

36 Chapters etc.

CHAPTERS ETC.

CHAPTER VIII

Arthur's Seat shall be my bed,
The sheets shall ne'er be press'd by me;
St Anton's well shall be my drink,
Sin' my true-love's forsaken me.
Old Song

SIR WALTER SCOTT *The Heart of Midlothian* (1818)

CHAPTER I

Since I can do no good because a woman,
Reach constantly at something that is near it.

The Maid's Tragedy: BEAUMONT AND FLETCHER

GEORGE ELIOT *Middlemarch* (1871-2)

CHAPTER X

Is it not a shame to make two chapters of what passed in going down one pair of stairs? for we are got no farther yet than to the first landing, and there are fifteen more steps down to the bottom; and for aught I know, as my father and my uncle Toby are in a talking humour, there may be as many chapters as steps: - let that be as it will, Sir, I can no more help it than my destiny - A sudden impulse comes across me - drop the curtain, Shandy - I drop it - Strike a line here across the paper, Tristram - I strike it - and hey for a new chapter.

The deuce of any other rule have I to govern myself by in this affair - and if I had one - as I do all things out of all rule - I would twist it and tear it to pieces, and throw it into the fire when I had done - Am I warm? I am, and the cause demands it - a pretty story! is a man to follow rules - or rules to follow him?

LAURENCE STERNE *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gent.* (1759-67)

162

... She had a right to happiness. Frank would take her in his arms, fold her in his arms. He would save her.

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She stood among the swaying crowd in the station at the North Wall. He held her hand and she knew that he was speaking to her, saying something about the passage over and over again.

JAMES JOYCE "Eveline" (1914)

WE TEND to take the division of novels into chapters for granted, as if it were as natural and inevitable as the division of the discourse into sentences and paragraphs. But of course it is not. The novels of Daniel Defoe, for instance, among the earliest English examples of the form, are continuous, uninterrupted streams of discourse. As usual with Defoe, it is hard to know whether this is a symptom of his own lack of literary sophistication, or a cunning imitation of naive, unprofessional narrators, pouring out their life-histories onto the page without a preconceived plan or structure. Whatever

163

the reason, it makes for a somewhat tiring reading experience, and a rather confused impression of the story being told (it is hard, for instance, to keep track of Moll Flanders's many journeys, partners and children, and difficult to refer back in the text to check up on them).

Breaking up a long text into smaller units has several possible effects. It gives the narrative, and the reader, time to take breath, as it were, in the intervening pauses. For this reason chapter breaks are useful for marking transitions between different times or places in the action. I have already noted, earlier, how Thackeray uses the concluding line of a chapter like the curtain line of a play, to heighten an effect of surprise and suspense (see Section 15). E. M. Forster does something very similar in the passage quoted from *Howards End* (see Section 2). Beginning a new chapter can also have a useful expressive or rhetorical effect, especially if it has a textual heading, in the form of a title, quotation or summary of contents. Smollett's chapter-headings, for instance, are like film trailers, enticing the reader with the promise of exciting action. In a sense they "give away" the development of the story in advance, but not in sufficient detail to kill our interest in it. These chapter-headings certainly convey the flavour of his fiction - racy, fast-moving and violent.

It is generally true to say that the more realistic a novelist is trying to be, the less likely he or she is to draw attention to this aspect of a novel's textual organization. Conversely, it is flaunted by self-consciously literary novelists. The very mention of the word "chapter" draws attention to the novel's compositional processes. We have already seen how Laurence Sterne uses such a reference to bring the idea of a narratee into play, having Tristram reproach his lady reader for being "so inattentive in reading the last chapter" (see Section 17). The quotation above is from Volume IV of *Tristram Shandy*, where the narrator is describing a conversation between his father and his Uncle Toby that took place on the day of his birth. In a more conventional novel, such a dialogue would not be broken up by chapter divisions, but Sterne typically makes the loquacity of his characters an excuse for defying the normal "rules" of composition, and starts a new chapter just because he

feels like it. In fact this turns out to be "my chapter upon chapters, which I promised to write before I went to sleep." He summarizes the received wisdom on the subject, "that chapters relieve the mind - that they assist - or impose upon the imagination - and that in a work of this dramatic cast they are as necessary as the shifting of scenes," only to dismiss these statements as "cold conceits". He recommends the reader to study Longinus. "If you are not a jot the wiser by reading him the first time over - never fear - read him again." Like so much of *Tristram Shandy*, the chapter on chapters is an elaborate but instructive spoof.

Sir Walter Scott started a vogue for using quotations as epigraphs for chapters - a kind of overt intertextuality. Usually these quotations were culled from old ballads, of which he was a keen collector. They have several functions. One is thematic. The lines from "Old Song" at the head of Chapter VIII of *The Heart of Midlothian*, for instance, are relevant to one of the main components of the plot: Effie Deans, sister to the heroine Jeannie Deans, is accused of murdering the child she bore out of wedlock. The verse from "Old Song" connects her plight to the long narrative tradition of young women seduced and deserted by their lovers. The reference to "Arthur's Seat" (a hill overlooking Edinburgh) and St Anton's well ties this motif to a particular regional setting, the evocation of which was one of Scott's principal preoccupations, and a major source of his appeal to contemporary readers. The cumulative effect of these quotations from old songs and ballads is to establish the credentials of the authorial narrator as a well-informed and reliable guide to Scottish history, culture and topography.

It was a practice much imitated in the nineteenth century, by for instance George Eliot. Her epigraphs, however, tend to come from established, though often minor, literary figures like the Elizabethan playwrights Beaumont and Fletcher, from whom she quotes a couple of lines before introducing Dorothea Brooke in *Middlemarch*. The quotation highlights the frustration of Dorothea's idealism by her gender. It also reinforces the impression George Eliot wanted to give of a bookish, learned author who was the intellectual equal of any man.

When George Eliot quotes anonymous verses they are usually of

her own composition. Kipling carried this practice of composing apocryphal sources for epigraphs to an extreme. "Mrs Bathurst", which I discussed earlier (see Section 7) is prefaced by a long extract from an "old play", written by Kipling himself in a pastiche of seventeenth-century dramatic prose, describing the death of a groom or clown at some royal court. Though fiendishly difficult to construe, it contains important clues to the meaning of the story. "She that damned him to death knew not that she did it, or would have died ere she had done it. For she loved him," seems, for instance, to rule out theories that the second corpse found beside Vickers' was that of Mrs Bathurst.

"Mrs Bathurst" doesn't have any chapters, of course. Short stories rarely do; though they sometimes have pauses or breaks in the text marked by a line space. James Joyce's "Eveline", for instance, consists mainly of a description of the principal character's thoughts as she sits at the window of her home, just before a planned elopement with her sailor lover. Then there is a break in the text marked by an asterisk, and the next section begins: "She stood among the swaying crowd in the station at the North Wall." The break in the text moves the action from the home to its climax on the dockside without describing how Eveline got there, which would be irrelevant to the story.

There are many different ways of dividing up a fictional text and of marking the divisions: "Books" or "Parts", numbered chapters, numbered or unnumbered sub-sections. Some authors have obviously given a great deal of thought to this matter, and taken pains to achieve a certain symmetry of form. Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones*, for example, has a hundred and ninety-eight Chapters, divided into eighteen Books, the first six of which are set in the country, the second six on the road, and the final six in London. The methods of publication and circulation of fiction at any given time affected this aspect of the novel. Throughout most of the nineteenth century, for instance, novels were commonly published in three volumes, mostly to suit the convenience of the circulating libraries, who were able to lend out one novel to three readers at once, but the practice may also have encouraged authors to see their novels in terms of a kind of three-act structure (it is possible

to break down the action of Jane Austen's *Emma* in this way, for instance). Many Victorian novels were originally published in part or serial form, either as independent soft-cover publications or in magazines, and this too affected the shape of the eventual novel. The chapters of the novels Dickens wrote for weekly serial publication, like *Hard Times* and *Great Expectations*, are much shorter than those in novels like *Dombey and Son* or *Bleak House*, originally published in monthly parts. The magazine instalments often had also to meet a very precise and uniform length-requirement.

There would seem to be two dimensions to this topic: one is the purely spatial distribution and division of the text into smaller units. This is often a clue to the structure or architecture of the narrative as a whole, and it has some effect on the tempo of the reading experience. Insofar as it manifests a degree of symmetry it corresponds to stanzaic form in poetry. The other dimension is semantic: the addition of levels of meaning, implication, suggestion, through chapter headings, epigraphs and so on. Reviewing my own practice in this respect, I find considerable variation, according to the nature of the novel in question. I had forgotten, until I looked at it for this purpose, that my first novel, *The Picturegoers*, has no chapters. It is divided into three numbered Parts, each of which is concerned with the events of one weekend. Within each Part there are sections marked only by double line spaces or, more emphatically, asterisks, between them. I presume that this form was suggested by the nature of the narrative, which shifts frequently from scene to scene and from character to character situated in different places at the same time. The spaces between the sections function in fact like cinematic "cuts". My first novel to have numbered chapters was *The British Museum is Falling Down*, a comic and self-consciously literary novel containing a good deal of parody. Each chapter is headed by a (hopefully) amusing quotation from some printed source about the British Museum Reading Room, both imitating and mocking the procedures of literary scholarship. *Changing Places* is divided into numbered parts entitled "Flying", "Settling", "Corresponding", "Reading", "Changing"

and "Ending"; and *How Far Can You Go?* is similarly divided into chapters, each of which begins with the word "How" - "How It Was", "How They Lost Their Virginites", "How They Lost the Fear of Hell" and so on. The verbal echoes were designed, I would say, to introduce an element of "symmetry" into the semantic level of chapter-headings, and perhaps to compensate for the fact that the chapters are very unequal in length. Symmetry, I believe, matters more to writers of fiction than readers consciously perceive.

37 The Telephone

He went to the telephone in the lobby outside. "Darling," he said.

"Is that Mr Last? I've got a message here, from Lady Brenda."

"Right, put me through to her."

"She can't speak herself, but she asked me to give you this message, that she's very sorry but she cannot join you tonight. She's very tired and has gone home to bed."

"Tell her I want to speak to her."

"I can't, I'm afraid, she's gone to bed. She's very tired."

"She's very tired and she's gone to bed?"

"That's right."

"Well, I want to speak to her."

"Good night," said the voice.

"The old boy's plastered," said Beaver as he rang off.

"Oh dear. I feel rather awful about him. But what can he expect, coming up suddenly like this? He's got to be taught not to make surprise visits."

"Is he often like that?"

"No, it's quite new."

The telephone bell rang. "D'you suppose that's him again? I'd better answer it."

"I want to speak to Lady Brenda Last."

"Tony, darling, this is me, Brenda."

"Some damn fool said I couldn't speak to you."

"I left a message from where I was dining. Are you having a lovely evening?"

EVELYN WAUGH *A Handful of Dust* (1934)