1
Beginning

THE Novel, that most accessible, democratic of literary forms, must establish its contract with its reader. It may be helped or hindered by all sorts of extraneous influences: cover design, encrustations of quotation from admiring reviewers, and the like. But it must also make its own way in the world. For the first half-century and more of its self-conscious existence, the Novel acknowledged its novelty as a type of writing. Samuel Richardson did this in anxious earnest, prefacing the first edition of his first novel, *Pamela* (1740), with a letter from an admirer declaring that the work that followed would 'infallibly be looked upon as the hitherto much-wanted Standard or Pattern for this Kind of Writing'.[1] In the preface to *Joseph Andrews* (1742), his contemporary and rival Henry Fielding announced with mock-solemnity the novelty of 'this Species of Writing, which I have affirmed to be hitherto unattempted in our Language' (8). This sense of unprecedentedness still lingers, even in a world where thousands of novels are published every year and where a novel seems the easiest kind of book for a literate person with a computer to write. One peculiarity of novels when they first arrived in the eighteenth century was that they told new stories rather than recomposing old ones. Their characters were, supposedly, singular; each novel had to introduce its readers to a new world. This has not changed.

The very permissiveness of those rules by which novels are written makes it necessary for a novelist to show a reader, in the beginning, what kind of thing he or she is reading, what he or she has signed up to. In his *Autobiography*, published

posthumously in 1883, Anthony Trollope was characteristically straightforward about what he had learnt about being a novelist. 'It is the first necessity of his position that he make himself pleasant.'[2] He meant that a novelist who wanted to sell books should give pleasure, but also that he or she should be welcoming or accommodating. And this was partly a matter of how to begin, how to introduce your characters, and perhaps yourself, to your readers. Trollope's own novels usually commence with a self-conscious business of introduction—with explanations of what we need to know (capsule histories of leading characters, for instance) and reassurances about what we will later find out. Often, in a manner invented by Fielding, Trollope will begin by talking about the reader or readers of 'these pages' (*The Way We Live Now*, 1874–5, ch. i, 1) and making himself present to us as an arranger of his material.

This manner is now extremely rare in novels. Those that do not use framing devices (see below) are likely to thrust us straight into a story rather than introduce us to it. Trollope seems to have believed that the novelist owed the reader the courtesy of introducing his material. He was notably hostile to the so-called 'sensation novels' of his day (exemplified by works like Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*, 1859–60), and their habit of commencing with some startling incident. At the opening of his own novel *Is He Popenjoy?* (1878)—itself exploiting public interest in a sensational court case of the day—he explicitly deprecated this 'plan of jumping at once into the middle' (ch. i). For the conscientious novelist, 'the story must be made intelligible from the beginning, or the real novel readers will not like it'. 'Real novel readers' are presumably those who have long been dedicated to novel-reading, as opposed to those inexperienced consumers readily entertained by the tricks of sensation fiction.

While it is no longer common to meet a welcoming, gentlemanly author, ready with explanations, on the first page of a novel, we still need to be made acquainted with the tenets—the

ground rules, as it were—of the fictional world into which we are entering. Our expectations are being shaped before we even read the novel's first sentence. Those introductory elements that usher us in to the main narrative are already guiding our habits of interpretation. Every novel will have at least a title to instruct us. Once titles, as given on title pages, were commonly lengthy and packed with information. The title page of Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders* (1721), for instance, informed the book's first readers that it contained

> The Fortunes and Misfortunes of the Famous Moll Flanders, &c. Who was Born in NEWGATE, and during a Life of continu'd Variety for Threescore Years, besides her Childhood, was Twelve Year a *Whore*, five times a *Wife* (whereof once to her own Brother), Twelve Year a *Thief*, Eight Year a Transported *Felon* in *Virginia*, at last grew *Rich*, liv'd *Honest*, and died a *Penitent*. *Written from her own* MEMORANDUMS.

This full title, with its pretence of documentary veracity as well as its sensationalism, is clearly part of the fiction (though there is no reason to think that it was composed by Defoe rather than his publisher). It encouraged eighteenth-century readers to associate Moll with notorious criminals and with the genre of criminal autobiographies that was already popular at the time. It also encouraged the reader to ask not 'What happens?' but 'How could all *this* happen?'

With its original title, Defoe's novel looks like something rather different from the literary classic that it has become. We might note that the original, purporting to be a version of the anti-heroine's own story, does not even have Defoe's name upon it. Its place on the library shelf was decided by publishers and readers long after its author's death. Few other novels have carried quite so much information on their title pages as this, but many originally had longer titles than those by which we now know them. Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1759–66) was in fact titled *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy,*

Gentleman. This is a mock-title, suitably inflated for a narrator whose fate will be shown to have been made by 'small accidents' and apparently inconsequential events. The knowing reader will already be keyed to the novel's method of comic deflation. Later novels honed down titles, but commonly employed explanatory, occasionally teasing subtitles. Until the early nineteenth century, these had often composed a double title, with the second part being given as an alternative to the first: Samuel Richardson's *Pamela, or, Virtue Rewarded*, Fanny Burney's *Evelina, or, a Young Lady's Entrance into the World*, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein, or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818). These seem to have avowed designs upon us. They prod us as to register the significance of the fictions on which we embark.

Without that commanding 'or' between the parts of a title, a subtitle becomes more reticent—a suggestion rather than a command. Such subtitles are fairly common in the nineteenth century: Thackeray's *Vanity Fair: A Novel Without a Hero* (1847–8); Elizabeth Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters: An Every-Day Story* (1864–6); George Eliot's *Middlemarch: A Study of Provincial Life* (1871–2). All these subtitles are calculated to nudge the readers and to communicate something of the novelist's deeper purposes. Most emphatic is perhaps Thomas Hardy's 'A Pure Woman' appended to the main title of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891). This steer to our interpretation is all the stronger given the notorious uncertainty of what happens to Tess when Alec d'Urberville takes advantage of her on that night in the Chase. Is she seduced? Or is it rape? Whatever our suppositions, she remains 'pure' in her author's mind, though tragically not in her husband's. Hardy's subtitle is defiant in the face of imagined censoriousness. Such once conventional control of our preconceptions is now rare.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries almost any self-respecting novelist would next provide a preface, explaining and probably vindicating his or her purposes. For many decades these were commonly defensive, the novel being widely

regarded as a 'low' or irresponsible genre. In her famous defence of novels and novel-reading in *Northanger Abbey* (1818), Austen refers wryly to 'that ungenerous and impolitic custom so common with novel writers, of degrading by their contemptuous censure the very performances, to the number of which they are themselves adding' (vol. i, ch. v, 21). She might have had in mind her successful contemporary Maria Edgeworth, whose novel *Belinda* (1801) she singles out for praise, for this began with a preface announcing, 'The following work is offered to the public as a Moral Tale—the author not wishing to acknowledge a Novel.' You might suspect irony, but the subsequent explanation—'so much folly, errour, and vice are disseminated in books classed under this denomination'—banishes that thought. Later prefaces were more confident. Dickens's *Oliver Twist* (1837–8) comes to many modern readers with an Author's Preface written for the third edition of 1841. It is an angry and righteous response to those critics who had taken exception to the novel's 'Newgate' subject matter.

> It is, it seems, a very coarse and shocking circumstance, that some of the characters in these pages are chosen from the most criminal and degraded of London's population; that Sikes is a thief, and Fagin a receiver of stolen goods; that the boys are pickpockets, and the girl is a prostitute.
>
> I confess I have yet to learn that a lesson of the purest good may not be drawn from the vilest evil. (xxv)

We are given a lengthy polemic unimaginable from a novelist now. When Dickens discusses his depiction of Nancy, who aids Oliver and is murdered for it by Sikes, he arrives at an assertion from which even other Victorian novelists might have flinched.

> It is useless to discuss whether the conduct and character of the girl seems natural or unnatural, probable or improbable, right or wrong. IT IS TRUE. (xxviii)

This was not to be the only time that Dickens composed a

preface to one of his novels as a rejoinder to his critics, and he was not the only novelist to do so. Frequently in the nineteenth century, as a novel was reprinted in subsequent editions, prefaces would be changed or supplemented, as an author mounted counter-attacks against critics or provided an antidote to misunderstanding. In some cases novelists' prefatory explanations after the event were elaborate. The prefaces to individual novels that Henry James composed for the New York edition of his fiction are substantial works of criticism. Conrad's, similarly composed for a collected edition of his fiction, are accounts of how the ideas for his books came to him. So in his Author's Note for *Nostromo* (1904), Conrad remembers how its germ was a 'vagrant anecdote' heard as a young sailor in the Gulf of Mexico, a story rediscovered 'twenty-six or twenty-seven years afterwards' in a 'shabby volume' in a second-hand bookshop (xl). It is as if, by showing how a novel originated, he can prove it to be, as he says in his 1920 Author's Note to *The Secret Agent* (1907), 'a perfectly genuine piece of work' (xxxvii).

A few novelists of the later twentieth century have acted in Conrad's manner. In the early 1970s Graham Greene composed introductions to the individual volumes of his collected works, published by Bodley Head. Reminiscing about the circumstances in which a novel was written, these made the personality of the author a dominant presence. Often they are droll: the 1974 Introduction to *Stamboul Train* (1932) tells us how its impecunious author could not at the time afford to travel beyond Cologne, explaining why, in the novel, there are 'more details on this first stretch of the line than I had the confidence to include later'.[3] Some of the Vintage paperback editions of Greene's novels currently available include the novelist's own introductions; others substitute introductions written by celebrity writers (Zadie Smith, Paul Theroux). Authorial prefaces have, however, largely died out, perhaps simply because the modern apparatus of publicity provides the author with many

means of explaining his or her purposes and, if necessary, rebutting the gainsayers.

The title apart, the most common form of authorial guidance that is still sometimes provided at the beginning of a novel is the epigraph—the resonant quotation placed at the head of a narrative, often on its own page. With the epigraph the author seems directly to tell us of the novel's significance, of its essence. Or rather, not directly, for an epigraph is invariably a quotation, connecting a new novel with the already written. (In Chapter 10 I examine the use of quotations and epigrams scattered elsewhere in a novel.) Novelists who are more 'literary', we might think, are more likely to provide an opening epigraph, and more populist novelists not to do so. There is some truth in this: George Eliot usually had an epigraph, Dickens did not. But it is not always so. Some contemporary writers of thrillers or detective fiction—Minette Walters, Ian Rankin, and Colin Dexter, for instance—like to begin with apposite quotations. In these cases the epigraphs are more like amusing clues to the mysteries that follow than claims of literary allegiance. They do also advertise the erudition of the authors, suggesting that the novel of detection is, like Inspector Morse's crosswords, the light amusement of the intellectually sophisticated.

Once we are past these introductory guidelines, we may think we are to begin the story. But not necessarily so. Sometimes there are false beginnings, things that we have to be told before the true beginning. These are discussed in the sections below on the prologue and the framing device, both of them parts of a work of fiction rather than some imposition from outside it. Unlike the prefaces of old, they do not communicate the author's intentions. Prologues charge the novel with the significance of earlier events or later knowledge. Framing devices provide a fictional explanation of how the main story has come to us. Both ask us to see how much is already taken for granted in simply starting to narrate. Yet, by using either, the novelist loses the opportunity for what is discussed in the final part of this

chapter: the arresting opening. This, especially if it is but a well-conceived sentence, can make the imagined world of a novel present in an instant. Most of the famous, quotable sentences from novels are such opening statements. The final part of this chapter therefore considers the special voltage of a novel's first sentence.

THE TITLE

Even the most common and unremarkable kind of title, the bare name of a novel's central character, will tell us something in advance about how to read. Jane Austen's *Emma* (1816) is about a singular and powerful individual, freed by wealth and lack of parental guidance, to exercise her sometimes imperious will. It is no accident that this is the only Austen novel to take its heroine's name as its title. To think of it another way, imagine that Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) were called *Isabel Archer*. This is not unimaginable, for Isabel is entirely the centre of the story, yet it would be to lose an important cue given us by James's title. However central are Isabel's experience, her consciousness, her choice of life, the title insists on a certain analytical distance. We watch her make her mistakes, we see the disastrous effects of her self-delusions. To give the novel its protagonist's name would be to encourage a sympathy that James seems to warn us off.

Unsurprisingly, both novelists and their publishers care very much about titles, knowing that they are the means by which a book first reaches out to its potential readers. Publishers have been known to put their novelists right in this matter. When Charles Monteith, editor at Faber and Faber, happened upon a novel by an unknown writer called William Golding that had been rejected by up to twenty other publishers, it was called *Strangers from Within*. Amongst other adjustments that Monteith suggested was the changing of the title to *Lord of the Flies*. One can hardly doubt that he was right. The phrase is used