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Modernists on the art of fiction

Between the 1880s and the 1930s, a new and fertile discourse on the art of fiction emerged alongside the extensive reshaping of fictional form itself. This interweaving of critical and creative activities typifies the self-consciousness we have come to find in modernism across all the arts. Manifestos, declarations, excurses and rationales are the inevitable accompaniments to modernist experimentation, just as reflexivity becomes lodged in the grain of the artwork: the Cézanne canvas cannot fail to be about the discourse of painting as much as it is about the pursuit of natural phenomena; the Imagist poem, stripping itself of the trappings of the 'poetical', succeeds in this very gesture in foregrounding the discourses of poetry. In the case of the art of fiction, the very use of the term 'art' is an emergent sign of this new self-consciousness.

It is important to recognize the influence of a particular historical context of aesthetic theory and practice, drawn mainly from France and Russia, in the development of Anglo-American modernist fiction, ranging from Gustave Flaubert's expressed desire to write a novel about nothing, to the coruscating naturalism of Emile Zola and the psychological intensities of Fyodor Dostoevsky. Through this context the idea of the modern novel comes to occupy a complex space bounded by the principles of abstraction on the one hand and realism on the other.

This essay presents a brief comparative survey of six representative writers and selected key texts on the art of modernist fiction. I want to suggest how far, through a cluster of recurrent concepts – art itself, but also life, experience, the human, realism, morality, freedom, democracy, readers – the discourse on modernist fiction is fundamentally Janus-faced, looking simultaneously inwards, towards form and language, and outwards, towards the changing material circumstances in which fiction was being produced and consumed.

Art and 'life': James and Woolf

Henry James settled in England in 1876, having gravitated from America to Europe a year earlier, and henceforth, in the words of Peter Keating, 'set

about transforming the quality and status of modern fiction'.[1] In reviews, commentaries and prefaces to his own works of fiction, extending up to his death in 1916, James constructed a highly influential conceptual framework for the fictions of modernism. James's essay 'The Art of Fiction', published in *Longman's Magazine* in September 1884, echoes the title of a lecture delivered by the writer Walter Besant to the Royal Institution five months earlier. Besant was closely associated with the Society of Authors, founded in 1883 to maintain and defend the rights of authors in a rapidly expanding and diversifying literary marketplace, but also gained recognition for his own popular fictions of working-class East End London.

James's essay subtly inflects a sense of disparity between the cultured émigré and the stalwart champion of British literary craftsmanship. He begins by congratulating Besant on his contribution to the process of making the English novel more *discutable* and less *naïf*, 'if I may help myself out with another French word'.[2] The English novel was, in other words, aspiring to a theory of itself, not yet perhaps with the 'remarkable completeness' of the French, but at least with more sophistication than was contained in the warm and comfortably ascendant Anglo-Saxon feeling that a novel is a novel as 'a pudding is a pudding' (36, 24). The central insight of Besant's argument, for James, is that fiction is one of the *fine* arts. Arraigned against this view in late Victorian English culture are, James argues, two influential countertendencies, one residual, the other emergent: first, puritanical approaches to art in general as 'injurious' and the novel in particular as immoral; second, the omnivorous 'vulgarization of everything' in modern commodity culture.

Through the question of fictional art and its fineness, however, James carefully uncouples himself from Besant's position. Besant proposes that the 'laws' of fiction can be set out with precision: novelists must write from their own experience, and with a sense of moral purpose; characters should be 'real' and clearly outlined; story and style (or 'workmanship') should be of primary importance. James's gnomic response is that it is impossible unequivocally either to agree or to disagree with these aspirations. Instead, James maps out for modern fiction a highly influential, if somewhat more elusive, theory. The sole *raison d'être* of the novel, for which it should remain unapologetic, is to represent the novelist's direct impression of 'life'. An essential precondition is freedom, the absence of any limit on the novelist's technique or interest. A novel's 'air of reality' is a function of its ability to recognize that human life is immense and various, and to catch 'the very note and trick, the strange irregular rhythm of life' (38). 'Life' here bears, of course, enormous semantic weight, but in the context of the later nineteenth century it was at least partly a biological category. The novel for James must be 'a living thing, all one and continuous, like any other organism, and in

proportion as it lives it will be found, I think, that in each of the parts there is something of each of the other parts' (34).

James's organicism places almost impossible strictures on analysis. Composition is not 'a series of blocks'; distinctions between aspects of description and narration in fiction are futile, those between different genres of fiction – for example, the novel and the romance – equally so. Good novels have life, bad novels do not; these, the only fictional classifications James claims to 'understand', are ultimately determined by the equally inscrutable quality of the author's intelligence: 'no good novel will ever proceed from a superficial mind' (44). The fineness of the fictional aesthetic, and whatever moral value fiction might possess, are both therefore determined by the untrammelled intelligence and sincerity of the individual novelist.

The powerful resonance of James's fictional aesthetic for the development of modernism might be located in its unresolved contradictions. In the conclusion to the essay, James places before the young novelist the alluring prospect of unlimited freedom and experimentation, in a form whose 'magnificence' makes other arts seem restricted by comparison. In one sense this is entirely consistent with the history of the novel which, since the eighteenth century, had been the preeminent art form of a secular modernity, bypassing the formal conventions of poetry and drama in order to open out aesthetic space for a post-Enlightenment age in which knowledge is no longer esoteric.[3] However, while the openness and flexibility of the Jamesian novel suggests an essentially *democratic* art, a challenge is posed to James's concept of fictional art by the actual extension of democracy in the late nineteenth century, through the widening of literacy and print culture as well as via the political modes of a widening franchise and the rise of the labour and suffrage movements. James's discourse on the novel coincides with a fragmentation or diversification of the literary marketplace. As popular fictions proliferate in the expansion of newspapers, magazines and periodicals, alternative initiatives seek to mark out a space for 'literary' art: specialist literary periodicals anticipate both the formation of the discipline of literary criticism and the construction of fiction as an object of study, in the early twentieth-century university.

James is therefore strictly ambivalent about the 'innumerable opportunities' open to the modern novelist, whose freedom is part of the trajectory of the novel as a democratic form, yet whose 'art' must be forged in contradistinction to a general 'vulgarization' which, in the realm of art itself, is signified by any resort to categorization, convention or cliché. The novelist must be liberated from Besant's 'laws', yet James fails to acknowledge the democratic possibility that laws, if transmissable as technique, might themselves liberate, creating the conditions for the proliferation of writing. His

organicist aesthetic shrouds fictional value in the achievement of 'life' as a measure of the superior intelligence of the writer – a standard perhaps more intimidating and constricting in its inscrutability than any laws could be. There is then a disjunction between James's radical individualism and his insistence on absolute standards of taste and judgement. The same contradiction was to reemerge later in the ideological formation of F. R. Leavis's Cambridge school of criticism from the 1930s onwards.

Virginia Woolf qualifies as one of the 'young writers' to whom James's discourse on fiction was often addressed, and the influence of James on her earliest fictions has often been observed. Like James, Woolf was born into a family of some intellectual distinction, and created a corpus of work combining experimental fiction of profound importance with a prodigious output of criticism and theory. In two of her most famous and often anthologized essays, 'Modern Fiction' (1919) and 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown' (1924), Woolf seems to conduct a silent dialogue with the Jamesian aesthetic; more explicitly, the argumentative form of 'The Art of Fiction' is echoed, as is a discourse in which social class and the definition of art are subtly entwined. Woolf's targets are, however, more daunting. While James could take on Besant with a degree of confidence, even complacency, Woolf's critical subjects are Arnold Bennett, H. G. Wells and John Galsworthy, three of the most popular and bestselling male novelists of the Edwardian period. Along with a certain patrician Jamesian tone in Woolf's treatment of her subjects, then, there is also an element of courage, inseparable from the pursuit of a gender politics which decisively differentiates Woolf's discourse on fiction from that of her predecessor.

'Modern Fiction' includes a noticeably robust configuration of the 'art of fiction'. With gentle irony, the art is mythologized as a female goddess; should she appear among us, however, she would insist on being broken and bullied as well as honoured and loved. The unsettling image of female maltreatment is a mark of the uncompromising stand taken by Woolf, in this and in the later essay, on the need for rigorous and constantly renewed fictional realism. Wells, Bennett and Galsworthy are 'materialists', and this is the source of 'our' constant disappointment with them: they 'are concerned not with the spirit but with the body', and 'write of unimportant things', spending immense 'skill' and 'industry' on making the 'trivial' and 'transitory' appear 'true' and 'enduring'.[4] Echoing yet outdoing James on Besant, Woolf develops a clear distinction between the manual or industrial labour of the 'materialists' and the intellectual work of those dedicated to the true art of fiction. Woolf draws here perhaps from Arthur Symons's *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899), in which Symons had consolidated the Flaubertian notion of the autonomous novel by accusing Zola and

the naturalists of trying to 'build in brick and mortar inside the covers of a book'.[5] Woolf's Bennett is the best workman/craftsman of her three *bêtes noires*, building such substantial fictional edifices that there are no draughts from the windows or cracks in the floorboards. And yet – 'if life should refuse to live there'? ('Modern Fiction' 147). House property, Woolf wryly notes, 'was the common ground from which the Edwardians found it easy to proceed to intimacy'.[6]

'Life' is, however, an elusive proposition; tentatively, Woolf suggests that this 'essential thing' has indeed narrowly eluded the Edwardians, has 'moved off, or on'. What is clearer is that the established form of the novel is no longer appropriate to a modern epistemology in which the notion of objectivity has been problematized by relativity physics and the subjective sciences of psychology and psychoanalysis. What, Woolf asks, is life actually like? To examine 'an ordinary mind on an ordinary day' is to realize that experience is a bewildering bombardment of diverse stimuli. The notion of a fictional realism based on narrative omniscience or distance must be replaced by a more complex model, emphasizing the liminality of the boundaries between inner and outer:

> Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. Is it not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever abberration or complexity it may display, with as little mixture of the alien and external as possible?
>
> ('Modern Fiction' 150)

Woolf constructs life as 'spirit' here through a delicate counterbalancing of the mystical and the naturalistic, 'luminous halo' seeming to belong simultaneously to religious imagery and the science of optics, 'semi-transparent envelope' to biology and spiritualism.

Woolf thus updates James's impressionistic insistence on 'catching . . . the strange irregular rhythm of life', correspondingly toughening up the task of the novelist in the final call to arms, where the proposal is clearly not simply for modernist fiction to repudiate realism, but to achieve a more authentic engagement with the real than *realism*, so called, could possibly attain. The preconditions for this task remain resolutely Jamesian: if the novelist is to be able to realize the 'infinite possibilities of the art', she must be freed from the 'powerful and unscrupulous' tyranny of realist fictional convention and its 'embalming' air of probability. Thus liberated, the only things forbidden to the novelist are falsity and pretence. The ethical drive is further reinforced by Woolf's bold use of the spiritual, confirming a sense that, for both her and James, consecration was a large part of advocacy. James had witheringly

described Anthony Trollope's tendency to confide in the reader as the 'betrayal of a sacred office' (26).

Yet in Woolf's case this strategic attack on 'materialism' is at the same time misleading. Two distinctly materialist emphases lie at the centre of Woolf's foundational contribution to modern feminist criticism, *A Room of One's Own* (1929). Woolf argues in this essay that to be able to write, a woman must have material support, time and space, a room; and she must inherit a set of 'tools'. Looking back across the history of modern prose, however, the woman writer finds at her disposal only *masculine* tools of grammar, syntax, vocabulary, sentence structure, even when these were deployed by her female predecessors.

Woolf's attack on the realist novel in the name of the 'spirit' of life is thus an encoded reflection on the thoroughly *ideological* nature of the realist tradition. Fittingly, the substance of the essay 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown' is crystallized in a single challenge: how does the novelist depict, or express the life of, the small anonymous woman sitting opposite in the railway carriage? Framing the enquiry is Woolf's revision, along the lines of a new relativity, of the old cliché that all novels deal essentially with character. Not only might character mean one thing to you, another to me, but, as Woolf claims in one of her most notorious and enigmatic assertions, 'in or about December, 1910, human character changed' ('Mr Bennett' 113). Beneath the gender-neutral terms in which this debate is conducted, however, we know that it is a woman who is being looked at, and that the material history of the realist gaze might also be that of a male gaze. '"Stop! Stop!"' exclaims Woolf, interrupting her imagined Edwardian materialist's attempt to describe Mrs Brown in terms of her father's shop in Harrogate and the wages of shop assistants in 1878. If Mrs Brown is the archetypal 'spirit we live by, life itself' (128), the ability to render her might require something more than the placing of new fictional tools at the disposal of Arnold Bennett – something, for example, like women writing with modernist tools of their own invention.

Lawrence and Forster: modernism as antimodernism

Woolf intriguingly assessed the effect, on 'young Georgians' such as D. H. Lawrence and E. M. Forster, of their inheritance of Edwardian fictional tools. Their early work, she claims, was spoilt by the attempt to effect a compromise between social or materialist realism and the need to break out into radical, modernist experimentation ('Mr Bennett' 125). It may, however, have been an easier proposition for both James and Woolf to carve out a theoretical space for modernist fiction as a fine and sacred art. In the work of

Lawrence and Forster, the problematic position of the aesthetic in a class-based society looms larger, producing complex fusions of identification and distance. Neither writer, it seems, could shake off either the allure of the aesthetic as a mode of emancipation in its own right, or the responsibility to use art as a mode of social investigation and critique. The result is that both remain ambivalent figures *vis à vis* the kind of 'official', high modernist fictional aesthetic of James and Woolf. In their own discourses on fiction, the novel attains a life and agency of its own, as if to anticipate a later 'death of the author' syndrome – or as if to attest to a lack of that ownership which in James and Woolf is constantly affirmed by an emphasis on the agency of the writer.

A sense of the novel's independent power as a form is glimpsed in Lawrence's early, and extraordinary, excursus, the *Study of Thomas Hardy*, which he began to write in 1915 'out of sheer rage' at the onset of war.[7] Hardy's novels figure relatively lightly, and appear to be a mere pretext for the first extended outline of a Lawrentian metaphysic of modernity as a long historical process of psychic and bodily repression. In contemporary terms, for Lawrence, this was exemplified by the 'self-preservation' ethic of capitalist economics and political democracy. In the longer view, it had been encapsulated in the rise of Christianity and the steady triumph of the ethic of Love over the old Mosaic Law of the Father. Boldly theoretical in his grasp of Hardy's fictional oeuvre, Lawrence asserts that all Hardy's heroes and heroines figure this pattern in the struggle, against the limits of social convention, to burst into 'flower' or being, while their subsequent failure, and banishment to the wilderness, constitute the tragedy of the novels. Enclosing this tragedy, however, and revealing its modern 'weakness', is the greater elemental context of nature, within which the human and social dramas are played out. Lawrence's Hardy is thus divided against himself. The explicit prevalence of the social system as the source of morality and retribution is 'almost silly' as a metaphysic, and makes some aspects of Hardy's writing 'sheer rubbish'.[8] But the novels expose what Hardy is powerless to conceal: that he has a deeper, instinctive and sensuous understanding of nature or the Law, an 'unconscious adherence to the flesh', which is somehow always overridden by his sense of social tragedy (94).

Several aspects of this reading of Hardy demonstrate a theory of fictional autonomy and impersonality which is nevertheless quite distinct from the modernist aesthetic of James and Woolf. There is initially a surprisingly collective treatment of the novels, almost cursorily listed and summarized, as if their individual characteristics were of far less importance than the shared pattern they reveal; and there is the sense that the novel possesses an unconscious dimension which might be antithetical to its author's

motives. Hardy, the individual, is almost bracketed out of the account, as if merely the cipher through which the art of fiction comes into being. This impersonality, then, constitutes a different kind of artistic truth-telling from the cool detachment of the author in pursuit of the minute data of experience; rather, it is a revelation of broader human and cultural truths, in patterns possibly unavailable to the individual consciousness.

This thinking about the art of fiction reaches its fullest expression in *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1923), where Lawrence famously announces:

> Art-speech is the only truth . . . The artist usually sets out – or used to – to point a moral and adorn a tale. The tale, however, points the other way, as a rule. Two blankly opposing morals, the artist's and the tale's. Never trust the artist. Trust the tale. The proper function of a critic is to save the tale from the artist who created it.[9]

This view of art as antithetical to its own morality confers upon the critic the hermeneutic task of uncovering the 'symbolic meaning' of the work. In the case of American literature, this meant revealing the extent to which writers were enslaved to the ideal of democratic equality, whether in terms of race, class or gender. In James Fenimore Cooper's 'white' novels, for example, all the characters are, Lawrence claims, fixed by the 'pin' of a social contract, 'never real human beings'; in the Leatherstocking novels, however, 'dreaming' close bondings between white and native Indian men, an unconscious belief in a natural inequality or *dis*quality reasserts itself (49, 58). Repeatedly, Lawrence subsumes the question of individual artistic genius beneath a model of the novel as a cultural document of profound revelation. Edgar Allan Poe is 'doomed' to register a process of 'white' psychic disintegration, and then to be reviled for performing this 'necessary' task by moralists; Herman Melville is similarly bound, in his loathing of the human and helpless fascination with the impersonal movements of matter, to produce in *Moby-Dick* (1851) an epic of 'esoteric symbolism of profound significance, and of considerable tiresomeness' (66, 146).

A series of essays written in the mid-1920s crystallize the peculiar amalgam of modernist and antimodernist thinking in Lawrence's discourse on the art of fiction.[10] The strains of the modern, democratic and emancipatory are familiar: the novel is 'the one bright book of life' (195). As in Woolf, 'life' is a condition of complete aesthetic freedom to convey the relativity of all things and the uniqueness and unpredictability of individual character. As we have seen, however, the novelist for Lawrence is no freer, as he put it, than a rooted tree is free; he or she is grounded in culture and history, and obliged by the novel itself to express situated truths which lie beyond individual

consciousness. The novel may then remain, in an age of rapidly developing technologies of communication and representation, 'the highest complex of subtle inter-relatedness that man has discovered' (172), but to maintain this condition the novelist's own relatedness must be insouciant, for as soon as the relationship becomes *willed*, the novelist trying to 'fix' or 'nail' the novel by organizing character into 'pattern', the novel either falls dead, or walks off with the nail.

Here, however, in what constitutes an extraordinary reversal of James's and Woolf's readings, Lawrence proposes that it is precisely in the most acclaimed of contemporary modernist fiction that the novel's demise along these lines is threatened. In an unforgettable satire, Lawrence characterizes the concerns of every character in Joyce, Dorothy Richardson and Marcel Proust: '"Did I feel a twinge in my little toe, or didn't I?"..."Is the odour of my perspiration a blend of frankincense and orange pekoe and boot-blacking, or is it myrrh and bacon-fat and Shetland tweed?"' (151). The novel's intense self-consciousness, he asserts, is an expression of childish egotism and a death blow to the possibility of an open and flexible approach to human identity seen as a whole. Once the novelist-surgeon has reduced the self to thousands of pieces, it cannot be reassembled; analysis arrests the organism in stasis, no longer to be seen as a living process or 'man alive'. This of course is a different stasis from the kind that Lawrence detected and condemned, in scrupulously modernist fashion, in the moral systems of nineteenth-century realism; both are, however, *immoral*, according to Lawrence's own Nietzschean inversion or transvaluation of values, because both upset the 'trembling balance' of interrelatedness between humans and the universe which was, for him, the very definition of the moral purpose of art. A bomb, he concluded, was the only solution, followed by modern fiction renewing itself through an alliance with philosophy, developing the courage once again to 'tackle new propositions without using abstractions' (155).

Forster's scepticism about modern fiction carried more of diffidence than of Lawrence's revolutionary zeal. Flattered to be invited to give the annual Clark lectures at Trinity College, Cambridge, in 1927, following T. S. Eliot in 1926, Forster nevertheless realized that the generous remuneration would require him not only to undertake a heavy course of reading, but to speak from within the developing profession or institution of literary criticism whose validity he had often questioned and whose inferiority to the creative process he had often upheld. However, once he had committed to the lectures, Forster's reflections fell obediently into the accessible headings of the student textbook: 'the story', 'people', 'the plot', 'pattern and rhythm'. *Aspects of the Novel* (1927) quickly became, and remained, a staple item on undergraduate reading lists, and deposited a homely and now deeply familiar vocabulary for fictional

analysis: 'flat' and 'round' characters; 'bouncing' the reader between narrative perspectives; and '"Yes – oh dear yes – the novel tells a story."'[11]

It is thus, initially, difficult to read *Aspects* as the work of a modernist, until we remember that the combination of friendly and accessible, prosaic, common-sense liberal humanism, and the wry, ironic sense of the potential fragility of this whole humanist project, is precisely what might be identified as modernist in Forster's fiction. Ostensibly, *Aspects* charts a middle way between the respective virtues of popular and experimental fiction. The factor of mediation, connecting with Woolf's pursuit of Mrs Brown and Lawrence's search for 'relatedness', is the sovereign condition of the 'human'. Like his peers, Forster saw the novel's lack of formal constraint, its openness and flexibility, as the ideal mode for recording the rich incalculability of human life. 'Human beings have their great chance in the novel', and they prevail at the *expense* of form; the novel's artistic development is hindered, in comparison with the drama, by 'its humanity or the grossness of its material': the novel is 'sogged by humanity' (149, 145, 39). Accordingly, Forster borrows some of this soggy humanity to help distance himself from the kind of critical and scholarly method that might be expected of him: he will 'attack' the novel with no system or apparatus, but with 'the human heart', because the final test of a novel always consists in our 'affection' for it.

It would be unsurprising if Forster's 'soggy' novel called to mind James's oblique association of the English novel with a pudding. In *Aspects* a critique of James's fiction is the means by which Forster distances himself from the Jamesian aesthetic. Forster is content to follow the orthodox line that novels essentially deal with character, even to the extent of signalling as the central idea of his lectures that there are only two 'forces' in fiction, 'human beings and a bundle of various things not human beings' (101). James is initially identified as an 'extreme case' of the inverse tendency to put those various things before the human, and the advantage of this aesthetic is found in the hourglass-shaped beauty of James's novel *The Ambassadors* (1903). However, Forster then invokes the extended public debate between James and Wells, in which the claims of 'art' and 'life' in fiction had become polarized, in order to align himself unequivocally with the latter. The beauty of the aesthetic pattern in James's fiction requires enormous, and literally human, sacrifices; 'most of human life has to disappear before he can do us a novel', the 'we' in this case representing Forster's implicit alliance with readers who cannot get interested in James's 'gutted' and 'castrated' characters, the 'common stuff' that fills other books (143). In James a 'heavy price' is paid for the aesthetic; it is a narrow path that leads, ultimately – the modern novel having struggled to shake off the straitjackets of formula – to the return of 'tyranny' in a new guise.

It is part of Forster's forging of a common cause with an expanding mass readership of fiction that he should call into question the boundary line between Jamesian art and writing of greater popularity. 'Has not a passage like this', he writes, as part of an analysis of Max Beerbohm's *Zuleika Dobson* (1911), 'a beauty unattainable by serious literature?' (111). However, the quarrel with James was not a quarrel with modernism as such, but a reconfiguration of modernism in which it is extricated, *à la* Lawrence, from the preciousness of Jamesian 'art'. Despite his humanistic protests against 'pseudo-scholarship' and analysis – protests which, of course, ironically align him with James – the project of *Aspects* itself compels Forster into a distanced assessment of technique, sometimes bringing distinct and surprising glimpses of a modernistic impersonality. Characters, the beating human heart of the Forsterian anti-aesthetic, are for example intriguingly seen as the author's 'word-masses', ripe for manipulation and modification. The universal aspects of human experience with which fiction deals are also open for defamiliarization – food, for example, and the curious 'stoking-up process' by which the individual 'goes on day after day putting an assortment of objects into a hole in his face without becoming surprised or bored' (58). These emphases might be mistaken, without too much difficulty, for something distinctly Beckettian.

Finally, then, Forster makes a cautious embrace of experimentalism, for example in the work of Gertrude Stein. Stein's fictive attempt to abolish narrative time fails, he argues, but the failure is both instructive and admirable; the impulse to 'emancipate fiction from the tyranny of time' is far more important than trying to rewrite the Waverley novels, for example. When the attempt involves the most fundamental disruption of language and form, the abolition of sequence in sentences, in syntax, and even in letters and sounds in words, then she is, however, 'over the precipice' (53). Forster himself declined to go over this precipice, but how might the art of fiction appear to those who did?

Beckett and Stein: theory as practice

'The Proustian equation is never simple'. From the opening challenge of Samuel Beckett's long essay on Proust (1931), we are conscious of a discourse in which creative intellectual work on the nature of fiction is striving to overcome the distinction between criticism and fiction, theory and practice.[12] Proust's multivolume work, *In Search of Lost Time* (1913–27), itself calls such a distinction into question, the narrative enfolding itself into the narrator's aspiration to write. It is indeed common to find extracts from Proust's novel anthologized alongside reflections on the theory of fiction.

The value of Proust, for Beckett, lay in the reconfiguration of two central preoccupations in modern discourse on fiction, character and realism, through the concept of time. Much of Beckett's essay is a meditation on the significance in Proust of the famous, epiphanic moments of involuntary memory: the taste of the madeleine cake steeped in tea, for example, or the hearing of a phrase of Vinteuil's music. For Lawrence, such moments may have epitomized the excesses of a maudlin, analytic self-consciousness. For Beckett, they herald the deconstruction of the concept of the self, under the pressure of Bergsonian theories of time and memory, Freudian psychoanalysis and relativity physics.

Time, Beckett explains, is the means by which the Proustian equation does not add up. Proust's characters are, in a conventional sense, 'victims and prisoners' of time, as bodies determined within a particular lifespan. But time is also inhabited in a different way from that suggested by the chronological measure of days and years, a way which allows us to occupy a 'much greater place' than that allotted by space (12–13). This distinctively modernist *spatialization* of time is confirmed by Proust's illustrations of involuntary memory, in which the slightest sensual stimulus triggers a memory so vivid that the individual might be said to inhabit, simultaneously, both the present moment and the recollected scene. In *Matter and Memory* (1911) the philosopher Henri Bergson had begun to question the concept of recollection itself, tied as it was to a model of memory as a set of images in the brain, selected for projection in the private cinema of consciousness. Rather, Bergson theorized, memory was an *actualization* of the past in the body, a complex physical event or evocation through which the individual does not 'have' memory but 'is' memory. Thus, for example, the opening pages of Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), with their subtle manipulation of tense and careful ambiguity surrounding the question of 'now', vividly suggest a sense in which Clarissa Dalloway is simultaneously a menopausal and a teenage woman.

Beckett's endorsement, then, of the Proustian epiphany, and of the inferiority of voluntary memory as 'of no value as an instrument of evocation' (14), closely resembles the theory of art as 'defamiliarization' in Russian Formalist criticism. Habit, 'the ballast that chains the dog to his vomit', is temporarily suspended by involuntary memory, and we see things afresh; we feel the true 'suffering of being', which is equivalent to 'the free play of every faculty' (20). Beckett is unafraid to designate this as contact with the 'real', that which 'the mock reality of experience' cannot reveal. Habit and voluntary memory thus enable the strictly retrospective, and false, construction of the self as stable, unitary and continuous. According to the Bergsonian conception of *durée*, what this idea of the self necessarily obstructs is the *experience* of being, as a

continuous process of strictly unforseeable becoming. If, therefore, we are prisoners of time, this is also, curiously, because we are condemned to be 'other, no longer what we were before the calamity of yesterday' (13). The human subject dies and is reborn anew every moment, whereas the seeming historical inevitability of the 'personality' or 'old ego' (terms similarly used by Lawrence to designate a false idea of the self) can only ever be constructed once these changes have occurred. Like Proust's Albertine, we are beings 'scattered in space and time', multiple not only in our capacity for simultaneity, but in the constant, creative unfolding of new selves; in a formulation that resonates through Beckett's own oeuvre and on into deconstructive philosophy, it is indeed common to be present at our own absence.

Needless to say, the established art of realist fiction, for Beckett-Proust, is inadequate to account for these conceptions of time and selfhood. Here Beckett rejoins for a moment the sceptical debate around realism which had animated the discourse on fiction since Flaubert and James. To an extent, he asserts, Proust follows a kind of impressionist realism, recording phenomena 'in the order and exactitude of their perception'; but Proust's contempt for the 'grotesque fallacy' of realism lies in the refusal to fit such recordings into the retrospective patterns of cause and effect (86, 76). This undoubtedly constitutes a strain of romanticism in Proust, a preference for intuitive over intellectualistic perception, though only insofar as 'intellectual' signals the tendency to make sense of things which are of necessity out of date. At the same time, however, Proust is thereby distanced from the abstraction of Charles Baudelaire and the Symbolists, his singular and lonely pursuit of a tenacious new contract between the imagination and reality figured in an enigmatic formula: 'real without being merely actual, ideal without being merely abstract' (64, 75).

The writing of Walter Benjamin, whose work on and around Proust forms a close parallel with that of Beckett, might helpfully, if indirectly, summarize in two main ways the extent to which Beckett's discourse on Proust, despite its instinctive avoidance of heroic or pious polemic, remains a discourse about emancipation. First, Benjamin maintains that the Proustian emphasis on involuntary memory counteracts the tendency of modern imaging technologies, such as the camera and cinema (which themselves infiltrate the forms of modern fictional realism), to 'reduce the scope for the play of imagination' and to degrade the role of *practice*. Second, in this manner the Proustian novel restores the value and communicability of *experience*, steadily devalued by the modern triumph of information over narrative, and embodied in the rise of the novel itself.[13]

Beckett's exacting study of Proust implies that the modernist novel might become progressively unrecognizable in its pursuit of Bergsonian insights.

Stein was also familiar with the work of Bergson, and strove to embody this in the creation of a fictional 'continuous present'. The character of Melanctha Herbert in Stein's much-admired early work *Three Lives* (1909) is renewed in every pulse of her reiterative sentences, as if nothing of Melanctha can ever be taken for granted as established. Stein, however, did not stop at jumping off the precipice with fiction: she took the discourse on the art of fiction with her. *How to Write* (1931) is a long, seemingly formless meditation in eight chapters whose headings, with their allusions to sentences and paragraphs, grammar, narrative and vocabulary, attest to Stein's longstanding preoccupation with the nature and philosophy of language and its relation to the idea of representation.[14] Critics have regarded *How to Write* as one of the most hermetic texts of a writer always working at the farthest verge of avant-garde modernism, and have tended to conclude, from its ironic subversion of the idea of an instructional and inclusive manual, that it was never intended for a wide readership.

The difficulty for any critical account of *How to Write* is that of avoiding a kind of bad faith implicit either in paraphrase or in extrapolation. Both of these strategies have of course been deployed, and might be defended as standard methods of 'making sense' of an otherwise recalcitrant text. Stein's 'discovery' that a paragraph is emotional but a sentence is not is often cited as the key insight of *How to Write*, while '[i]t is natural to suppose that a rose is a rose is a rose', can be extracted as a familiar Steinian reflection on the redundancy of descriptive or referential writing. *How to Write* requests of its reader, however, a way of reading quite peculiar to itself, and a mode of intellectual engagement which, as in Bergson's critique of the logic of cause and effect, refuses the retrospective imposition of a structure of meaning, as if to translate the text as it is into an explicatory metalanguage. In *practice*, as it were, what might this look like?

> Grammar is undated because furlows and furrows are avaricious with hunting hares in partial referring to enable utter with renown come distaste unable.
>
> How can beginning and end beginning with white in iron end whom with lent.
>
> A grammar colors reddened. (79)

> Well well is he. Explain my doubts, well well is he explain my doubts.
>
> Could he get used to a city.
>
> Explain my doubts.
>
> Well well is he explain my doubts. Well well is he explain my doubts. (217)

Let us assume that the reader is learning not to identify and retain points of central significance in *How to Write*, but instead to become immersed in Stein's playful linguistic flow. The flow is aided by the almost complete

exclusion of any punctuation other than the full stop. This exclusion also has the effect of focusing the mind on decisions of meaning that are usually made for us; the utterances seem protean, not simply unrelated fragments, but units of sense that shift through the action of hingeing words which can perform more than one grammatical function. Is 'colors' a verb or a noun? Can 'in partial referring' be allowed to continue the sentence or is it the source of a new, fugitive unit of sense? The middle section of the first example, 'How can . . .', might be recomposed, with judicious punctuation, into a meditation on the strange disjunction between beginnings and endings of utterances, and more generally seems to reflect Stein's fascination with the way grammatically correct utterances might be nonreferential, and with the lapsing of language in and out of sense (she reflects elsewhere on the interesting impossibility of *not* making sense in language for any length of time). With the alliteration of 'furlows and furrows' and 'hunting hares', poetic affect also unsettles grammatical sense. 'Explain my doubts' in the second example is a surreal intrusion into its sentence, like the murmuring of a subconscious. In the general context of punctuation, the rare comma only intensifies a questioning of the relationship between text and subtext, just as repetition intensifies the autonomy of the phrases.

The longer the reader is able to sustain this attention, the more we realize that the text is working according to a logic of the glimpse or of peripheral vision, as of something held just out of reach; what we glimpse, perhaps, are the underlying rules that make and constrain sense. This of course is precisely how *not* to write in an orthodox way, but another sense of the proposition 'how to write' is released, in which writing is a transitive act – literally, an act of contiguity, of placing one letter after another and one word after another. In 'Proust' Beckett observes that the 'enchantment' of reality can only be apprehended when objects can be seen in their singularity, 'independent of any general notion and detached from the sanity of a cause' ('Proust' 22–3). In *How to Write* Stein performs a similar service for words. In direct contrast to Lawrence's aesthetic, nothing is more inappropriate to Stein's text than the hermeneutic gesture: as attention is diverted from conventional sense and reference, it is focused with a peculiar tenacity, perhaps enchantment, on the texture of words and their effects, or on what Stein called 'wordness'.

It would be tempting to read in Stein's astonishing text a certain logical extension of James's call for an autonomous art of modernist fiction.[15] Autonomy in this sense has often proved capable of acquiring a bad name; James can be seen to demonstrate, 'in the saddest possible way, that the modernist novel was ruthlessly determined to be about nothing but itself', and satirized for giving up on the reader only when 'he was finally persuaded that he had almost no readers to address'.[16] At its most extreme, this critical

approach produces the misunderstanding of modernism apparent in George Orwell's 'Inside the Whale' (1943). At a time of unprecedented turmoil in world history, Orwell complains, the modernists can only look elsewhere, and primarily into their own art. This critique is founded, however, on a false dichotomy. In Benjamin's theory of artistic 'correspondence', contemporaneity has nothing to do with content, or with the recording of reality in literary form; it consists, rather, in the direct correspondence of the *form* of art with its context, such that what is discovered could not have taken any other form. 'In order to complete them', Woolf mused, on the sense of incompleteness left by the novels of the Edwardian materialists, 'it seems necessary to do something – to join a society, or, more desperately, to write a cheque' ('Mr Bennett' 119). Woolf here voices for her peers the modernist proposition, not only that the fiction will suffice, but that artistic autonomy is the very *guarantee* of its engagement with the real. The fact that an extensive discourse on fiction seemed increasingly necessary to sustain this autonomy becomes less paradoxical in the light of what we might see in modernism as a will-to-literature or 'one of the fiercest campaigns ever mounted in favour of literature'.[17] The campaign is nevertheless shadowed by a fear that the future of the novel will depend upon the existence of a world not yet 'grown alien to it'.[18]

Notes

1. Peter Keating, *The Haunted Study: A Social History of the English Novel 1875–1914* (London: Fontana, 1991), p. 13.
2. Henry James, 'The Art of Fiction', in Leon Edel (ed.), *The House of Fiction: Essays on the Novel by Henry James* (London: Hart-Davis, 1957), pp. 23–45 (p. 23). Further references cited parenthetically.
3. See, for example, Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1957).
4. Virginia Woolf, 'Modern Fiction', in Woolf, *The Common Reader: First Series*, ed. Andrew McNeillie (London: Hogarth Press, 1984), pp. 146–53 (pp. 147–8). Further references cited parenthetically.
5. Arthur Symons, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (New York: Haskell House, 1971), p. 5.
6. Virginia Woolf, 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown', in Peter Faulkner (ed.), *A Modernist Reader: Modernism in England 1910–1930* (London: Batsford, 1986), pp. 112–28 (p. 123). Further references cited parenthetically.
7. D. H. Lawrence, letter to J. B. Pinker, 5 September 1914, in *The Letters of D. H. Lawrence*, 8 vols., *Volume II: 1913–1916*, ed. George Y. Zytaruk and James T. Boulton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 212.
8. D. H. Lawrence, *Study of Thomas Hardy and Other Essays*, ed. Bruce Steele (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 93. Further references cited parenthetically.

9. D. H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature*, ed. Ezra Greenspan, Lindeth Vasey and John Worthen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 14.
10. See 'The Future of the Novel', 'Morality and the Novel' and 'Why the Novel Matters' in Lawrence, *Study of Thomas Hardy*, pp. 149–55, 169–76, 191–8.
11. E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982), p. 40. Further references cited parenthetically.
12. Samuel Beckett, 'Proust', in Beckett and Georges Duthuit, *Proust and Three Dialogues* (London: John Calder, 1965), pp. 7–93. Further references cited parenthetically.
13. See 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire' and 'The Storyteller', in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Fontana/Collins, 1982), pp. 157–202, 83–109.
14. Gertrude Stein, *How to Write* (New York: Dover, 1975). Further references cited parenthetically.
15. See Ira B. Nadel, 'Gertrude Stein and Henry James', in Shirley Neuman and Ira B. Nadel (eds.), *Gertrude Stein and the Making of Literature* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), pp. 81–97.
16. Keating, *Haunted Study*, pp. 358, 397.
17. David Trotter, 'The Modernist Novel', in Michael Levenson (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 70–99 (p. 74).
18. Milan Kundera, 'The Depreciated Legacy of Cervantes', in Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, trans. Linda Asher (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), p. 16.