

# *Preface*

A story is the best thing about a novel. But the title of this book, which is deliberately ambiguous, is meant to suggest something more than that. 'Novel' is the name of a literary kind, and there is a story to tell about how, over the centuries, its substance has widened and its conventions changed. This book is about both: it is at once a study of narrative and a history of the novel since its emergence some three centuries ago.

Its pattern differs, however, from older histories like Ernest Baker's or Walter Allen's, which moved chronologically from novelist to novelist. In this book I shall move rather from one aspect of narrative to another, though some chapters are broadly historical within themselves. Since no two readers have read the same novels, the best way to use it might be as a framework: a sort of clothes-horse to hang one's own instances on – relating what one has read, or means to read, to the outline offered here.

Critical debate suggests that the study of fiction now needs just that. The problem of narrative by now represents a highly sophisticated inquiry – so much so that it is sometimes hard to find a way back to the starting-point or to get at the facts that a reader of fiction needs in order to acquire a sense of what is exceptional and what is ordinary. That is because it is always a temptation for critics to write with the object of impressing other critics: and one worth resisting, if hard to resist. My first impulse was to write an elementary book rather than an original one; though originality sometimes comes unlooked for, and elementary arguments have a way of turning irresistibly into something else. And any working historian knows that it is easier to be original than to get it right.

Henry James, in an excited moment, called the novel 'independent, elastic, prodigious', and its story is as untidy as some of its masterpieces. It is already hard to achieve a 'poetic' of it, or working

handbook, and it will doubtless get harder. If Aristotle had read any novels he would have needed a far wider canvas than he allowed to tragedy in that surviving fragment of analysis known as the *Poetics*. My own view is that the novel none the less calls for analysis in something like the Aristotelian style, even though it now amounts to some three centuries of endeavour in all the great literary languages of the Western world. By Aristotelian here I mean a tradition which is analytically concerned with formal elements considered as ways of representing realities, as mimetic devices; and one hospitable to historical reference, too, since those devices change from age to age. The study now needs a sense of form that is not merely formalistic. All that could help in contemporary judgement too. Twentieth-century novels are powerfully reminiscent of their origins, to an informed eye, and especially of that highly formative century between Defoe and Scott, Lesage and Balzac.

It is in this spirit that I am concerned here with form: as a complex of devices for representing reality. That is why I have devoted a last chapter to the defence of realism: a doctrine that dogmatically upholds the claims of fiction to represent the real, and in my view fundamentally right. All that has meant shifting the argument from single novels or novelists towards a sense of how novels relate to one another in long ancestral lines. The sympathetic reader will have to expect to shift his interests in a similar direction. It is one thing to read novels, as most of us do; another to reflect efficiently about the novel as an evolving literary kind, though one activity can depend upon the other. In that sense, this book is about the Novel rather than novels. It considers how a great literary species was moulded into a recognisable life of its own, and how its conventions have evolved since the seventeenth century.

A European community existed in fiction before statesmen were inspired and encouraged to make institutions of it, and no boundaries of nation or period can reasonably limit this inquiry, though my main emphasis falls on novels composed in English and in French. The twentieth century, as I see it, has been rich above all in its faculty to revive and adapt, and many of its experiments are best seen as reflections of preceding ages. That reminder could be salutary: one odd effect of the cult of the New since the 1950s has been to exalt as original some narrative practices that Diderot or Sterne would have found unsurprising; and some fashionable arguments about meta-fictionality strike me as ignorant, and perhaps wilfully ignorant at that.

The *nouveau roman* of the 1960s was nothing like as *nouveau* as its name suggested. Post-war fiction has plenty of lively and original elements to boast of; but seeing what is original calls for some widely shared knowledge of the sources out of which modern techniques have grown. That is the first object of this book.

By and large, and with that object in mind, I have concerned myself with novels that are famous, or at least known; and some of my assertions about the primacy of events may seem over-bold and omissive unless seen in the light of that guiding principle. To deal largely with known books is a matter of courtesy, in the first instance, since any reader would prefer to hear about novels which he has read or may soon read. It is also more useful. And it is compelled upon the historian, in any case, by a body of evidence so vast that his own knowledge is necessarily partial and imperfect. But masterpieces cannot be grasped in isolation, and my scope is rather wider than that. Great art, as F. Scott Fitzgerald once remarked in his notes, 'is the contempt of a great man for small art', and to feel that contempt one needs to know something about small art and to widen interests beyond the best. If it has proved difficult to maintain a balance in this delicate matter, I hope that the general principle, at least, can be conceded.