It can be used in the widest popular sense. It designates for everyone, not merely for the critic, the chain of events in a story and the principle which knits it together. It covers *Treasure Island* and *Tristram Shandy*, *Wuthering Heights* and *The Ambassadors*, *The Three Musketeers* and *Ulysses*. In all these novels a few things happen, and in a certain order, and in every novel things must happen and in a certain order. As they must needs happen, however, it is the order which distinguishes one kind of plot from another. Events move along one line in *Treasure Island*, along another in *Vanity Fair*. This volume will be more specifically, then, a study of some of the lines along which events