Chapter 1

What It’s All About

1 What Am I Doing?

The title and subtitle of this book both require explanation. Together they do indeed capture what I am trying to do, but, perhaps, in somewhat cryptic form. So let me now break the code. And I am going to begin to do that by trying to make clear, as the street argot has it, “where I’m coming from.”

2 My Experience

When I began to write on what might be called “analytic aesthetics,” I chose a problem of a rather abstract kind. Early on, having finished with it, it seemed to me that I had reached a dead end in my work, and decided to try to say something in “analytic aesthetics” less abstract and more relevant to my own personal experience of art. I quite naturally then turned to the art that I knew best and was most deeply involved with: the classical music of the Western canon.

I think I realized at a very early stage what my philosophical “method” in philosophy of art was going to be, and has been, for the most part, ever since. In my first book on musical aesthetics, *The Corded Shell*, I emphasized in the preface the importance I placed on the musical examples adduced: that “they are,” as I put it, “very much a part of the argument.” And in my second

book on the subject, *Sound and Semblance*, I became even more explicitly aware of what that meant. As I put the point then: “I have come to the conclusions expressed here, first and foremost, through my experience of music, not by spinning out philosophical arguments.”

In turning to the philosophy of literature, in recent years, I have followed the same procedure, employed the same basic method that I have done in all of my writings on musical aesthetics. I have begun with my own experience of literature and tried to generalize from that. That having been said, I can now turn to the title of this book, with an explanation to hand of its meaning and significance.

**3 The Title**

I am mainly concerned in this book with the experience, *my* experience, of the art form known as the novel. And *my* experience of the novel is the experience, usually, of a once-told tale. Which is to say, I seldom read a novel more than once, and when I do I usually read it the second time for the same reason that I read it the first time: to be told a story. That is the basic experience—*my* experience—on which the arguments to come are based.

There are two very good reasons often adduced for being very wary of generalizing from personal experience. First, it is dangerous and unwarranted to assume that one’s own experience is shared by others. And, second, contrary to long-standing philosophical as well as pre-systematic intuitions, it is dangerous and unwarranted to assume that one cannot be mistaken about the correct characterization of one’s own experience, first-person reports having proved over and again to be inaccurate or even downright wrong; or, in other words, experience is not necessarily transparent to the one whose experience it is.

Both points are well taken, and should doubtless serve as a constant reminder of our fallibility in these regards. But, that having been conceded, there is no need going to the opposite, skeptical extreme of believing that my experience of literature is unique to me alone, therefore not generalizable to others, and that I am not even in a position to know what it is, or correctly describe it.

As regards the former worry, it needs merely to be pointed out that I am not a solitary autodidact, residing in a cave on a desert island, but a fully socialized, conventionally educated participant in a culture that includes novel-reading as one of its recognized modes of activity: an “institution,” if you will, made possible by a large number of other activities, among them, obviously, authoring, editing, publishing, criticizing, advertising, and discussing.

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It would be highly unlikely that within this “institution” there are not large numbers of readers who share my novel-reading habits, just as, contrariwise, it would be highly unlikely that there are not readers who fail to share them.

This book is about the reading experience of what I—justifiably, I think—take to be a substantial and significant number of serious novel-readers who, like me, read a novel usually but once, and, when they do on occasion read a novel again or even more than twice, read it in much the same way they read it the first time. I shall expatiate on this claim at various points to come. Suffice it to say, for now, that the kind of reading experience I am trying to understand is deeply entrenched in our age-old experience of story-telling, which must, I think, be coeval with the very beginnings of human experience itself. Furthermore, I believe it has been given too short shrift by philosophers of art and literary theorists, in favor of a reading experience—important as well, needless to say, in its own right—in which novels are read, re-read many times over, savored, and studied in depth. I do not mean, in the least, to denigrate the latter kind of reading experience. I do want to call attention to the importance of the former, as subject for the philosopher of art.

Having said all I can, at present, about the worry of generalizing from personal experience, let me turn now to the skeptical worry of, if I may so put it, being able to “know thyself.”

If I were erecting a philosophical system upon the premise that first-person reports are incorrigible, I would, I dare say, be under heavy obligation to answer those quite justifiably skeptical of that premise. But I have no such grandiose intention, nor need I claim—that I am an infallible witness of my own conscious states in general, my experience in novel-reading in particular. All I am assuming, and that common sense and folk wisdom acquiesce in, is that, by and large, where delicate matters of psychological pathology are not at issue, I can describe with reasonable accuracy and reliability what my experience is like when listening to a symphony or, in the present instance, reading a novel. It is simply what we all assume, most of the time, when we move out of the seminar room, or, as Hume would say, out of our “closet,” and into the real world, to tell others what’s on our minds and be told, in turn, what’s on theirs.

The title of this book is *Once-Told Tales*. Its purpose is as described above, skeptics to the contrary notwithstanding. Let me now, then, go on to say something about the subtitle: *An Essay in Literary Aesthetics*.

### 4 Literature: What Is It?

This book is about our experience of *stories*. But its subtitle implies that it raises issues for the philosophy of *literature*. Clearly, though, literature encompasses more than stories. Essays can be literature. Orations can be
literature. And non-narrative poetry certainly is literature. But are all stories literary works? It would hardly seem so, since, if a parent tells her child a bedtime story that she herself makes up, it will doubtless not be literature.

Note that it is not the case, at least as I understand “literature,” that the parent’s story fails to be literature just because it is not written down. I construe an oral tradition of story-telling, such as the Homeric epic, as literature; and I have no reason to believe that that is an unusual view of the matter.

But I do have reason to believe that I view the domain of “literature” as encompassing a wider territory than some others do. And that issue needs to be addressed, although I hasten to add that I certainly do not have a “definition” to offer, in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions, of what “literature” is, to back up my more inclusive view.

In this regard I quote from Peter Lamarque, in his admirable survey of the issues in philosophy of literature. Lamarque writes: “A merely gripping story, meant to be read once and set aside … do[es] not even purport to have the status of literature …. Literary works invite multiple readings because they offer content with depth, inviting reflection.”

One wants to notice, for starters, how imbued with evaluative predicates this passage is, in its characterization of the contrast between fictions—stories—that are “literature” and those that are not, to wit: “merely,” “status,” “depth.” Let me start with “status.”

I dare say that, in some of its uses, the term “literature,” when applied to a text, is intended to confer on it a certain, shall we say, superior status. “This isn’t just a trashy novel: this is literature.” As we might say, “This isn’t just another Hollywood movie; this is art.” But philosophers of art have tended in the recent past to back away from the evaluative use of the term “art,” just illustrated, and concentrate their attention, rather, on what has come to be called, in some quarters, its “classificatory” sense, so as to leave in place the common sense distinction between good and bad works of art. Similarly, I want to construe the term “literature” in its wide, classificatory sense, allowing for all sorts of examples of “literature,” properly so-called, that have low status, do not invite multiple readings, offer no depth at all, and invite no reflection whatever; in fact are trashy novels to be read once and set aside, having served their purpose of relieving the boredom of a flight across the pond.

Perhaps this trivial thought experiment will capture my meaning here. A shop assistant in a small bookstore is unpacking a shipment of merchandise. He picks up a volume with the title, *A Case of Murder*, by a second-rate author of detective stories whose name is completely unfamiliar to him. There

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is no indication on the cover as to whether the book is a whodunit or of the “true crime” genre. “Where should this be shelved?” he asks the owner. “In the literature section,” she replies: “it’s a whodunit.” It is this perfectly ordinary sense of “literature” to which I subscribe in what follows.

Furthermore, I want now to critically examine the first sentence in the above quotation from Lamarque, which, it appears to me, has implications that it is part of the purpose of this book to cast doubt upon.

Lamarque writes to begin with of “A merely gripping story …. .” I want to take issue, for starters, with that damning word “merely,” for, it appears to me, to say a novel tells “a gripping story” is to bestow high praise indeed on it. A novel may, to be sure, do other things as well. But one would think that, if it told “a gripping story,” that would be accomplishment enough for a hopeful author, “merely” to the contrary notwithstanding.

According to Boswell, the remark was once made to Dr. Johnson that, “Surely, Sir, Richardson is very tedious,” to which, Boswell reports, Johnson replied: “Why, Sir, if you read Richardson for the story, your impatience would be so much fretted that you would hang yourself. But you must read him for the sentiment, and consider the story as only giving occasion to the sentiment.”

Of course Johnson was right that Pamela and Clarissa Harlowe are novels that are not to be read for the story. And, on the same occasion, he referred to Fielding as a “blockhead,” averring that “there is more knowledge of the human heart in one letter of Richardson’s than in all ‘Tom Jones.’ ”

Boswell, not unsurprisingly, was much puzzled by Johnson’s low opinion of Tom Jones and its author, expressing “wonder at Johnson’s excessive and unaccountable depreciation of one of the best writers that England has produced.” Tom Jones, he continued, “has stood the test of public opinion with such success, as to have established its great merit, both for the story, the sentiments, and the manners, and also the varieties of diction, as to leave no doubt of its having an animated truth of execution throughout.” And, we might add, it has stood the test of public opinion for more than 200 years since Boswell penned those words, whereas Pamela and Clarissa Harlowe are read, I would venture to guess, almost exclusively by professors of English literature and a few unfortunate students, mercifully, one hopes, in one of the standard abridged editions.

There is little need to think deeply on the matter of why Richardson’s novels, for all of their literary merit and “sentiment,” have not, as Boswell

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6 Ibid., p. 412.
7 Ibid., p. 413.
would put it, stood the test of public opinion. Whatever else the, may I say, majority of even serious readers seek in a novel, surely it is, first and foremost, to be told a story. As I shall repeat, over and again, as this book progresses, to be told a story is a non-trivial matter, deserving the full attention of the philosopher (among others). And any novel that motivates its reader to hang himself if he should come to it for the story has an uphill climb if it aspires to the test of public opinion.

 Needless to say, I am not making a blanket value judgment here to the effect that a novel cannot be a good novel, or even a masterpiece, if one cannot come to it for the story. In the eighteenth century, *Tristram Shandy* comes immediately to mind; Proust and Joyce in the twentieth. What I am trying to do is to remind us—for I am saying something that many people before have known—of how important story-telling has always been in the human experience, and remind us, further, that the novel is, first and foremost, whatever else it may be, a major source of that human experience. It is as such that I try here to understand it, which is why I find the expression “a merely gripping story,” when applied to a novel, something akin to an oxymoron.

 And this brings me again to the quotation from Lamarque, now focusing on the phrase “meant to be read once and set aside …,” which is supposed to describe the novel that boasts “merely [a] gripping story ….” My target here is the suggestion that some novels are meant, which is to say intended, to be read but once—those, namely, that Lamarque describes as possessing merely a gripping story. What I am going to suggest, which, doubtless, will be greeted with some considerable skepticism, is that the one-time reader is what the author, even the serious author, has in mind from the get-go, far more often than Lamarque’s remark seems to imply. But this suggestion needs to be snuck up on. So let’s begin with what I take to be an uncontentious case.

 I presume the paradigm instance of the once-read literary work is, as the British call it, the “shilling shocker,” or, in the States, the “whodunit”: in other words, the murder mystery, or detective story. The point of such a work, after all, is to present a story with twists, turns, and surprises, ending in “whodunit.” And, once you have experienced the twists, turns, and surprises, and, of course, found out whodunit, what would be the point of a second read?

 But of course, the reply might be, you are speaking merely of “trashy novels” that no one would deny were intended by their authors to be read once and then “set aside.” It is not literature, in the evaluative use of that word (which I have rejected), and certainly very bad literature in the classificatory use (which I have embraced). So it hardly can be taken to prove anything about the kind of serious novels—the kind of “literature” in the evaluative use—philosophers of art should be concerned with. But not so fast!

 American and British readers alike, who are devoted to the whodunit, will be familiar, no doubt, with the names of Dashiell Hammett, Raymond
Chandler, Agatha Christie, and P.D. James, whose novels are classics of the
genre; and those writers are not considered merely literary hacks but literary
artists of the first water. Furthermore, the palpable literary merit of their
works does not imply, in my view, that they were intended, in Lamarque’s
words, “to invite multiple readings ….” They were, on the contrary, pro-
duced, in that regard, with the same intention as any other examples of the
genre, “to be read once and set aside ….” At least that is my conjecture; for
that is what the nature of the genre is. And it makes no matter whether the
story is told with plodding predictability or literary panache. The central
point of the exercise is to tell a whodunit story. Thus, when you know the
story, when you know whodunit, you’ve milked that cow dry.

To this claim an immediate objection will no doubt be registered. If the
penny-dreadful is intended to be read once and then put aside, what is the
point of its having any literary value at all? Did Hammett, Chandler, Christie,
and James labor in vain?

I think the answer should be fairly plain. The literary merits of a whodunit
by one of the above-named worthies lie of course in their superior command
of the requirements of the genre itself, as well as their superior command of
the requirements of the novel tout court. But there is no reason to think the
literary mastery evinced in the works of such superior practitioners of the art
is not experienced—indeed was intended to be experienced—in the first, and
usually the only, reading. That a whodunit is intended to be read but once,
and is written with the first and only reading in view, accommodated espe-
cially to that end alone, does not imply that, if it possesses superior literary
qualities, those qualities are otiose. What it does imply is that that first and
only reading will provide greater readerly satisfaction than the first and only
reading of a run-of-the-mill whodunit, at least to the reader qualified to
appreciate its superior literary qualities.

Using the “superior” whodunit to ease my passage, I want now to make
the more audacious claim that the novel in general, the “serious” novel
included, with plenty of bona fide counter-examples to the contrary notwith-
standing, is also written to be read once; that is to say, even though, of course,
there might be the wish that some reader will pay the author the compliment
of wanting to read it again. Or, in other words, with the same disclaimers in
place, the author crafts the narrative novel with a view to the effect it will have
on the reader the first time through. For, after all, whether the story being
told is a whodunit or a whathappened, the story must be told, the incidents
manipulated, and the characters delineated so as to hold the reader’s interest,
one way or the other, be the denouement finding out whether Elizabeth will
marry Darcy or what, in the event, will happen to Anna Karenina. When you
have negotiated the intricacies of the plot—when you have experienced the
surprises, made the discoveries, had your expectations verified—you have
realized the intentions of the novelist *qua* story-teller (although I am not claiming that story-telling intentions are the *only* intentions the serious novelist may have). These intentions, that is, the story-telling intentions, you cannot realize again—until, of course, the passage of time has erased enough from your memory to make a second reading the first. But that point—the point of re-reading—I will return to when the time is ripe.

Let me return now, one final time, to the quotation from Lamarque, this time to remark on its general tenor, and complete my “apologia” for the subtitle of my book.

The contrast being made is between novels that are merely gripping stories, therefore meant to be read once, therefore not even purporting to be *literature*, and novels that invite multiple readings because they possess depth and invite reflection. The points, I guess, I have been trying to make are, first, that it is not merely a virtue but a major purpose of the narrative novel that it have a gripping story, exceptions to the contrary notwithstanding; second, that to be read once is not, therefore, the mark of a novel that fails to be literature, even in the *evaluative* sense of that concept; and, third, that it is, or should be, a major task of the philosophy of art to try to understand the experience of the one-time reader of the novel, not as some kind of peripheral, second-class citizen of the literary world but at least one of its principal players and perhaps even hero or heroine of the piece. There is, I think, a kind of intellectual snobbism in ignoring or putting down this consumer of literary works. The reader of stories is the modern world’s counterpart of the audience of the bard. There must be something deeply important to the human condition about this craving for the story that has caused it to last from then until now. That is why I have not scrupled to subtitle this book *An Essay in Literary Aesthetics*. The issues surrounding the phenomenon of the one-time reader are as important, if not more important, to literary aesthetics as those that surround the studious re-reader of literary texts, admirable though that character may be.

5 A Friendly Witness?

It is tempting to call as a witness for the defense here E.M. Forster, one of the great novelists of the twentieth century, as well as a distinguished commentator on the art form of which he was a master, who wrote in *Aspects of the Novel*, “We shall all agree that the fundamental aspect of the novel is its story-telling aspect ….”8 One could hardly call in a more qualified witness than he, and there is the thesis, in his own words, that I am defending

throughout and he emphatically endorses. But it would certainly be disingenuous of me to leave it at that, because, having apparently affirmed the primacy of story-telling in the novel, Forster then goes on to deplore the fact. “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.”

What a strange remark to emanate from one of the consummate storytellers of our time! Why should story-telling rank so low for Forster, as an artistic achievement, as it apparently does for Lamarque as well? There is more on that from him to come in a moment. But one can make two conjectures immediately.

Two quite understandable motives might be, perhaps unconsciously, at work here, driven by two “obsessions” that have permeated thinking about the literary arts during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The first is expressed in Walter Pater’s familiar apothegm that all of the arts aspire to the condition of music, which is to say, the pure aesthetic, hence Forster’s desire that “the highest factor common to novels” be “melody” rather than story. But, then, there is the contrary “obsession,” that, to appropriate Pater to another use, all of the arts aspire to the condition of knowledge, hence Forster’s wish that “the perception of truth” might prevail over story-telling, “this atavistic form.” (I shall have more to say about Pater later on.)

Forster expatiates on both the “low” and the “atavistic” character of story-telling. They go together, and here is what he has to say.

For the more we look at the story ... the less shall we have to admire .... It is immensely old—goes back to neolithic times, perhaps to paleolithic .... 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 .... The novelist droned on, and as soon as the audience guessed what happened next they either fell asleep or killed him.

One cannot help marking the irony (or perhaps the appropriateness?) of the story-teller telling a story to dump on story-telling. Be that as it may, Forster has more to say. Of the story,

*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
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making the audience not want to know what happens next …. It is the lowest and simplest of literary organisms. Yet it is the highest factor common to all very complicated organisms known as novels.11

Of course Forster has it exactly right—and who would know better than he—what drives a story. It is, indeed, the desire “to know what happens next.” And, once one does know, one does the modern equivalent of Neanderthals killing the author or going to sleep: one puts that novel away and picks up another, as I will be arguing anon.

But is that so low? And is that all there is to it? Forster passes a pretty severe judgment: “We are all like Scheherazade’s husband, in that we want to know what happens next …. Some of us want to know nothing else—there is nothing in us but primeval curiosity, and consequently our other literary judgments are ludicrous.”12

The story-reader who only wants “to know what happens next” is probably a fair characterization of what I shall later call the non-serious, in-it-for-the-story reader. But even he deserves more of our attention than the short shrift Forster is willing to give him.

It is of course true that, once one begins to read a work of narrative fiction, the desire to know “what happens next” is the driving motive of the exercise. And, when one knows, the driving motive is gratified, which is why “Don’t tell me what happens” is a familiar imperative. But that does not distinguish the reader of a novel from the reader of a news report in the Times or the fan at a baseball game, to adduce two obvious examples. They too are driven by the motive to know “what happens next.” What the philosopher of art wants to know is why anyone wants to know “what happens next” in a fictional narrative.

There appears to me to be a paradox lurking here that is closely related to what I call in subsequent chapters the Radford problem, which is to say, the problem of why we feel emotions towards fictional characters—sorrow over their misfortunes, happiness for their happiness—when, after all, they do not exist, hence do not suffer or prosper. For one might well ask why we want to know “what happens next” in a fictional story, for the very same reason. Indeed, one way of putting the paradox is to observe that nothing happens next because nothing happened before; indeed, nothing happened or happens at all. The characters don’t exist; the events don’t exist. Or perhaps a less nihilistic way of putting it is that there does not seem to be any reason for us wanting to know “what happens next” in a fictional narrative since it is, after all, “only” a fictional narrative. Who cares what happens to Anna Karenina? Why should anyone care? It is the mystery

11 Ibid., pp. 27–28.
12 Ibid., p. 27.
all over again of why we are, and have been since time immemorial, so desirous of experiencing fictional narrative when nothing appears to be at stake. Finally, we might well ask just what we are really finding out when we find out “what happens next” in a fictional narrative. When I find out “what happens next” in the ninth inning of a baseball game, or “what happens next” in the news story I am reading, I am, of course, finding out something about the real world, about “reality,” even though it may be as unimportant a reality as the outcome of a game. But what am I finding out about when I find out “what happens next” to Anna, since there is no such being and nothing has happened to “her” in the first place?

We all, as Aristotle tells us, have a desire to know. But what are we coming to “know” when we find out “what happens next” in a fictional narrative? And why do we want to know “it”?

What we are up against here is, again, the deep-seated enigma of what Hecuba is to us that we should weep for her or that we should even care at all “what happens next” to her or what “happens” at all in fictional narrative, it being fictional narrative. I leave these questions here unanswered, but will return to them as my argument progresses. And it is now high time for the argument to begin.