

From Myth to Modernism

A SHORT GUIDE TO THE
WORLD NOVEL

Gilbert Phelps

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Preface

This book, needless to say, is *not* a complete history of world fiction or anything approaching it. That would demand many volumes, and even then probably only the surface of so vast a subject would be scratched. Neither is it a potted history of the type that may be of value on the shelves of a reference library, but which hardly makes for stimulating and consecutive reading. It is an attempt, rather, to tell the story (in itself a varied and fascinating one) of the rise of the narrative impulse in the major cultures, both East and West, and in doing so to correct the temptation to think solely in terms of our own.

The book in consequence is not for the specialist in any particular branch of the subject, or in the literature of any of the separate languages – and I must stress that although I have studied some of the works discussed in the original, the bulk of my reading has been in English translation, while I am almost entirely ignorant of the Oriental languages. One consequence of this is that my Bibliography is, in effect, a list of personal acknowledgements as well as of suggestions for further reading.

From Myth to Modernism is, therefore, addressed primarily to the English-speaking general reader, though this is a term which has wide applications and which includes, or should include, many students. Anyone, for example, who has read or taught English Literature in one of the universities knows very well that it is possible, indeed normal, to obtain a good honours degree in it while being almost totally ignorant of the literatures of other countries. Some courses may ask for a subsidiary modern language, or for Latin or Anglo-Saxon, but this rarely involves more than an acquaintance with two or three set books, with few points of reference to other cultures, and probably none at all to those outside Europe and America. In many ways ordinary lovers of literature are often better informed than those who have been subjected to an academic training, because curiosity and enthusiasm may have encouraged them to range more freely. But many of them, too, will be aware that their reading of fiction has been piecemeal, and that they have gaps in their understanding of its progress as a whole the bridging of which would add to their appreciation and powers of discrimination. And all kinds of readers must frequently have wondered why a particular author wrote in the way he or she did at a particular moment; and whether writers in other parts of the world were thinking, feeling and responding in similar or different ways – and, if it comes to that, how, why and where the need to tell stories arose in the first place.

This book aims to answer some of these questions and to fill in some of the gaps. Inevitably, of course, any attempt to survey so large a territory within the bounds of a single volume will have holes in it, as well as oversimplifications and compressions which will infuriate many, and choices of significant moments, works or authors which are in many cases bound to be purely personal. But if this bird's-eye view misses many of the foothills, on the whole it does pick out the main peaks and mountain ranges.

To achieve this I have had to make a number of editorial decisions. The titles of works in those European languages of which the English and American reader is likely to have a smattering (French, German, Spanish and Italian) have, for example, mostly been given in the original. They are followed in brackets either by the title of the translated work, if there is one, or by a literal translation in quotation marks. If the title is the same in both languages, or if the meaning is obvious, no translation has been made. However I have reserved the right to be inconsistent when dealing with more modern works. The Latin-American novels discussed here, for example, tend to be best known to the English-speaking world by their translated titles; and while, say, most German modern novels are best-known in translation (Kafka's *The Trial*, for example), this is certainly not true of some French works. *Le Grand Meaulnes*, for example, is best known in the original, and *A la recherche du temps perdu* sounds much more natural even to British ears than *Remembrance of Things Past* – added to which, Proust found the latter a most unsatisfactory rendering for his overall theme and purpose.

In other cases, notably with the great Russian works of fiction, those in the other Slavonic and East European languages, as well as those in the Scandinavian languages, the Oriental languages and Sanskrit, the titles are in English, either in the form adopted in the translations, where they exist, or in more or less literal versions or approximations to them. There are some exceptions, however, especially where Sanskrit works are concerned, either because I was defeated in my efforts to find satisfactory English equivalents, or because the flavour was best preserved by keeping to the original title, or because it was in this form that the work reached the West. It would be possible, for example, to make a literal (if long-winded) English translation of *Pancatantra*, but that was how this great seminal collection of tales was known not only in the East but throughout Europe.

In transcribing it, as with all Sanskrit works, I have omitted all accents and symbols, partly because the cost of their reproduction would be prohibitive, but mainly because their presence would be meaningless to the non-specialist Western reader. I have adopted the same course in my renderings of titles and names of authors and characters in dealing with works in the various 'modern' Indian languages, and much the same applies in the case of Chinese and Japanese works, though sometimes (especially with the names of Japanese authors) I have retained those stresses which may be of assistance to the reader in pronouncing them to his inner ear. Naturally this would be unacceptable to the Orientalist, but I am writing, I repeat, for the more general reader who

will gain from this book at least some rough idea of the growth of Oriental story-telling, still so little known in the West. As far as accents and other symbols in the major European languages (excluding Russian) are concerned, it was obvious enough that they were essential, but I was doubtful whether all those used in less well-known ones would be of help to the kind of readers I had in mind, and for the most part I have left them out.

These decisions may seem arbitrary and wrong-headed, but I ask the reader to accept them rather as a series of conventions whose intention was to make for greater ease of reading, and which might help to achieve my main objective of providing a general framework and wider and more balanced perspectives which would lead the addict of fiction, whether specialised student or not, to extend the scope of his reading, to get more out of it and, above all, to enjoy it more fully.

12 June 1985

GILBERT PHELPS

Introduction

Until comparatively recently the majority of readers, at least in the West, had no doubt what they understood by 'the novel'. It was the kind of book pioneered in eighteenth-century England by Samuel Richardson and Henry Fielding, and carried to maturity in various parts of the world by the great nineteenth-century masters. Definitions based on this model, indeed, are still embedded in most of the histories of literature and books of reference – and they are quite adequate for what they set out to describe: the realistic novel which for some two hundred years constituted the Western fictional norm. From about the 1920s, however, and especially since the last war, the basic assumptions underlying such confident definitions have been undermined as modern philosophers have detected all kinds of epistemological issues inherent in the writing of fiction. What the American critic Robert Alter has called 'the problematical relationship between real-seeming artifice and reality' now overshadows the practice of fiction-writing and the critical responses to it.

The current debate over the nature of reality in fiction and in real life has had the effect of throwing doubt on a number of the older theories as to the nature and origins of the novel. The idea, for instance, that it is essentially a product of bourgeois society has been challenged – and indeed the literary phenomenon of the novel has occurred, entirely independent of Western influences, in two other cultures which by no stretch of the imagination could be described as bourgeois – in twelfth-century Japan and in fifteenth-century China. If it comes to that, the idea that literature is always and necessarily the product or reflection of the society its writers belong to has itself been considerably modified, not least by a number of modern social anthropologists who have pointed out that there are plenty of instances, including a number from folklore, of narrative motifs or forms which fall outside, or are in direct opposition to, the prevailing cultural ethos.

This is not to deny that social factors were indirectly at work, but they do not always operate in the straightforward way that some of the more simplistic determinist theories suggest. For one thing, these theories tend to minimise the part played in the creation of literature by the individual genius who, to a considerable degree, evolves his own traditions – often in opposition to those of the culture in which he happens to have been born, and often in isolation and solitude. For another, some of the impulses that lead to artistic creation belong fundamentally not to a specific culture, but to the human species itself: they are biological rather than social. It is not only certain basic themes,

moreover, that are universal, but some of the forms as well. There is no known culture, for instance, which has not produced, in however rudimentary a way, the short lyric and the short story, and very few which do not possess some kind of drama. There is ample evidence to support the view that certain fundamental aspects of literature, no matter how much the modes of their expression may be affected by social factors, are non-social in origin.

Considerations such as these suggest that any attempt to explore the history of the novel in its world-wide manifestations is justified in going beyond a theory which confines its beginnings to one particular period in one particular country. If the definitions derived from this theory can no longer be fully applied to the experimental novels of this century, it follows that neither are they satisfactory for all the fictions of other cultures and other times. It is no longer sensible to speak of the novel as if it belonged only to the realistic genre or as if it arrived suddenly out of the blue in the eighteenth century and had no living connections with narrative traditions that can be traced back over many centuries. Neither is it sensible to apply only the criteria derived from that particular genre to all the earlier works of fiction, some of which had intrinsic merits of their own, and employed narrative modes which may, in some cases, be more relevant to the future of the novel than those of traditional Realism.

Contents

PREFACE ix

INTRODUCTION xiii

Part One: FROM MYTH TO REALISM

- 1 Myth and the Novel 3
A common heritage – the orally-transmitted epic – the Iliad and the Odyssey – the written tradition in Egypt – from oral composition to written – the sacred books of the ancient world
- 2 Towards Fact and Fiction 16
The historical instinct in China, Greece and the Roman Empire – the influence of Buddhism – the great story collections – towards romance – Greek and Roman prose romances – the Satiricon
- 3 Romance and Realism 30
Epic survivals – the Christianisation of story-telling – the Arthurian and other romances – Reynard the Fox: the first anti-hero – the Decameron
- 4 India, Arabia and the Far East 42
Romance and didacticism in India – the Maqamat: Arabian forerunner of the picaresque – The Thousand and One Nights – the Classical Prose Movement in China – the evolution of vernacular story-telling – Japan: The Tale of Genji – China: Monkey
- 5 Idealism and Experience 54
The stirrings of individual consciousness – Rabelais – Spain: the chivalrous and pastoral romances – the rise of the picaresque tradition – Don Quixote – the pastoral and the picaresque in England
- 6 Regression and Advance 68
France: the heroic romances – the picaresque genre in the seventeenth century – Simplicissimus – the comic romances – the voyages imaginaires
- 7 Truth or Fiction? 77
The Pilgrim's Progress – laying the foundations of the realistic novel – picaresque revivals – memoirs and fake memoirs – Manon Lescaut – Defoe and the influence of Robinson Crusoe

- 8 Beyond the Memoir 88
The influence of Marivaux and La Vie de Marianne – Samuel Richardson and the epistolary form – Pamela and Clarissa Harlowe – Henry Fielding and the concept of the comic epic – Joseph Andrews and Tom Jones – the emergence of the modern realistic novel
- 9 Extensions, Diversions and Confirmations 102
Tristram Shandy and the concept of time – the novel of sensibility in England – the Enlightenment in France – Voltaire and the Encyclopaedists – moral confusion and the Marquis de Sade – the influence of Rousseau – the German Enlightenment – Goethe and the Sturm und Drang movement – the growth of Romanticism – the English Gothic novel – the triumph of Jane Austen
- 10 Romanticism into Realism 125
The Age of the Novel – Sir Walter Scott – French Romanticism and Victor Hugo – Stendhal: history and the individual – Balzac: La Comédie humaine – the historical novel in Italy – costumbrismo in Spain – the German Romantic Movement – the Biedermeier writers – the Russian fictional tradition: Pushkin to Dostoyevsky
- 11 The Far East – and the New World 149
Independent developments in China and Japan – the 'Floating World' – the novels of Saikaku – a proliferation of narrative forms – commercial printing and some 'playful compositions' – the growing influence of the west – the New World: European transplants – James Fenimore Cooper: the 'American Scott' – Poe and American Gothic – Hawthorne and Melville

Part Two: REALISM TO MODERNISM

- 12 Realism to Naturalism 169
The new Realism in France – Madame Bovary – Zola's Naturalism – Huysmans: subjective sensationalism – Social Realism in England – Disraeli, Mrs Gaskell and the 'condition of England' question – the genius of Charles Dickens – fresh use of outmoded techniques in Vanity Fair – the Brontës – Trollope and the English family saga – George Eliot's European sensibilities – Thomas Hardy: 'last of the Victorians, first of the Moderns'
- 13 Realism and Naturalism in Germany and Scandinavia 187
Theodor Fontane and Effi Briest – Scandinavian Naturalism – Hans Christian Andersen – the influence of the French Naturalists – Georg Brandes and 'Radical Realism' – Strindberg: tormented genius – peasant fiction and Knut Hamsun – the feminist tradition – rediscovering old themes

14 Religious Traditionalism versus Realism 204

War, unrest and religious traditionalism in Spain – the persistence of costumbrismo – Perez Galdós: French influences in a Spanish context – Portugal: the influence of Eça de Queirós – Italian Realism – Verga and regional verismo – D'Annunzio and the tendency to decadence

15 Art and Politics – Russia and the Slav Countries 217

'Oblomovism' – Turgenev and 'the superfluous man' – Fathers and Sons: human elements and ideological issues – the two giants of Russian fiction: Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy – the literature of the minority cultures – the fictional tradition in Poland and Bulgaria – the Southern Slavs – Czechoslovakia

16 Rumania, Hungary, Greece and Turkey 237

Rumania: 'Magyar provincialism' versus the influences of the west – Hungary and the exploration of Europeanisms – Greece and the genre tradition – the Generation of 1930 – Turkey

17 New Directions in the Americas 246

The Civil War and its aftermath – nostalgia – the Southern writers – frontier humorists – Mark Twain – Howells and American Realism – Theodore Dreiser – Henry James and 'the international subject' – European influences in Latin America – the Indian Theme – Modernismo – Machado de Assis – Latin American Regionalism – Jorge Luis Borges: 'games with infinity'

18 Realism and Modernism in France, Belgium and Holland 267

The reaction against Realism – temporal and spatial paradoxes – the influence of the psycho-analysts – France and the roman fleuve – André Gide and Marcel Proust – 'the age of anxiety' – left-wing commitment – André Malraux – Belgian and Dutch fiction – Couperus and the role of Fate in human affairs – Dutch Modernism

19 Expressionism in Germany 280

Thomas Mann and the role of the artist in society – Heinrich Mann and The Blue Angel: a mirror on an age – the Expressionist movement between the wars – 'a new literature of the nerves' – Herman Hesse – Franz Kafka – the rise of Hitler

20 Tradition, Modernism and Fascism 289

Italy: flamboyant Futurism and 'magic' Realism – the fashionable writers of the Fascist period – Pirandello and international modernism – Spain: the Generation of '98 – the Generation of 1927 – the Spanish Civil War – Portugal

- 21 Russia – from Renaissance to Socialist Realism 296
A remarkable renaissance – Chekhov and Gorky – crisis in the Russian Realistic tradition – western influences: 'art for art's sake' – the triumph of the Bolsheviks – the Union of Soviet Writers and the doctrine of Socialist Realism – the Ukraine, Georgia and the Baltic States
- 22 Modernism in English Fiction 307
The anti-Naturalistic Mood – the isolation of the artist – Joseph Conrad – 'forces of darkness' – the 'materialists': Arnold Bennett, John Galsworthy and H. G. Wells – the First World War – Virginia Woolf and the 'stream of consciousness' – James Joyce: a kaleidoscopic universe – D. H. Lawrence – Wyndham Lewis – the 1930s and mounting political tension
- 23 The British Empire and After 319
Canada: from loyalist inheritance to a new nationalism – Australia: an anti-British tradition – Patrick White and the Australian experience – New Zealand – Africa: the mixture of races – the West Indies: from expatriate influence to a new nationalism – India: the Indian languages and the novel in English
- 24 The Triumph of the American Novel 334
'The new great American literature' – Hemingway and the Lost Generation – Scott Fitzgerald and the Jazz Age – the 1930s – the American South – fiction in Yiddish
- 25 The Far East 344
China to the 1911 revolution – Japan in 1868: embracing the west – Japanese Naturalism – the 'I-novel' – the Romantic movement – the isolation of the Japanese writer – the 'Literary Revolution' in China – the short story genre – western influences in Thailand – Indonesia and the Philippines

EPILOGUE 356

A BASIC BIBLIOGRAPHY 369

INDEX 381

Part One

FROM MYTH TO REALISM

Myth and the Novel

In order to understand fully what is happening in the novel today, and the directions in which it may develop in the future, it is necessary to begin with its pre-history. Story-telling for entertainment presupposes that a degree of sophistication has already been reached in a given culture, and it is almost certain that in the beginning it was employed exclusively in the service of primitive theology. The first stories, that is, were the sacred myths which grew out of (or went into) the various rituals expressing the most vital concerns of the human race at that stage of its development. Through them early men sought to come to terms with the forces of nature and the mysteries both of their external world and of the world within themselves. Evidence suggests that initially myths were collections of episodes bound together in a kind of vast cyclical structure (usually with some sort of creation story at the centre), frequently related to the seasons of the year or the movements of the constellations. After a time the separate episodes tended to proliferate to such an extent that they burst the seams and spilled out to have a life that was almost separate from the parent myth. It was then that the entertainment motive could appear, and the episodes be related with additions of drama, suspense and even humour.

Modern anthropologists have often pointed out the remarkable correspondences between the myths of primitive peoples, both past and present. There is the story of Cupid and Psyche (a fairly late addition to Greek mythology), in which Psyche breaks the injunction to receive her divine lover in darkness without looking at his face, and then has to undergo all kinds of trials before he is restored to her. The Norse legend of Freja and Oddur, and the story of Pururavas and Urvashi in the Indian *Vedas*, are basically the same, and there are also Welsh and Zulu versions. Similarly the Greek story of Diana and Endymion (one of the many solar myths) is known (with local variations) to the Sinhalese, to a number of the African tribes, and to the Aborigines of Australia.

There are numerous other mythic stories which have been common to Indians, Iranians, Greeks and Romans, as well as to Germans, Scandinavians, Russians and Celts. At one time it was supposed that these were stories already current among the ancestors of all these peoples – the Aryan tribes who had emigrated westwards from the central Asian tablelands – until it was realised that some of them were also known to non-Aryan peoples like the Chinese,

and the Indians of North and South America. Here is further evidence of the universality of some of the basic story-telling impulses: that there is a common human heritage lying behind the beginnings of all literature.

Much the same can be said of other kinds of ancient stories, which either derive from the larger central myths or gather elements from them. Many of the constituents of fairy-tales, for example, have had a world-wide distribution. Thus the Greek sirens of Homer illustrate the recurrent motif of the female fairy who brings death to her human lover, which Robert Louis Stevenson found to be as common in Samoa as on the banks of Loch Awe in his native Scotland; while the theme of fairy gold relates just as much to the *Jān* or *Jinnis* of the Arabs and Moors as to the *fairies* of Britain. Long before the advent of writing, therefore, there was a vast reservoir of narrative themes and motifs awaiting development. In its beginnings literature (though that word is by definition the art of writing) is world-wide, and those beginnings have never been entirely lost.

The idea of a meaningful link between ancient myth and the novel has, indeed, received weighty support in recent years from a number of contemporary thinkers, especially in France. Claude Lévi-Strauss, anthropologist and 'father' of modern structuralism, for example, sees myth as 'an emergent form of fiction, in its first freshness and originality', and the novel as 'born from the attenuation of myth'. In other words, when the mythological stories are hived off from the whole they enter the realm of finite space and time to which the novel itself belongs. As the Americans Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg have said: 'Because mythic narrative is the expression in story form of deep-seated human concerns, fears and aspirations, the plots of mythic tales are a storehouse of narrative correlatives – keys to the human psyche in story form – guaranteed to reach an audience and move them deeply.'

* * *

With most cultures the next major step in the evolution of narrative literature is the absorption of sacred myth, together with the quasi-historical legend, heroic songs, and the fictional folk-tale, into the new synthesis of the orally-transmitted epic. The oldest recorded example is probably the cycle of Sumerian heroic poems now known as *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. It was in Sumer that the art of writing began, about the year 3000 BC (at least two centuries earlier than in China) and it was being employed not long after that date to record not only contracts, laws and other practical matters, but also religious invocations and sacred stories as well.

Archaeological finds in Mesopotamia, in strata dated about 2500 BC, reveal that there must have been contacts between the Sumerian and pre-Aryan Indus valley civilisations – in fact there is evidence to suggest that the *Gilgamesh* epic, or at any rate some of its constituent stories, penetrated as far as the ancient peoples of India, as well as the Greeks and Romans. Elements have been detected in the *Odyssey* and in later epics of the Classical world,

including Virgil's *Aeneid* – and they recur in a number of the medieval epics.

What survives of *Gilgamesh*, some 3,000 lines, has been pieced together from a number of fragments of clay tablets. Some of these, transcribed into Akkadian, were preserved in the library of King Ashurbanipal of Assyria (669 – 630 BC), and there are also fragments in Hittite and Hurrian. But others are in the original Sumerian including one discovered at Megiddo in Palestine, dated at about 1400 BC. It recounts how the hero Gilgamesh meets Utnapishtim, the Babylonian 'Noah', who tells him the story of the Great Flood and the Ark – one of the tales that grew out of a massive inundation at the top of the Persian Gulf which, according to the archaeologists, took place about the year 4000 BC, and obviously gave rise to the similar story in the Bible's *Book of Genesis*.

The name 'Gilgamesh' in Sumerian means father or hero. In all likelihood the poem is referring to the Gilgamesh who ruled at Uruk in Babylonia about 2700 BC, but the hero of the epic is essentially a mythical figure. After his many adventures he becomes a god, bearing a strong resemblance in some parts of the poem to the Babylonian and Assyrian sun-god, Tammuz (the Adonis of Greek myth). Internal evidence makes it clear, however, that some portions of the epic pre-date the reign of the semi-historical King Gilgamesh, and that (as so often happened in the evolution of an oral epic) a number of very ancient myths and legends were at a later stage clustered round the name of a popular hero. This applies in particular to the stories about Enkidu, the wild man or primeval hunter, living among the gazelles and beasts of the fields, who was created by the goddess Aruru to be a rival to Gilgamesh, and becomes instead his boon companion. *The Epic of Gilgamesh* was, then, a prototypical repository of ancient myths and stories which had originally circulated in oral form long before the invention of writing.

The traditional, orally-transmitted epic is to be found in most of the major literatures (and in many minor ones as well) and in most it is the earliest known literary form. When the Greek orator and philosopher Dio Chrysostom (about the year AD 80) commented that 'even among the Indians, they say, Homer's poetry is sung, having been translated by them into their own dialect and tongue', he is not to be taken literally. What Chrysostom meant was that the Indians, too, possessed epics (composed in Sanskrit) similar to those of Homer. The *Mahabharata* (Bharata was one of the legendary hero-kings of ancient India and this is his 'great poem') is nearly eight times as long as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* combined, and with its 100,000 couplets can claim to be the longest poem in the world. Like its Greek counterparts, this vast epic, too, is ascribed to an individual, Vyasa, but his traditional description as 'the arranger' indicates the real nature of his authorship. *The Mahabharata* may not have reached its final form until near the beginning of the Christian era, but by then it had gone through numerous transcriptions. It was originally adopted – and adapted for religious purposes – by the priestly caste of the Brahmins, in the fifth century BC, or even earlier. The central story, about a feud between two half-brothers for accession to the throne of the Bharatas,