

E. M. FORSTER

Aspects of the Novel



E. M. Forster, one of England's most distinguished writers, was born in 1879 and attended King's College, Cambridge, of which he was an honorary Fellow. He was named to membership in the Order of Companions of Honor by the Queen in 1953. He wrote his first novel, *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, at twenty-six, followed by *A Room with a View* in 1908, *Howards End* in 1910, and other novels and critical essays. These include *A Passage to India* (1924), *Aspects of the Novel* (1927), *Abinger Harvest* (1936), *Two Cheers for Democracy* (1951), *The Hill of Devi* (1953), and *Marianne Thornton*, the biography of his great-aunt (1956). Two books have been published since his death in 1970: *Maurice* (1972) and *The Life to Come and Other Stories* (1973).

A HARVEST BOOK • HARCOURT, INC.
ORLANDO AUSTIN NEW YORK
SAN DIEGO LONDON

To
CHARLES MAURON

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www.HarcourtBooks.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Forster, E. M. (Edward Morgan), 1879–1970.

Aspects of the novel.

“A Harvest book.”

1. Fiction. 2. English fiction—History and criticism. I. Title.

PN3353.F6 1985 808.3 84-22498

ISBN 978-0-15-609180-0 (pbk.)

Printed in the United States of America

DOC 60 59 58 57 56 55 54

ASPECTS OF THE NOVEL

that doesn't appeal to me," and all I can promise is that sentimentality shall not speak too loudly or too soon. The intensely, stifling human quality of the novel is not to be avoided; the novel is sogged with humanity; there is no escaping the uplift or the downpour, nor can they be kept out of criticism. We may hate humanity, but if it is exorcised or even purified the novel wilts; little is left but a bunch of words.

And I have chosen the title "Aspects" because it is unscientific and vague, because it leaves us the maximum of freedom, because it means both the different ways we can look at a novel and the different ways a novelist can look at his work. And the aspects selected for discussion are seven in number: The Story; People; The Plot; Fantasy; Prophecy; Pattern and Rhythm.

Two

THE STORY

WE shall all agree that the fundamental aspect of the novel is its story-telling aspect, but we shall voice our assent in different tones, and it is on the precise tone of voice we employ now that our subsequent conclusions will depend.

Let us listen to three voices. If you ask one type of man, "What does a novel do?" he will reply placidly: "Well—I don't know—it seems a funny sort of question to ask—a novel's a novel—well, I don't know—I suppose it kind of tells a story, so to speak." He is quite good-tempered and vague, and probably driving a motor-bus at the same time and paying no more attention to literature than it merits. Another man, whom I visualize as on a golf-course, will be aggressive and brisk. He will reply: "What does a novel do? Why, tell a story of course, and I've no use for it if it didn't. I like a story. Very bad taste on my part, no doubt, but I like a story. You can take your art, you can take your literature, you can take your music, but give me a good story. And I like a story to be a story, mind, and my wife's the same." And a third man he says in a sort of droop-

ASPECTS OF THE NOVEL

ing regretful voice, "Yes—oh, dear, yes—the novel tells a story." I respect and admire the first speaker. I detest and fear the second. And the third is myself. Yes—oh, dear, yes—the novel tells a story. That is the fundamental aspect without which it could not exist. That is the highest factor common to all novels, and I wish that it was not so, that it could be something different—melody, or perception of the truth, not this low atavistic form.

For the more we look at the story (the story that is a story, mind), the more we disentangle it from the finer growths that it supports, the less shall we find to admire. It runs like a backbone—or may I say a tapeworm, for its beginning and end are arbitrary. It is immensely old—goes back to neolithic times, perhaps to paleolithic. Neanderthal man listened to stories, if one may judge by the shape of his skull. The primitive audience was an audience of shock-heads, gaping round the campfire, fatigued with contending against the mammoth or the woolly rhinoceros, and only kept awake by suspense. What would happen next? The novelist droned on, and as soon as the audience guessed what happened next, they either fell asleep or killed him. We can estimate the dangers incurred when we think of the career of Scheherazade in somewhat later times. Scheherazade avoided her fate because she knew how to wield the weapon of suspense—the only literary tool that has any effect upon tyrants and savages. Great novelist though she was—exquisite in her descriptions, tolerant in her judgments, ingenious in her in-

THE STORY

cidents, advanced in her morality, vivid in her delineations of character, expert in her knowledge of three Oriental capitals—it was yet on none of these gifts that she relied when trying to save her life from her intolerable husband. They were but incidental. She only survived because she managed to keep the king wondering what would happen next. Each time she saw the sun rising she stopped in the middle of a sentence, and left him gaping. "At this moment Scheherazade saw the morning appearing and, discreet, was silent." This uninteresting little phrase is the backbone of the *One Thousand and One Nights*, the tapeworm by which they are tied together and the life of a most accomplished princess was preserved.

We are all like Scheherazade's husband, in that we want to know what happens next. That is universal and that is why the backbone of a novel has to be a story. Some of us want to know nothing else—there is nothing in us but primeval curiosity, and consequently our other literary judgments are ludicrous. And now the story can be defined. It is a narrative of events arranged in their time sequence—dinner coming after breakfast, Tuesday after Monday, decay after death, and so on. *Qua* story, it can only have one merit: that of making the audience want to know what happens next. And conversely it can only have one fault: that of making the audience not want to know what happens next. These are the only two criticisms that can be made on the story that is a story. It is the lowest and simplest of literary or-

ASPECTS OF THE NOVEL

ganisms. Yet it is the highest factor common to all the very complicated organisms known as novels.

When we isolate the story like this from the nobler aspects through which it moves, and hold it out on the forceps—wriggling and interminable, the naked worm of time—it presents an appearance that is both unlovely and dull. But we have much to learn from it. Let us begin by considering it in connection with daily life.

Daily life is also full of the time-sense. We think one event occurs after or before another, the thought is often in our minds, and much of our talk and action proceeds on the assumption. Much of our talk and action, but not all; there seems something else in life besides time, something which may conveniently be called "value," something which is measured not by minutes or hours, but by intensity, so that when we look at our past it does not stretch back evenly but piles up into a few notable pinnacles, and when we look at the future it seems sometimes a wall, sometimes a cloud, sometimes a sun, but never a chronological chart. Neither memory nor anticipation is much interested in Father Time, and all dreamers, artists and lovers are partially delivered from his tyranny; he can kill them, but he cannot secure their attention, and at the very moment of doom, when the clock collected in the tower its strength and struck, they may be looking the other way. So daily life, whatever it may be really, is practically composed of two lives—the life in time and the life by values—and our conduct reveals a

Daily life
governed by
TIME & VALUES

28

THE STORY

double allegiance. "I only saw her for five minutes, but it was worth it." There you have both allegiances in a single sentence. And what the story does is to narrate the life in time. And what the entire novel does—if it is a good novel—is to include the life by values as well; using devices hereafter to be examined. It, also, pays a double allegiance. But in it, in the novel, the allegiance to time is imperative: no novel could be written without it. Whereas in daily life the allegiance may not be necessary: we do not know, and the experience of certain mystics suggests, indeed, that it is not necessary, and that we are quite mistaken in supposing that Monday is followed by Tuesday, or death by decay. It is always possible for you or me in daily life to deny that time exists and act accordingly even if we become unintelligible and are sent by our fellow citizens to what they choose to call a lunatic asylum. But it is never possible for a novelist to deny time inside the fabric of his novel: he must cling however lightly to the thread of his story, he must touch the interminable tapeworm, otherwise he becomes unintelligible, which, in his case, is a blunder.

I am trying not to be philosophic about time, for it is (experts assure us) a most dangerous hobby for an outsider, far more fatal than place; and quite eminent metaphysicians have been dethroned through referring to it improperly. I am only trying to explain that as I lecture now I hear that clock ticking or do not hear it ticking, I retain or lose the time sense; whereas in a novel there is always a clock.

Time always a
dominant concern
of the novel

29

ASPECTS OF THE NOVEL

The author may dislike his clock. Emily Brontë in *Wuthering Heights* tried to hide hers. Sterne, in *Tristram Shandy*, turned his upside down. Marcel Proust, still more ingenious, kept altering the hands, so that his hero was at the same period entertaining a mistress to supper and playing ball with his nurse in the park. All these devices are legitimate, but none of them contravene our thesis: the basis of a novel is a story, and a story is a narrative of events arranged in time sequence. (A story, by the way, is not the same as a plot. It may form the basis of one, but the plot is an organism of a higher type, and will be defined and discussed in a future lecture.)

Who shall tell us a story?

Sir Walter Scott of course.

Scott is a novelist over whom we shall violently divide. For my own part I do not care for him, and find it difficult to understand his continued reputation. His reputation in his day—that is easy to understand. There are important historical reasons for it, which we should discuss if our scheme was chronological. But when we fish him out of the river of time and set him to write in that circular room with the other novelists, he presents a less impressive figure. He is seen to have a trivial mind and a heavy style. He cannot construct. He has neither artistic detachment nor passion, and how can a writer who is devoid of both, create characters who will move us deeply? Artistic detachment—perhaps it is priggish to ask for that. But passion—surely passion is low-brow enough, and think how all Scott's laborious

THE STORY

mountains and scooped-out glens and carefully ruined abbeys call out for passion, passion and how it is never there! If he had passion he would be a great writer—no amount of clumsiness or artificiality would matter then. But he only has a temperate heart and gentlemanly feelings, and an intelligent affection for the country-side: and this is not basis enough for great novels. And his integrity—that is worse than nothing, for it was a purely moral and commercial integrity. It satisfied his highest needs and he never dreamt that another sort of loyalty exists.

His fame is due to two causes. In the first place, many of the elder generation had him read aloud to them when they were young; he is entangled with happy sentimental memories, with holidays in or residence in Scotland. They love him indeed for the same reason that I loved and still love *The Swiss Family Robinson*. I could lecture to you now on *The Swiss Family Robinson* and it would be a glowing lecture, because of the emotions felt in boyhood. When my brain decays entirely I shall not bother any more over great literature. I shall go back to the romantic shore where the "ship struck with a fearful shock," emitting four demigods named Fritz, Ernest, Jack and little Franz, together with their father, their mother, and a cushion, which contained all the appliances necessary for a ten years' residence in the tropics. That is my eternal summer, that is what *The Swiss Family Robinson* means to me, and is not it all that Sir Walter Scott means to some of

Recall
when the
effluence
is jumbled
face still

Walter
Scott
w/o passion

ASPECTS OF THE NOVEL

you? Is he really more than a reminder of early happiness? And until our brains do decay, must not we put all this aside when we attempt to understand books?

In the second place, Scott's fame rests upon one genuine basis. He could tell a story. He had the primitive power of keeping the reader in suspense and playing on his curiosity. Let us paraphrase *The Antiquary*—not analyze it, analysis is the wrong method, but paraphrase. Then we shall see the story unrolling itself, and be able to study its simple devices.

THE ANTIQUARY

CHAPTER I

It was early in a fine summer's day, near the end of the eighteenth century, when a young man of genteel appearance, having occasion to go towards the north-east of Scotland, provided himself with a ticket in one of those public carriages which travel between Edinburgh and the Queensferry, at which place, as the name implies, and as is well known to all my northern readers, there is a passage-boat for crossing the Firth of Forth.

That is the first sentence in *The Antiquary*—not an exciting sentence, but it gives us the time, the place, and a young man—it sets the story-teller's scene. We feel a moderate interest in what the young man will do next. His name is Lovel, and there is a mystery about him. He is the hero or Scott would not call him genteel, and he is sure to make the heroine happy. He meets the Antiquary, Jonathan Oldbuck.

THE STORY

They get into the coach, not too quickly, become acquainted, Lovel visits Oldbuck at his house. Near it they meet a new character, Edie Ochiltree. Scott is good at introducing fresh characters. He slides them very naturally, and with a promising air. Edie Ochiltree promises a good deal. He is a beggar—no ordinary beggar, a romantic and reliable rogue, and will he not help to solve the mystery of which we saw the tip in Lovel? More introductions: to Sir Arthur Wardour (old family, bad manager); to his daughter Isabella (haughty), whom the hero loves unrequited; and to Oldbuck's sister Miss Grizzle. Miss Grizzle is introduced with the same air of promise. As a matter of fact she is just a comic turn—she leads nowhere, and your story-teller is full of these turns. He need not hammer away all the time at cause and effect. He keeps just as well within the simple boundaries of his art if he says things that have no bearing on the development. The audience thinks they will develop, but the audience is shock-headed and tired and easily forgets. Unlike the weaver of plots, the story-teller profits by ragged ends. Miss Grizzle is a small example of a ragged end; for a big one I would refer to a novel that professes to be lean and tragic: *The Bride of Lammermoor*. Scott presents the Lord High Keeper in his book with great emphasis and with endless suggestions that the defects of his character will lead to the tragedy, while as a matter of fact the tragedy would occur in almost the same form if he did not exist—the only necessary ingredients in it being Edgar, Lucy, Lady Ashton and

Bucklaw. Well, to return to *The Antiquary*, then there is a dinner, Oldbuck and Sir Arthur quarrel, Sir Arthur is offended and leaves early with his daughter, and they try to walk back to their own house across the sands. Tides rise over sands. The tide rises. Sir Arthur and Isabella are cut off, and are confronted in their peril by Edie Ochiltree. This is the first serious moment in the story and this is how the story-teller who is a story-teller handles it:

While they exchanged these words, they paused upon the highest ledge of rock to which they could attain; for it seemed that any farther attempt to move forward could only serve to anticipate their fate. Here then they were to await the sure, though slow progress of the raging element, something in the situation of the martyrs of the Early Church, who, exposed by heathen tyrants to be slain by wild beasts, were compelled for a time to witness the impatience and rage by which the animals were agitated, while awaiting the signal for undoing their grates and letting them loose upon the victims.

Yet even this fearful pause gave Isabella time to collect the powers of a mind naturally strong and courageous, and which rallied itself at this terrible juncture. "Must we yield life," she said, "without a struggle? Is there no path, however dreadful, by which we could climb the crag, or at least attain some height above the tide, where we could remain till morning, or till help comes? They must be aware of our situation, and will raise the country to relieve us."

Thus speaks the heroine, in accents which certainly chill the reader. Yet we want to know what happens next. The rocks are of cardboard, like those in my dear Swiss Family; the tempest is turned on with one

hand while Scott scribbles away about Early Christians with the other; there is no sincerity, no sense of danger in the whole affair; it is all passionless, perfunctory, yet we do just want to know what happens next.

Why—Lovel rescues them. Yes; we ought to have thought of that; and what then?

Another ragged end. Lovel is put by the Antiquary to sleep in a haunted room, where he has a dream or vision of his host's ancestor, who says to him, "*Kunst macht Gunst*," words which he does not understand at the time, owing to his ignorance of German, and learns afterwards that they mean "Skill wins Favour": he must pursue the siege of Isabella's heart. That is to say the supernatural contributes nothing to the story. It is introduced with tapestries and storms, but only a copybook maxim results. The reader does not know this though. When he hears "*Kunst macht Gunst*," his attention reawakens—then his attention is diverted to something else, and the time-sequence goes on.

Picnic in the ruins of St. Ruth. Introduction of Dousterswivel, a wicked foreigner, who has involved Sir Arthur in mining schemes and whose superstitions are ridiculed because not of the genuine Border band. Arrival of Hector McIntyre, the Antiquary's nephew, who suspects Lovel of being an impostor. The two fight a duel; Lovel, thinking he has killed his opponent, flies with Edie Ochiltree, who has turned up as usual. They hide in the ruins of St. Ruth, where they watch Dousterswivel gulling Sir

Arthur in a treasure-hunt. Lovel gets away on a boat and—out of sight out of mind; we do not worry about him until he turns up again. Second treasure-hunt at St. Ruth. Sir Arthur finds a hoard of silver. Third treasure-hunt. Dousterswivel is soundly cudgelled, and when he comes to himself sees the funeral rites of the old Countess of Glenallan, who is being buried there at midnight and with secrecy, that family being of the Romish persuasion.

Now the Glenallans are very important in the story, yet how casually they are introduced! They are hooked on to Dousterswivel in the most artless way. His pair of eyes happened to be handy, so Scott had a peep through them. And the reader by now is getting so docile under the succession of episodes that he just gapes (like a primitive cave-man). Now the Glenallan interest gets to work, the ruins of St. Ruth are switched off, and we enter what may be called the "pre-story," where two new characters intervene, and talk wildly and darkly about a sinful past. Their names are: Elspeth Mucklebackit, a Sibyl of a fisherwoman, and Lord Glenallan, son of the dead countess. Their dialogue is interrupted by other events—by the arrest, trial and release of Edie Ochiltree, by the death by drowning of another new character, and by the humours of Hector McIntyre's convalescence at his uncle's house. But the gist is that Lord Glenallan many years ago had married a lady called Evelina Nevile, against his mother's wish, and had then been given to understand that she was his half-sister. Maddened with horror, he had

left her before she gave birth to a child. Elspeth, formerly his mother's servant, now explains to him that Evelina was no relation to him, that she died in childbirth—Elspeth and another woman attending—and that the child disappeared. Lord Glenallan then goes to consult the Antiquary, who, as a Justice of the Peace, knew something of the events of the time, and who had also loved Evelina. And what happens next? Sir Arthur Wardour's goods are sold up, for Dousterswivel has ruined him. And then? The French are reported to be landing. And then? Lovel rides into the district leading the British troops. He calls himself "Major Nevile" now. But even "Major Nevile" is not his right name, for he is who but the lost child of Lord Glenallan, he is none other than the legitimate heir to an earldom. Partly through Elspeth Mucklebackit, partly through her fellow servant whom he meets as a nun abroad, partly through an uncle who has died, partly through Edie Ochiltree, the truth has come out. There are indeed plenty of reasons for the *dénouement*, but Scott is not interested in reasons; he dumps them down without bothering to elucidate them; to make one thing happen after another is his only serious aim. And then? Isabella Wardour relents and marries the hero. And then? That is the end of the story. We must not ask "And then?" too often. If the time-sequence is pursued one second too far it leads us into quite another country.

The Antiquary is a book in which the life in time is celebrated instinctively by the novelist, and this

must lead to slackening of emotion and shallowness of judgment, and in particular to that idiotic use of marriage as a finale. Time can be celebrated consciously also, and we shall find an example of this in a very different sort of book, a memorable book: Arnold Bennett's *The Old Wives' Tale*. Time is the real hero of *The Old Wives' Tale*. He is installed as the lord of creation—excepting indeed of Mr. Critchlow, whose bizarre exemption only gives added force. Sophia and Constance are the children of Time from the instant we see them romping with their mother's dresses; they are doomed to decay with a completeness that is very rare in literature. They are girls, Sophia runs away and marries, the mother dies, Constance marries, her husband dies, Sophia's husband dies, Sophia dies, Constance dies, their old rheumatic dog lumbers up to see whether anything remains in the saucer. Our daily life in time is exactly this business of getting old which clogs the arteries of Sophia and Constance, and the story that is a story and sounded so healthy and stood no nonsense cannot sincerely lead to any conclusion but the grave. It is an unsatisfactory conclusion. Of course we grow old. But a great book must rest on something more than an "of course," and *The Old Wives' Tale* is very strong, sincere and sad—it misses greatness.

What about *War and Peace*? That is certainly great, that likewise emphasizes the effects of time and the waxing and waning of a generation. Tolstoy, like Bennett, has the courage to show us people getting old—the partial decay of Nicolay and Natasha is

really more sinister than the complete decay of Constance and Sophia: more of our own youth seems to have perished in it. Then why is *War and Peace* not depressing? Probably because it has extended over space as well as over time, and the sense of space until it terrifies us is exhilarating, and leaves behind it an effect like music. After one has read *War and Peace* for a bit, great chords begin to sound, and we cannot say exactly what struck them. They do not arise from the story, though Tolstoy is quite as interested in what comes next as Scott, and quite as sincere as Bennett. They do not come from the episodes nor yet from the characters. They come from the immense area of Russia, over which episodes and characters have been scattered, from the sum-total of bridges and frozen rivers, forests, roads, gardens, fields, which accumulate grandeur and sonority after we have passed them. Many novelists have the feeling for place—Five Towns, Auld Reekie, and so on. Very few have the sense of space, and the possession of it ranks high in Tolstoy's divine equipment. Space is the lord of *War and Peace*, not time.

A word in conclusion about the story as the repository of a voice. It is the aspect of the novelist's work which asks to be read out loud, which appeals not to the eye, like most prose, but to the ear; having indeed this much in common with oratory. It does not offer melody or cadence. For these, strange as it may seem, the eye is sufficient; the eye, backed by a mind that transmutes, can easily gather up the sounds of a paragraph or dialogue when they have aesthetic

value, and refer them to our enjoyment—yes, can even telescope them up so that we get them quicker than we should do if they were recited, just as some people can look through a musical score quicker than it can be rapped out on the piano. But the eye is not equally quick at catching a voice. That opening sentence of *The Antiquary* has no beauty of sound, yet we should lose something if it was not read aloud. Our mind would commune with Walter Scott's silently, and less profitably. The story, besides saying one thing after another, adds something because of its connection with a voice.

It does not add much. It does not give us anything as important as the author's personality. His personality—when he has one—is conveyed through nobler agencies, such as the characters or the plot or his comments on life. What the story does do in this particular capacity, all it can do, is to transform us from readers into listeners, to whom "a" voice speaks, the voice of the tribal narrator, squatting in the middle of the cave, and saying one thing after another until the audience falls asleep among their offal and bones. The story is primitive, it reaches back to the origins of literature, before reading was discovered, and it appeals to what is primitive in us. That is why we are so unreasonable over the stories we like, and so ready to bully those who like something else. For instance, I am annoyed when people laugh at me for loving *The Swiss Family Robinson*, and I hope that I have annoyed some of you over Scott! You see what I mean. Intolerance is the atmos-

phere stories generate. The story is neither moral nor is it favourable to the understanding of the novel in its other aspects. If we want to do that we must come out of the cave.

We shall not come out of it yet, but observe already how that other life—the life by value—presses against the novel from all sides, how it is ready to fill and indeed distort it, offering it people, plots, fantasies, views of the universe, anything except this constant "and then . . . and then," which is the sole contribution of our present inquiry. The life in time is so obviously base and inferior that the question naturally occurs: cannot the novelist abolish it from his work, even as the mystic asserts he has abolished it from his experience, and install its radiant alternative alone?

Well, there is one novelist who has tried to abolish time, and her failure is instructive: Gertrude Stein. Going much further than Emily Brontë, Sterne or Proust, Gertrude Stein has smashed up and pulverized her clock and scattered its fragments over the world like the limbs of Osiris, and she has done this not from naughtiness but from a noble motive: she has hoped to emancipate fiction from the tyranny of time and to express in it the life by values only. She fails, because as soon as fiction is completely delivered from time it cannot express anything at all, and in her later writing we can see the slope down which she is slipping. She wants to abolish this whole aspect of the story, this sequence in chronology, and my heart goes out to her. She cannot do it without abol-

ASPECTS OF THE NOVEL

ishing the sequence between the sentences. But this is not effective unless the order of the words in the sentences is also abolished, which in its turn entails the abolition of the order of the letters or sounds in the words. And now she is over the precipice. There is nothing to ridicule in such an experiment as hers. It is much more important to play about like this than to rewrite the Waverley Novels. Yet the experiment is doomed to failure. The time-sequence cannot be destroyed without carrying in its ruin all that should have taken its place; the novel that would express values only becomes unintelligible and therefore valueless.

That is why I must ask you to join me in repeating in exactly the right tone of voice the words with which this lecture opened. Do not say them vaguely and good-temperedly like a busman: you have not the right. Do not say them briskly and aggressively like a golfer: you know better. Say them a little sadly, and you will be correct. Yes—oh, dear, yes—the novel tells a story.

Three

PEOPLE



HAVING discussed the story—that simple and fundamental aspect of the novel—we can turn to a more interesting topic: the actors. We need not ask what happened next, but to whom did it happen; the novelist will be appealing to our intelligence and imagination, not merely to our curiosity. A new emphasis enters his voice: emphasis upon value.

Since the actors in a story are usually human, it seemed convenient to entitle this aspect People. Other animals have been introduced, but with limited success, for we know too little so far about their psychology. There may be, probably will be, an alteration here in the future, comparable to the alteration in the novelist's rendering of savages in the past. The gulf that separates Man Friday from Batouala may be paralleled by the gulf that will separate Kipling's wolves from their literary descendants two hundred years hence, and we shall have animals who are neither symbolic, nor little men disguised, nor as four-legged tables moving, nor as painted scraps of paper that fly. It is one of the ways where science may enlarge the novel, by giving