



VINTAGE MAUGHAM

Ten Novels and
Their Authors

About the Book

‘One of the finest novelists and dramatists of the twentieth century’ *Glasgow Herald*

Maugham’s studies of the lives and masterpieces of ten great novelists are outstanding examples of literary criticism at its finest. Afforded here are some of the formulae of greatness in the genre, as well as the flaws and heresies which enfeeble it. Written by a master of fiction, *Ten Novels and Their Authors* is a unique and invaluable guide.

See also: *The Vagrant Mood*

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

Ten Novels and
Their Authors

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

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Contents

[Cover](#)

[About the Book](#)

[Title](#)

[Copyright](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Other Works by W Somerset Maugham](#)

[1 The Art of Fiction](#)

[2 Henry Fielding and *Tom Jones*](#)

[3 Jane Austen and *Pride and Prejudice*](#)

[4 Stendhal and *Le Rouge et le Noir*](#)

[5 Balzac and *Le Père Goriot*](#)

[6 Charles Dickens and *David Copperfield*](#)

[7 Flaubert and *Madame Bovary*](#)

[8 Herman Melville and *Moby Dick*](#)

[9 Emily Brontë and *Wuthering Heights*](#)

[10 Dostoevsky and *The Brothers Karamazov*](#)

[11 Tolstoy and *War and Peace*](#)

[12 In Conclusion](#)

TEN NOVELS AND AND THEIR AUTHORS

William Somerset Maugham was born in 1874 and lived in Paris until he was ten. He was educated at King's School, Canterbury, and at Heidelberg University. He spent some time at St. Thomas' Hospital with the idea of practising medicine, but the success of his first novel, *Liza of Lambeth*, published in 1897, won him over to letters. *Of Human Bondage*, the first of his masterpieces, came out in 1915, and with the publication in 1919 of *The Moon and Sixpence* his reputation as a novelist was established. At the same time his fame as a successful playwright and short story writer was being consolidated with acclaimed productions of various plays and the publication of *The Trembling of a Leaf*, subtitled *Little Stories of the South Sea Islands*, in 1921, which was followed by seven more collections. His other works include travel books, essays, criticism and the autobiographical *The Summing Up* and *A Writer's Notebook*.

In 1927 Somerset Maugham settled in the South of France and lived there until his death in 1965.

OTHER WORKS BY W SOMERSET MAUGHAM

Novels

The Moon and Sixpence

Of Human Bondage

The Narrow Corner

The Razor's Edge

Cakes and Ale

The Merry-Go-Round

The Painted Veil

Catalina

Up at the Villa

Mrs Craddock

Christmas Holiday

The Magician

Theatre

Liza of Lambeth

Then and Now

Collected Short Stories

Collected Short Stories Vol. 1

Collected Short Stories Vol. 2

Collected Short Stories Vol. 3

Collected Short Stories Vol. 4

Short Stories

Ashenden

Far Eastern Tales

More Far Eastern Tales

Travel Writing

The Gentleman in the Parlour

On a Chinese Screen

Don Fernando

Literary Criticism

Points of View

The Vagrant Mood

Autobiography

A Writer's Notebook

The Summing Up

J'ai toujours aimé les correspondances, les conversations, les pensées, tous les détails du caractère, des mœurs, de la biographie en un mot, des grands écrivains ...

SAINTE-BEUVE

La première condition d'un roman est d'intéresser. Or, pour cela, il faut illusionner le lecteur à tel point qu'il puisse croire que ce qu'on lui raconte est réellement arrivé.

BALZAC

The Art of Fiction

(1)

I should like to tell the reader of this book how the essays in it first came to be written. One day, when I was in the United States, the Editor of *Redbook* asked me to make a list of what in my opinion were the ten best novels in the world. I did so, and thought no more about it. Of course my list was arbitrary. I could have made one of ten other novels, just as good in their different ways as those I chose, and give just as sound reasons for selecting them. If a hundred persons, well read and of adequate culture, were asked to produce such a list, in all probability at least two or three hundred novels would be mentioned, but I think that in all the lists most of those I have chosen would find a place. That there should be a diversity of opinion in this matter is understandable. There are various reasons that make a particular novel so much appeal to a person, even of sound judgment, that he is led to ascribe outstanding merit to it. It may be that he has read it at a time of life when, or in circumstances in which, he was peculiarly liable to be moved by it; or it may be that its theme, or its setting, has a more than ordinary significance for him owing to his own predilections or personal associations. I can imagine that a passionate lover of music might place Henry Handel Richardson's *Maurice Guest* among the ten best novels, and a native of the Five Towns, delighted with the fidelity with which Arnold Bennett described their character and their inhabitants, might in his list place *The Old Wives' Tale*. Both are good novels, but I do not think an unbiased judgment would put either of them among the best ten. The nationality of a reader lends to certain works an interest that inclines him to attribute a greater excellence to them than would generally be admitted. During the eighteenth century, English literature was widely read in France, but since then, till fairly recently, the French have not taken much interest in anything that was written beyond their own frontiers, and I don't suppose it would occur to a Frenchman to mention *Moby Dick* in such a list as I myself made, or *Pride and Prejudice* only if he were of quite unusual culture; he would certainly, however, include Madame de Lafayette's *La Princesse de Clèves*; and rightly, for it has outstanding merits. It is a novel of sentiment, a psychological novel, perhaps the first that was ever written: the story is touching; the characters are soundly drawn; it is written with distinction, and it is commendably brief. It deals with a state of society which is well known to every schoolboy in France; its moral atmosphere is familiar to him from his reading of Corneille and Racine; it has the glamour of association with the most splendid period of French history, and it is a worthy contribution to the golden age of French literature. But the English reader may think the magnanimity of the protagonists inhuman, the discourse with one another stilted, and their behaviour incredible. I do not say he is right to think this; but, thinking it, he will never class this admirable novel among the ten best in the world.

In a brief commentary to accompany the list of books I made for *Redbook*, I wrote: 'The wise reader will get the greatest enjoyment out of reading them if he learns the useful art of skipping.' A sensible person does not read a novel as a task. He reads it as a diversion. He is prepared to interest himself in the characters and is concerned to see how they act in given circumstances, and what happens to them; he sympathises with their troubles and is gladdened by their joys; he puts himself in their place and, to an extent, lives their lives. Their view of life, their attitude to the great subjects

human speculation, whether stated in words or shown in action, call forth in him a reaction of surprise of pleasure or of indignation. But he knows instinctively where his interest lies and he follows it surely as a hound follows the scent of a fox. Sometimes, through the author's failure, he loses the scent. Then he flounders about till he finds it again. He skips.

Everybody skips, but to skip without loss is not easy. It may be, for all I know, a gift of nature, or it may be something that has to be acquired by experience. Dr. Johnson skipped ferociously, and Boswell tell us that 'he had a peculiar facility in seizing at once what was valuable in any book without submitting to the labour of perusing it from beginning to end'. Boswell was doubtless referring to books of information or of edification; if it is a labour to read a novel it is better not to read it at all. Unfortunately, for reasons I shall go into presently, there are few novels which it is possible to read from beginning to end with unfailing interest. Though skipping may be a bad habit, it is one that is forced upon the reader. But when the reader once begins to skip, he finds it hard to stop and so may miss much that it would have been to his advantage to read.

Now it so happened that some time after the list I had made for *Redbook* appeared, an American publisher put before me the suggestion of reissuing the ten novels I had mentioned in an abridged form, with a preface to each one written by me. His idea was to omit everything but what told the story the author had to tell, expose his relevant ideas and display the characters he had created so that readers might read these fine novels, which they would not have done unless what might not unfairly be described as a lot of dead wood had been cut away from them; and thus, since nothing but what was valuable was left in them, enjoy to the full a great intellectual pleasure. I was at first taken aback; but then I reflected that though some of us have acquired the knack of skipping to our profit, most people have not, and it would surely be a good thing if they could have their skipping done for them by a person of tact and discrimination. I welcomed the notion of writing the prefaces to the novels in question, and presently set to work. Some students of literature, some professors and critics, would exclaim that it is a shocking thing to mutilate a masterpiece, and that it should be read as the author wrote it. That depends on the masterpiece. I cannot think that a single page could be omitted from so enchanting a novel as *Pride and Prejudice*, or from one so tightly constructed as *Madame Bovary*; but that very sensible critic George Saintsbury wrote that 'there is very little fiction that will stand concentration and condensation as well as that of Dickens'. There is nothing reprehensible in cutting. Few plays have ever been produced that were not to their advantage more or less drastically cut for rehearsal. One day, many years ago, when we were lunching together, Bernard Shaw told me that his plays were much more successful in Germany than they were in England. He ascribed this to the stupidity of the British public and to the greater intelligence of the German. He was wrong. In England he insisted that every word he had written should be spoken. I had seen his plays in Germany; the directors had ruthlessly pruned them of verbiage unnecessary to the dramatic action, and so provided the public with an entertainment that was thoroughly enjoyable. I did not, however, think it well to tell him this. I know no reason why a novel should not be subjected to a similar process.

Coleridge said of *Don Quixote* that it is a book to read through once and then only to dip into, but which he may well have meant that parts of it are so tedious, and even absurd, that it is time ill-spent when you have once discovered this, to read them again. It is a great and important book, and every professed student of literature should certainly read it once through (I have myself read it from cover to cover twice in English and three times in Spanish), yet I cannot but think that the ordinary reader, the reader who reads for delight, would lose nothing if he did not read the dull parts at all. He would surely enjoy all the more the passages in which the narrative is directly concerned with the adventures

and conversations, so amusing and so touching, of the gentle knight and his earthy squire. A Spanish publisher has, in point of fact, collected these in a single volume. It makes very good reading. There is another novel, certainly important, but to be called great only with hesitation, Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa*, which is of a length to defeat all but the most obstinate of novel readers. I do not believe I could ever have brought myself to read it if I had not come across a copy in an abridged form. The abridgment had been so well done that I had no feeling that anything was lost.

I suppose most people would admit that Marcel Proust's *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu* is the greatest novel that has been produced in this century. Proust's fanatical admirers, of whom I am one, can read every word of it with interest; in a moment of extravagance, I stated once that I would soon be bored by Proust than amused by any other writer; but I am prepared now, after a third reading, to admit that the various parts of his book are of unequal merit. I suspect that the future will cease to be interested in those long sections of desultory reflection which Proust wrote under the influence of ideas current in his day, but now in part discarded and in part commonplace. I think then it will be more evident than it is now that he was a great humorist and that his power to create character, original, various and lifelike, places him on an equality with Balzac, Dickens and Tolstoy. It may be that some day an abridged version of his immense work will be issued from which will be omitted those passages that time had stripped of their value and only those retained which, because they are the essence of a novel, remain of enduring interest. *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu* will still be a very long novel, but it will be a superb one. So far as I can make out from the somewhat complicated account in André Maurois' admirable book, *À la Recherche de Marcel Proust*, the author's intention was to publish his novel in three volumes of about four hundred pages each. The second and third volumes were in print when the First World War broke out, and publication was postponed. Proust's health was too poor to allow him to serve in the war and he used the ample leisure thus at his disposal to add to the third volume an immense amount of material. 'Many of the additions,' says Maurois, 'are psychological and philosophical dissertations, in which the intelligence' (by which I take him to mean the author in person) 'comments on the actions of the characters.' And he adds: 'One could compile from them a series of essays after the manner of Montaigne: on the role of music, novelty in the arts, beauty of style, on the small number of human types, on flair in medicine, etc.' That is true, but whether they add to the value of the novel as a novel depends, I suppose, on what opinions you hold on the essential function of the form.

On this, different people have different opinions. H. G. Wells wrote an interesting essay which he called *The Contemporary Novel*: 'So far as I can see,' he says, 'it is the only medium through which we can discuss the great majority of the problems which are being raised in such a bristling multitude by our contemporary social development.' The novel of the future 'is to be the social mediator, the vehicle of understanding, the instrument of self-examination, the parade of morals and the exchange of manners, the factory of customs, the criticism of laws and institutions and of social dogmas and ideas.' 'We are going to deal with political questions and religious questions and social questions.' Wells had little patience with the idea that it was merely a means of relaxation, and he stated categorically that he could not bring himself to look upon it as an art-form. Strangely enough, I resented having his own novels described as propaganda, 'because it seems to me that the word propaganda should be confined to the definite service of some organised party, church or doctrine.' The word, at all events now, has a larger meaning than that; it indicates the method through which be it word of mouth, through the written word, by advertisement, by constant repetition, you seek to persuade others that your views of what is right and proper, good and bad, just and unjust, are the

correct views, and should be accepted and acted upon by all and sundry. Wells's principal novels were designed to diffuse certain doctrines and principles; and that is propaganda.

What it all comes down to is the question whether the novel is a form of art or not. Is its aim to instruct or to please? If its aim is to instruct, then it is not a form of art. For the aim of art is to please. On this poets, painters and philosophers are agreed. But it is a truth that shocks a good many people since Christianity has taught them to look upon pleasure with misgiving as a snare to entangle the immortal soul. It seems more reasonable to look upon pleasure as a good, but to remember that certain pleasures have mischievous consequence and so may more wisely be eschewed. There is a general disposition to look upon pleasure as merely sensual, and that is natural since the sensual pleasures are more vivid than the intellectual; but that is surely an error, for there are pleasures of the mind as well as of the body, and if they are not so keen, they are more enduring. The Oxford Dictionary gives one of the meanings of art: 'The application of skill to subjects of taste, as poetry, music, dancing, the drama, oratory, literary composition, and the like.' That is very well, but then it adds: 'Especially the modern use of skill displaying itself in perfection of workmanship, perfection of execution as an object in itself.' I suppose that is what every novelist aims at, but, as we know, he never achieves it. I think we may claim that the novel is a form of art, perhaps not a very exalted one, but a form of art nevertheless. It is, however, an essentially imperfect form. Since I have dealt with this subject in lectures which I have delivered here and there, and can put what I have to say now no better than I do in them, I am going to permit myself briefly to quote from them.

I think it an abuse to use the novel as a pulpit or a platform, and I believe readers are misguided when they suppose they can thus easily acquire knowledge. It is a great nuisance that knowledge can only be acquired by hard work. It would be fine if we could swallow the powder of profitable information made palatable by the jam of fiction. But the truth is that, so made palatable, we can't be sure that the powder will be profitable, for the knowledge the novelist imparts is biased and therefore unreliable; and it is better not to know a thing at all than to know it in a distorted fashion. There is no reason why a novelist should be anything but a novelist. It is enough if he is a good novelist. He should know a little about a great many things, but it is unnecessary, and sometimes even harmful, for him to be a specialist in any particular subject. He need not eat a whole sheep to know what mutton tastes like; it is enough if he eats a chop. Then, by applying his imagination and his creative faculty to the chop he has eaten, he can give you a pretty good idea of an Irish stew; but when he goes on from this to broach his views on sheep-raising, the wool industry and the political situation in Australia, it is wise to accept them with reserve.

The novelist is at the mercy of his bias. The subjects he chooses, the characters he invents and his attitude towards them are conditioned by it. Whatever he writes is the expression of his personality and it is the manifestation of his innate instincts, his feeling and his experience. However hard he tries to be objective, he remains the slave of his idiosyncrasies. However hard he tries to be impartial, he cannot help taking sides. He loads his dice. By the mere fact of introducing a character to your notice early in his novel, he enlists your interest and your sympathy in that character. Henry James insists again and again that the novelist must dramatize. That is a telling, though perhaps not very lucid, way of saying that he must arrange his facts in such a manner as to capture and hold your attention. So, need be, he will sacrifice verisimilitude and credibility to the effect he wants to get. That, as we know, is not the way a work of scientific or informative value is written. The aim of the writer of fiction is not to instruct, but to please.

There are two main ways in which a novel may be written. Each has its advantages, and each its disadvantages. One way is to write it in the first person, and the other is to write it from the standpoint of omniscience. In the latter, the author can tell you all that he thinks is needful to enable you to follow his story and understand his characters. He can describe their emotions and motives from the inside. If one of them crosses the street, he can tell you why he does so and what will come of it. He can concern himself with one set of persons and series of events, and then, putting them aside for a period, can concern himself with another side of events and another set of persons, so reviving flagging interest and, by complicating his story, give an impression of the multifariousness and complexity and diversity of life. The danger of this is that one set of characters may be so much more interesting than the other, as, to take a famous example, happens in *Middlemarch*, that the reader may find it irksome when he is asked to occupy himself with the fortunes of persons he doesn't in the least care about. The novel written from the standpoint of omniscience runs the risk of being unwieldy, verbose and diffuse. No one has written it better than Tolstoy, but even he is not free from these imperfections. The method makes demands on the author which he cannot always meet. He has to get into the skin of every one of his characters, feel his feelings, think his thoughts; but he has his limitations and he can only do this when there is in himself something of the character he has created. When there isn't, he can only see him from the outside, and then the character lacks the persuasiveness which causes the reader to believe in him.

I suppose it was because Henry James, with his solicitude for form in the novel, became conscious of these disadvantages that he devised what may be described as a sub-variety of the method of omniscience. In this the author is still omniscient, but his omniscience is concentrated on a single character, and since the character is fallible the omniscience is not complete. The author wraps himself in omniscience when he writes: 'He saw her smile'; but not when he writes. 'He saw the irony of her smile'; for irony is something he ascribes to her smile, and, it may be, without justification. The usefulness of the device, as Henry James without doubt very well saw, is that since this particular character, in *The Ambassadors*, Strether, is all-important, and it is through what he sees, hears, feels, thinks, surmises that the story is told and the characters of the other persons concerned in it are unfolded, the author finds it easy to resist the irrelevant. The construction of his novel is necessarily compact. The device, besides, gives an air of verisimilitude to what he writes. Because you are asked to concern yourself primarily with one person, you are insensibly led to believe what he tells you. The facts that the reader should know are imparted to him as the person through whom the story is told gradually learns them; and so the reader enjoys the pleasure of the elucidation, step by step, of what was puzzling, obscure and uncertain. The method thus gives the novel something of the mystery of a detective story, and so that dramatic quality which Henry James was always eager to obtain. The danger, however, of divulging little by little a string of facts is that the reader may be more quick-witted than the character through whom the revelations are made and so guess the answers long before the author wishes him to. I don't suppose anyone can read *The Ambassadors* without growing impatient with Strether's obtuseness. He does not see what is staring him in the face, and what everyone he comes in contact with is fully aware of. It was a *secret de Polichinelle* and that Strether should not have guessed it points to some defect in the method. It is unsafe to take your reader for more of a fool than he is.

Since novels have for the most part been written from the standpoint of omniscience, it must be supposed that novelists have found it on the whole the most satisfactory way of dealing with the

difficulties; but to tell a story in the first person has also certain advantages. Like the method adopted by Henry James, it lends verisimilitude to the narrative and obliges the author to stick to his point; for he can tell you only what he has himself seen, heard or done. To use this method more often would have served the great English novelist of the nineteenth century well, since, partly owing to methods of publication, partly owing to a national idiosyncrasy, their novels have tended to be shapeless and discursive. Another advantage of using the first person is that it enlists your sympathy with the narrator. You may disapprove of him, but he concentrates your attention on himself and so compels your sympathy. A disadvantage of the method, however, is that the narrator, when, as in *Dave Copperfield*, he is also the hero, cannot without inpropriety tell you that he is handsome and attractive; he is apt to seem vainglorious when he relates his doughty deeds and stupid when he fails to see, what is obvious to the reader, that the heroine loves him. But a greater disadvantage still, and one that most authors of this kind of novel have managed entirely to surmount, is that the hero-narrator, the central character, is likely to appear pallid in comparison with the persons he is concerned with. I have asked myself why this should be, and the only explanation I can suggest is that the author, since he sees himself in the hero, sees him from the inside, subjectively, and, telling what he sees, gives him the confusions, the weaknesses, the indecisions he feels in himself; whereas he sees the other characters from the outside, objectively, through his imagination and his intuition; and if he is an author with, say, Dickens's brilliant gifts, he sees them with a dramatic intensity, with a boisterous sense of fun, with a keen delight in their oddity, and so makes them stand out with a vividness that overshadows his portrait of himself.

There is a variety of the novel written on these lines which for a time had an immense vogue. This is the novel written in letters; each letter, of course, is written in the first person, but the letters are by different hands. The method had the advantage of extreme verisimilitude. The reader might easily believe that they were real letters, written by the persons they purported to have been written by, and that they came into his hands by a betrayal of confidence. Now, verisimilitude is what the novelist strives to achieve above all else; he wants you to believe that what he tells you actually happened, even if it is as improbable as the tales of Baron Münchhausen or as horrifying as Kafka's *The Castle*. But the genre had grave defects. It was a roundabout, complicated way of telling a story, and it told it with intolerable deliberation. The letters were too often verbose and contained irrelevant matter. Readers grew bored with the method and it died out. It produced three books which may be accounted among the masterpieces of fiction: *Clarissa*, *La Nouvelle Héloïse* and *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*.

There is, however, a variety of the novel written in the first person which, to my mind, avoids the defects of the method and yet makes handsome use of its merits. It is, perhaps, the most convenient and effective way in which a novel can be written. To what good use it can be put may be seen in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*. In this variety, the author tells the story himself, but he is not the hero, and it is not his story that he tells. He is a character in it, and is more or less closely connected with the persons who take part in it. His role is not to determine the action, but to be the confidant, the mediator, the observer of those who do take part in it. Like the chorus in a Greek tragedy, he reflects on the circumstances which he witnesses; he may lament, he may advise, he has no power to influence the course of events. He takes the reader into his confidence, tells him what he knows, hopes or fears, and when he is non-plussed frankly tells him so. There is no need to make him stupid, so that he should not divulge to the reader what the author wishes to hold back, as happens when the story is told through such a character as Henry James's Strether. On the contrary, he can be as keen-witted and clear-sighted as the author can make him. The narrator and the reader are united in their common

interest in the persons of the story, their characters, motives and conduct; and the narrator begets in the reader the same sort of familiarity with the creatures of his invention as he has himself. He gets an effect of verisimilitude as persuasive as that which the author obtains who is himself the hero of his novel. He can so build up his protagonist as to arouse your sympathy and show him in an heroic light, which the hero-narrator cannot do without somewhat exciting your antagonism. A method of writing a novel which conduces to the reader's intimacy with the characters, and adds to its verisimilitude, has obviously much to recommend it.

I will venture now to state what in my opinion are the qualities that a good novel should have. It should have a widely interesting theme, by which I mean a theme interesting not only to a clique, whether of critics, professors, highbrows, bus-conductors or bar-tenders, but so broadly human that its appeal is to men and women in general; and the theme should be of enduring interest: the novelist is a rash who elects to write on subjects whose interest is merely topical. When they cease to be so, his novel will be as unreadable as last week's newspaper. The story the author has to tell should be coherent and persuasive; it should have a beginning, a middle and an end, and the end should be the natural consequence of the beginning. The episodes should have probability and should not only develop the theme, but grow out of the story. The creatures of the novelist's invention should be observed with individuality, and their actions should proceed from their characters; the reader must never be allowed to say: 'so and so would never behave like that'; on the contrary, he should be obliged to say: 'That's exactly how I should have expected so and so to behave.' I think it is all the better if the characters are in themselves interesting. In Flaubert's *L'Éducation Sentimentale* he wrote a novel which has a great reputation among many excellent critics, but he chose for his hero a man so null, so featureless, so vapid that it is impossible to care what he does or what happens to him; and in consequence, for all its merits, the book is hard to read. I think I should explain why I say the characters should be observed with individuality: it is too much to expect the novelist to create characters that are quite new; his material is human nature, and although there are all sorts and conditions of men, the sorts are not infinite, and novels, stories, plays, epics have been written for so many hundreds of years that the chance is small that an author will create an entirely new character. Casting my mind's eye over the whole of fiction, the only absolutely original creation I can think of is Don Quixote, and I should not be surprised to learn that some learned critic had found a remote ancestry for him also. The author is fortunate if he can see his characters through his own individuality, and if his individuality is sufficiently out of the common to give them an illusive air of originality.

And just as behaviour should proceed from character, so should speech. A woman of fashion should talk like a woman of fashion, a street-walker like a street-walker, a racing tout like a racing tout and an attorney like an attorney. (It is surely a fault in Meredith and Henry James that the characters invariably talk like Henry James and Meredith respectively.) The dialogue should be neither desultory nor should it be an occasion for the author to air his views; it should serve to characterise the speakers and advance the story. The narrative passages should be vivid, to the point and no longer than is necessary to make the motives of the persons concerned, and the situations in which they are placed, clear and convincing. The writing should be simple enough for anyone of fair education to read with ease, and the manner should fit the matter as a well-cut shoe fits a shapely foot. Finally, a novel should be entertaining. I have put this last, but it is the essential quality, without which no other quality avails. And the more intelligent the entertainment a novel offers, the better it is. Entertainment is a word that has a good many meanings. One item is that which affords interest f

amusement. It is a common error to suppose that in this sense amusement is the only one importance. There is as much entertainment to be obtained from *Wuthering Heights* or *The Brothers Karamazov* as from *Tristram Shandy* or *Candide*. The appeal is different, but equally legitimate. Of course, the novelist has the right to deal with those great topics which are of concern to every human being, the existence of God, the immortality of the soul, the meaning and value of life; though he is prudent to remember that wise saying of Dr. Johnson's that of these topics one can no longer say anything new about them that is true, or anything true about them that is new. The novelist can only hope to interest his reader in what he has to say about them if they are an integral element of the story he has to tell, are essential to the characterisation of the persons of his novel and affect their conduct; that is, if they result in action which otherwise would not have taken place.

But even if the novel has all the qualities that I have mentioned, and that is asking a lot, there is still like a flaw in a precious stone, a faultiness in the form that renders perfection impossible to attain. That is why no novel is perfect. A short story is a piece of fiction that can be read, according to its length, in anything between ten minutes and an hour, and it deals with a single, well-defined subject: an incident or a closely related series of incidents, spiritual or material, which is complete. It should be impossible to add to it or to take away from it. Here, I believe, perfection can be reached, and I do not think it would be difficult to collect a number of short stories in which this has in fact been done. But a novel is a narrative of indefinite length; it may be as long as *War and Peace*, in which a long succession of events is related and a vast number of characters are displayed through a period of time, or as short as *Carmen*. Now, in order to give probability to his story, the author has to narrate a series of facts that are relevant to it, but that are not in themselves interesting. Events often require to be separated by a lapse of time, and the author for the balance of his work has to insert, as best he can, matter that will fill up this lapse. These passages are known as bridges. Most writers resign themselves to crossing them, and they cross them with more or less skill, but it is only too likely that in the process they will be tedious. The novelist is human and it is inevitable that he should be susceptible to the fashions of his day, since after all he has an unusual affectivity, and so is often led to write what, as the fashion passes, loses its attractiveness. Let me give an instance: until the nineteenth century novelists paid little attention to scenery, a word or two sufficed to enable them to say all they wanted to about it; but when the romantic school, and the example of Chateaubrianism, captivated the public fancy, it grew modish to write descriptions for their own sake. A man could not go down a street to buy a tooth-brush at the chemist's without the author telling you what the houses he passed looked like and what articles were for sale in the shops. Dawn and the setting sun, the stars at night, the cloudless sky, the snow-capped mountains, the dark forests – all gave occasion for interminable descriptions. Many were in themselves beautiful; but they were irrelevant: it took writers a long time to discover that a description of scenery, however poetically observed and admirably expressed, was futile unless it was necessary – that is, unless it helped the author to get on with his story or told the reader something it behoved him to know about the persons who take part in it. This is an adventitious imperfection in the novel, but there is yet another that seems inherent. Since it is a work of considerable length, it must take some time to write, weeks at least, generally months and occasionally even years. It is only too likely that the author's inventiveness will sometimes fail him. Then he can only fall back on dogged industry and his general competence. It will be a marvel if by these means he can hold his readers' attention.

In the past, readers, preferring quantity to quality, to get their money's worth wanted their novels long, and the author was often hard put to it to provide more matter for the printer than the story

had to tell required. He hit upon an easy way to do this. He inserted into his novel stories, sometimes long enough to be called novelettes, which had nothing to do with his theme or, at best, were tacked on to it with little plausibility. No writer did this with greater nonchalance than Cervantes in *Don Quixote*. These interpolations have always been regarded as a blot on an immortal work, and can only be read now with impatience. Contemporary criticism attacked him on this account, and in the second part of the book we know he eschewed the bad practice, so producing what is generally thought to be impossible, a sequel that was better than its forerunner; but this did not prevent succeeding writers (who doubtless had not read the criticisms) from using so convenient a device to enable them to deliver to the booksellers a quantity of copy sufficient to make a saleable volume. In the nineteenth century new methods of publication exposed novelists to new temptations. Monthly magazines then devoted much of their space to what is somewhat depreciatingly known as light literature achieved great success, and so provided authors with the opportunity to bring their work before the public in serial form with profit to themselves. At about the same time, the publishers found it to their advantage to issue the novels of popular authors in monthly numbers. The authors contracted to provide a certain amount of material to fill a certain number of pages. The system encouraged them to be leisurely and long-winded. We know from their own admissions how from time to time the authors of these serials, even the best of them, Dickens, Thackeray, Trollope, found it a hateful burden to be obliged to deliver an instalment by a given date. No wonder they padded! No wonder they burdened their stories with irrelevant episodes! When I consider how many obstacles the novelist has to contend with, how many pitfalls to avoid, I am not surprised that even the greatest novels are imperfect; I am only surprised that they are not more imperfect than they are.

(3)

I have in my time, hoping to improve myself, read several books on the novel. Their writers are, on the whole as disinclined as was H. G. Wells to look upon it as a means of relaxation. One point they are pretty unanimous on is that the story is of little consequence. Indeed, they are inclined to regard it as a hindrance to the reader's capacity to occupy himself with what in their opinion are the novel's significant elements. It does not seem to have occurred to them that the story, the plot, is as it were the lifeline which the author throws to the reader in order to hold his interest. They consider the telling of a story for its own sake as a debased form of fiction. That seems strange to me, since the desire to listen to stories appears to be as deeply rooted in the human animal as the sense of property. From the beginning of history men have gathered round the camp-fire, or in a group in the market place, to listen to the telling of a story. That the desire is as strong as ever is shown by the amazing popularity of detective stories in our own day. The fact remains that to describe a novelist as a mere storyteller is to dismiss him with contumely. I venture to suggest that there is no such creature. By the incidents he chooses to relate, the characters he selects and his attitude towards them, the author offers you a criticism of life. It may not be a very original one, or very profound, but it is there; and consequently though he may not know it, he is in his own modest way a moralist. But morals, unlike mathematics, are not a precise science. Morals cannot be inflexible for they deal with the behaviour of human beings, and human beings, as we know, are vain, changeable and vacillating.

We live in a troubled world, and it is doubtless the novelist's business to deal with it. The future is uncertain. Our freedom is menaced. We are in the grip of anxieties, fears and frustrations. Values that were long unquestioned now seem dubious. But these are serious matters, and it has not escaped the

writers of fiction that the reader may find a novel that is concerned with them somewhat heavy going. Now, owing to the invention of contraceptives, the high value that was once placed on chastity no longer obtains. Novelists have not been slow to notice the difference this has made in the relations of the sexes and so, whenever they feel that something must be done to sustain the reader's flagging interest, they cause their characters to indulge in copulation. I am not sure they are well-advised. On sexual intercourse Lord Chesterfield said that the pleasure was momentary, the position ridiculous and the expense damnable: if he had lived to read modern fiction he might have added that there is also a monotony about the act which renders the reiterated narration of it excessively tedious.

At present there is a tendency to dwell on characterisation rather than on incident and, of course, characterisation is important; for unless you come to know intimately the persons of a novel, and so can sympathise with them, you are unlikely to care what happens to them. But to concentrate on your characters, rather than on what happens to them, is merely one way of writing a novel like another. The tale of pure incident, in which the characterisation is perfunctory or commonplace, has just as much right to exist as the other. Indeed, some very good novels of this kind have been written, *Camille*, *Blas*, for instance, and *Monte Cristo*. Scheherazade would have lost her head very soon if she had dwelt on the characters of the persons she was dealing with, rather than on the adventures that befell them.

In the chapters that follow I have given in each case some account of the life and character of the author I am writing about. This I have done partly to please myself, but also for the reader's sake, since I think that to know what sort of a person the author was adds to one's understanding and appreciation of his work. To know something about Flaubert explains a good deal that would otherwise be disturbing in *Madame Bovary*, and to know the little there is to know about Emily Brontë gives a greater poignancy to her strange and wonderful book. A novelist, I have written these essays from my own standpoint. The danger of this is that the novelist is very apt to like best the sort of thing he does himself, and he will judge the work of others by how nearly they approach his own practice. In order to do full justice to works with which he has no natural sympathy, he needs a dispassionate integrity, a liberality of spirit, of which the members of an irritable race are seldom possessed. On the other hand, the critic who is not himself a creator is likely to know little about the technique of the novel, and so in his criticism he gives you either his personal impressions, which may well be of no great value, unless like Desmond MacCarthy he is not only a man of letters but also a man of the world; or else he proffers a judgment founded on hard and fast rules which must be followed to gain his approbation. It is as though a shoemaker made shoes only in two sizes and if neither of them fitted your foot, you could for all he cared go shoeless.

The essays which are contained in this volume were written in the first place to induce readers to read the novels with which they are concerned, but in order not to spoil their pleasure it seemed to me that I had to take care not to reveal more of the story than I could help. That made it difficult to discuss the book adequately. In re-writing these pieces I have taken it for granted that the reader already knows the novels I treat of, and so it cannot matter to him if I divulge facts which the author has for obvious reasons delayed to the end to tell him. I have not hesitated to point out the defects as well as the merits that I see in these various novels, for nothing is of greater disservice to the general reader than the indiscriminate praise that is sometimes bestowed on certain works that are rightly accepted as classics. He reads and finds that such and such a motive is unconvincing, a certain character unreal, such and such an episode irrelevant and a certain description tedious. If he is of an impatient temper, he will cry that the critics who tell him that the novel he is reading is a masterpiece

are a set of fools, and if he is of a modest one, he will blame himself and think that it is above his head and not for the likes of him; if, on the other hand, he is by nature dogged and persistent he will read conscientiously, though without enjoyment. But a novel is to be read *with* enjoyment. If it doesn't give the reader that, it is, so far as he is concerned, valueless. In this respect every reader is his own best critic, for he alone knows what he enjoys and what he doesn't. I think, however, that the novelist may claim that you do not do him justice unless you admit that he has the right to demand something of his readers. He has the right to demand that they should possess the small amount of application that is needed to read a book of three or four hundred pages. He has the right to demand that they should have sufficient imagination to be able to interest themselves in the lives, joys and sorrows, tribulations, dangers and adventures of the characters of his invention. Unless a reader is able to give something of himself, he cannot get from a novel the best it has to give. And if he isn't able to do that, he had better not read it at all. There is no obligation to read a work of fiction.

Henry Fielding and *Tom Jones*

(1)

The difficulty of writing about Henry Fielding, the man, is that very little is known about him. Arthur Murphy, who wrote a short life of him in 1762, only eight years after his death, as an introduction to an edition of his works, seems to have known him, if he knew him at all, only in his later years, and had so little material to work with that, presumably to fill the eighty pages of his essay, he indulged in long and tedious digressions. The facts he tells are few, and subsequent research has shown that they are not always accurate. The last author to deal at length with Fielding is Dr Homes Dudden, Master of Pembroke. The two stout volumes of his work are a monument of painstaking industry. By giving a lively picture of the political circumstances of the times, and a vivid account of the Young Pretender's disastrous adventure in 1745, he has added colour, depth and substance to the narrative of his hero's checkered career. I don't believe that there is anything to be said about Henry Fielding that the eminent Master of Pembroke has left unsaid.

Fielding was a gentleman born. His father was the third son of John Fielding, a Canon of Salisbury, and he in turn was the fifth son of an Earl of Desmond. The Desmonds were a young branch of the family of Denbigh, who flattered themselves that they were descended from the Habsburgs. Gibbon, the Gibbon of *The Decline and Fall*, wrote in his autobiography: 'The successors of Charles the Fifth may disclaim their brethren of England; but the romance of *Tom Jones*, the exquisite picture of human manners, will outlive the palace of the Escorial, and the imperial eagle of the House of Austria.' The phrase has a fine resonance, and it is a pity that the claim of these noble lords has been shown to have no foundation. They spelt their name Feilding, and there is a well-known story that on one occasion the then Earl asked Henry Fielding how this came about; whereupon he answered: 'I can only suppose it is because my branch of the family learnt to spell before your lordship's.'

Fielding's father entered the army and served in the wars under Marlborough 'with much bravery and reputation'. He married Sarah, the daughter of Sir Henry Gould, a Judge of the King's Bench; and at his country seat, Sharpham Park, near Glastonbury, our author was born in 1707. Two or three years later the Fieldings, who by this time had had two more children, daughters, moved to East Stour, Dorsetshire, a property which the judge had settled on his daughter, and there three more girls and boys were born. Mrs. Fielding died in 1718, and in the following year Henry went to Eton. Here he made some valuable friends and, if he did not leave, as Arthur Murphy states, 'uncommonly well versed in the Greek authors and an early master of the Latin classics,' he certainly acquired a real love for classical learning. Later in life, when he was ill and poverty-stricken, he found comfort in reading Cicero's *De Consolatione*; and when, dying, he set out in the ship that took him to Lisbon, he carried with him a volume of Plato.

On leaving Eton, instead of going up to a university, he lived for a while at Salisbury with his grandmother, Lady Gould, the judge being dead; and there, according to Dr. Dudden, read some Latin and a good deal of miscellaneous literature. He was then a handsome youth, over six feet tall, strong and active, with deep-set eyes, a Roman nose, a short upper lip with an ironical curl to it, and

stubborn, prominent chin. His hair was brown and curly, his teeth white and even. By the time he was eighteen, he gave promise of the sort of man he was going to be. He happened to be staying at Lynn Regis with a trusty servant, ready to 'beat, maim or kill' for his master, and there fell in love with Miss Sarah Andrews, whose considerable fortune added to the charm of her beauty, and he concocted a scheme to carry her off, by main force if necessary, and marry her. It was discovered, and the young woman was hurried away and safely married to a more eligible suitor. For all one knows to the contrary, Fielding spent the next two or three years in London, with an allowance from his grandmother, engaging in the gaities of the town as agreeably as a well-connected young man can do when he has good looks and charm of manner. In 1728, by the influence of his cousin, Lady Mary Wortley-Montagu, and with the help of the charming, but not particularly chaste, actress, Anne Oldfield, a play of Fielding's was put on by Colley Cibber at Drury Lane. It was called *Love in Several Masques* and was given four performances. Shortly after this he entered the University of Leyden with an allowance from his father of two hundred pounds a year. But his father had married again and either could not, or would not, continue to pay him the allowance he had promised, so after about a year Fielding was obliged to return to England. He was in such straits then that, as in his light-hearted way he put it himself, he had no choice but to be a hackney coachman or a hackney writer.

Austin Dobson, who wrote his life for the English Men of Letters Series, says that 'his inclinations as well as his opportunities led him to the stage'. He had the high spirits, the humour, the keen-witted observation of the contemporary scene, which are needed by the playwright; and he seems to have had besides, some ingenuity and a sense of construction. The 'inclinations' of which Austin Dobson speaks may very well mean that he had the vicarious exhibitionism which is part of the playwright's make-up, and that he looked upon writing plays as an easy way to make quick money; the 'opportunities' may be a delicate way of saying that he was a handsome fellow of exuberant virility and had taken the fancy of a popular actress. To please a leading lady has ever been the surest way for a young dramatist to get his play produced. Between 1729 and 1737 Fielding composed or adapted twenty-six plays, of which at least three greatly pleased the town; and one of which made Swift laugh a thing that to the best of the Dean's recollection he had only done twice in his life before. Fielding did not do very well when he attempted pure comedy; his great successes seem to have been in a genre which, so far as I know, he devised himself, an entertainment in which there were singing and dancing, brief topical sketches, parodies and allusions to public figures: in fact, something indistinguishable from the revues popular in our own day. According to Arthur Murphy, Fielding's farces 'were generally the production of two or three mornings, so great was his facility in writing'. Dr. Duddesley looks upon this as an exaggeration. I don't think it is. Some of these pieces were very short, and I have myself heard of light comedies that were written over a week-end and were none the worse for that. The last two plays Fielding wrote were attacks on the political corruption of the times, and the attacks were effective enough to cause the Ministry to pass a Licensing Act which obliged managers to obtain the Lord Chamberlain's licence to produce a play. This act still obtains, to torment British authors. After this, Fielding wrote only rarely for the theatre and, when he did, presumably for no other reason than that he was more than usually hard up.

I will not pretend that I have read his plays, but I have flipped through the pages, reading a scene here and there, and the dialogue seems natural and sprightly. The most amusing bit I have come across is the description which, after the fashion of the day, he gives in the list of Dramatis Personæ in *Tom Thumb the Great*: 'A woman entirely faultless, save that she is a little given to drink.' It is usual to dismiss Fielding's plays as of no account, and doubtless no one would give them a thought if he were

not the author of *Tom Jones*. They lack the literary distinction (such as Congreve's plays have) which the critic, reading them in his library two hundred years later, would like them to have. But plays are written to be acted, not to be read; it is certainly well for them to have literary distinction; but it is not that which makes them good plays, it may (and often does) make them lessactable. Fielding's plays have by now lost what merit they had, for the drama depends very much on actuality and so is ephemeral, almost as ephemeral as a newspaper, and Fielding's plays, as I have said, owed their success to the fact that they were topical; but light as they were, they must have had merit, for neither a young man's wish to write plays, nor pressure brought to bear by a favourite actress, will induce managers to put on play after play unless they please the public. For in this matter the public is the final judge. Unless the manager can gauge their taste, he will go bankrupt. Fielding's plays had at least the merit that the public liked to go to see them. *Tom Thumb the Great* ran for 'upwards of forty nights', and *Pasquin* for sixty, which was as long as *The Beggar's Opera* had run.

Fielding had no illusions about the worth of his plays, and himself said that he left off writing for the stage when he should have begun. He wrote for money, and had no great respect for the understanding of an audience. 'When he had contracted to bring on a play, or a farce,' says Murphy, 'it is well known by many of his friends now living, that he would go home rather late from a tavern and would, the next morning, deliver a scene to the players, written upon the papers which had wrapped the tobacco, in which he so much delighted.' During the rehearsals of a comedy called *The Wedding Day*, Garrick, who was playing in it, objected to a scene and asked Fielding to cut it. 'No, damn 'em,' said Fielding, 'if the scene isn't a good one let them find it out.' The scene was played, the audience noisily expressed their displeasure, and Garrick retired to the green-room, where his author was indulging his genius and solacing himself with a bottle of champagne. He had by this time drunk pretty plentifully; and cocking his eye at the actor, with streams of tobacco trickling down from the corner of his mouth, "What's the matter, Garrick," says he, "what are they hissing now?"

"Why, the scene that I begged you to retrench; I knew it would not do; and they have so frightened me, that I shall not be able to collect myself the whole night."

"Oh, damn 'em," replies the author, "they *have* found it out, have they?"

This story is told by Arthur Murphy, and I am bound to say that I doubt its truth. I have known and had dealings with actor-managers, which is what Garrick was, and it does seem to me very unlikely that he would have consented to play a scene which he thought would wreck the play; but the anecdote wouldn't have been invented unless it had been plausible. It at least indicates how Fielding's friends and boon-companions regarded him.

If I have dwelt on his activity as a playwright, though it was after all not much more than an episode in his career, it is because I think it was important to his development as a novelist. Quite a number of eminent novelists have tried their hands at playwriting, but I cannot think of any that have conspicuously succeeded. The fact is that the techniques are very different, and to have learnt how to write a novel is of no help when it comes to writing a play. The novelist has all the time he wants to develop his theme, he can describe his characters as minutely as he chooses and make their behaviour plain to the reader by relating their motives; if he is skilful, he can give verisimilitude to improbabilities; if he has a gift for narrative, he can gradually work up to a climax which a long preparation makes more striking (a supreme example of this is Clarissa's letter in which she announced her seduction); he does not have to show action, but only to tell it; he can make the persons explain themselves in dialogue for as many pages as he likes. But a play depends on action, and by action, of course, I don't mean violent action like falling off a precipice or being run over by a bus.

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