Reading the Modern British and Irish Novel 1890–1930

Daniel R. Schwarz
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READING THE NOVEL

General Editor: Daniel R. Schwarz

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For my students who have taught me how to read better,
and for my wife, Marcia Jacobson,
my sons, Dave and Jeff Schwarz,
my mother, Florence Schwarz,
and in memory of my father, Joseph Schwarz (1913–2004)
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Introduction: Reading the Modern British and Irish Novel 1890–1930

I Approach and Method

Our continuing interest in the modern British and Irish novel reminds us that Modernism is a continuing part of our present, and that consigning writers or artists to historical periods is often a pointless exercise in archeology. Indeed, Modernism originally was not a period preceded by Victorianism or Edwardianism and followed by a period which we now denote as post-Modernism, but an ongoing tradition of experimentation in literature, dance, architecture, music, painting, sculpture, photography, and film. If Modernism is considered the end of historical periods, the last gasp of history, what can come next? Because each period thinks of itself as in a state of crisis, Modernism is really not so much a period as a state of mind. To be sure, Modernist narrative is different in degree rather than kind from prior narratives. Its originality derives from building upon and at times transforming interior monologue, stream of consciousness, nineteenth-century journalism, psychoanalysis, and naturalism. Postmodernism’s audacious claims of originality and uniqueness not only recall the very claims of Modernism decades ago, but remind us that challenges to unity, fragmentation, radical disjunctions and inconsistency in point of view, multiple perspectives on reality, and moral paralysis reach back to Modernism.

As in all my work from the past three decades, I stress in the following pages that literary works are by humans, about humans, and for humans, and I stress close reading within an historical contextual framework. I am interested in modes of narration and representation. A place is once again being cleared by scholars for literary criticism based on close reading even as
it is informed by – but not driven by – theoretical hypothesis. For me literary criticism means an empathetic reading of a text to discover the conscious and unconscious patterns of language that the text conveys to both the reading audience for whom it was written and the contemporary reader. Literary criticism necessarily depends on an awareness of what, in the transaction of reading, a particular reader does to a text. I seek a pluralistic approach which allows for multiple perspectives and a dialogic approach among those perspectives. Such a criticism leaves room for resistant readings – feminist, ethnic, and gay – without allowing the text to be appropriated by theoretical or political agendas. It means teaching our students that reading is an evolving process requiring attention to what the text is saying, to the structure of effects the text generates, and to how authors make conscious and unconscious choices to create their structures of effects.

Novelists begin with their choice of material, often materials drawn from the real world in which they live, even if it is only their own interior reality; they then alter that material as they begin the process of transforming their raw material into fiction. As they do so – as that process takes place – they impose an appropriate form upon their material and decide how they should present it to an audience. Writing is thus how writers read the world; as Stephen Dedalus says in the “Proteus” episode of *Ulysses*, “Signatures of all things I am here to read.”

An aesthetics of reading need account for changes in the way we read an author. In a sense, major novels change even though the author writes no more words. The interpretive history of a text is a dialogue among (1) the text as object which critics write about and readers think about; (2) the subjective interests of individual critics and ordinary readers; and (3) the predispositions and assumptions of the culture in which those critics write and readers live.

The literary canon enriches itself because each generation brings something different to major authors and texts. As my teaching has evolved in response to changes in literary and cultural perspectives, the texts that I teach change with them. For example, until 1980 few critics thought about the homoeroticism of the male bonding in “The Secret Sharer”; now it is a foregrounded subject. Thus, in my edition of “The Secret Sharer” in the *Case Studies in Contemporary Criticism* series, every contributor took up the subject of homoeroticism in one way or another. I now see “The Secret Sharer” in the context of other works which focus on seeing and being seen, including James’s *The Turn of the Screw* and Mann’s *Death in Venice*, and also trace that focus back to the seminal nineteenth-century painter, Manet, and especially his *Déjeuner sur l’herbe*.

The history of modern British and Irish novel criticism is a miniature of the history of Anglo-American criticism in the post-war period. Thus in the
criticism of the 1950s and 1960s we see two major aspects of formalism: the New Criticism, a formalism that eschewed biography and reader’s response, and emphasized the isness of the text; and Aristotelian criticism, a formalism that stressed what we might call the doesness of the text – i.e. the structure of effects upon the reader as a result of the creation, consciously or unconsciously, by the author of these effects in the text.

Until recent years, even under the auspices of those practicing the New Criticism and Aristotelian criticism, Anglo-American criticism of English fiction has in part derived from the very tradition of manners and morals that English fiction addresses. Perhaps from an historical perspective this criticism should be seen as a response to British and Irish fiction’s interest in content and its moral effects on readers. Thus Anglo-American criticism of British and Irish fiction has tended to focus on the moral context of texts, viewing aesthetic matters as subservient.

We might recall how, in the face of great resistance, the study of English literature in the university emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries from the classics and from philology. In the nineteenth century, one read vernacular literature in one’s own tongue for pleasure, but did not study it. Even then, if one studied modern literature at all, it was to establish canonical texts. Indeed, as late as the early 1960s, English studies at major universities in Britain and America resisted the acknowledgement of Modernism, a field which began with the writers after Hardy and sometimes with Hardy and Hopkins.

The tradition of close reading fostered by the New Criticism was particularly appropriate to Modernist texts which resisted easy understanding. To be sure, at times the New Criticism – whose philosophical underpinnings included the early critical essays of T. S. Eliot, himself an Anglo-Catholic, and his example of the religious poet and Anglican priest John Donne – may have been appropriated by some as a bulwark for bolstering orthodox religious values, but the emphasis was on powerful close reading of complex texts. Even if the New Critical readings were at times reductive efforts to resolve tension, irony, and ambiguity in overly positivistic and (w)holistic readings – readings in which the teleology of an organic whole mimed the organic “plot” of Christianity stretching from Genesis to Apocalypse – it was more often the case that the New Criticism was a secular and skeptical tool in the service of closely examining the words in a text. For example, in the hands of such practitioners as William Empson, the New Criticism was a method of seeing the need for opening the doors and windows of possibilities. The New Criticism and Aristotelian criticism installed the Kantian category of the aesthetic as central; the aesthetic ideal holds that artistic experience is different in kind from other experiences, and that art is not simply art-as-such, i.e. art as sociology or art as biography, but is unique in itself.
Introduction

Accompanying the rise of English studies was the development of highly sophisticated modes of reading. Thus we can say that the aforementioned Anglo-American critical tradition has yielded an important theory and method. Indeed, did not the modern tradition – the tradition of Joyce, Conrad, James, and Woolf as well as the poets Yeats, Eliot, and Stevens – depend upon powerful close formalist reading, based on attention to the text as aesthetic object, to explicate the texts and to make them accessible to college and university students and other serious readers?

Even when Anglo-American criticism through the 1980s is primarily interested in aesthetic issues, that criticism never really abandons humanism. Notwithstanding the modifications of Anglo-American criticism by the theoretical explosion in the last decades of the twentieth century, the lasting concerns of that criticism remain the accuracy, the inclusiveness, and the quality – the maturity and sincerity – of mimesis in the English novel. The special focus of this criticism has been and still is the way that fictional characters live in imagined social communities. Indeed, Anglo-American criticism has usually subscribed to the view that art is about something other than art and that subject matter is important. To be sure, Anglo-American novel criticism takes seriously the importance of form, but its interest in form is inextricably tied to an interest in values. Anglo-American novel criticism believes that the doing – technique, structure, and style – is important because it reveals or discusses the meaning inherent in the subject.

The differences that separate various strands of Anglo-American criticism – formalist and historical – prior to the theoretical revolution of the 1970s seem less significant than they once did. Now we are able to see that the New Critics, Aristotelians, Partisan Review group, contextualists, and literary historians share a number of important assumptions: authors write to express their ideas and emotions; the way humans live and the values for which they live are of fundamental interest to authors and readers; literature expresses insights about human life and responses to human situations; and that is the main reason why we read, teach, and think about literature. While the emphasis varies from critic to critic, we can identify several concepts that define Anglo-American criticism in general, and we can see that until the theoretical revolution of the 1970s virtually all major critical voices shared similar humanistic assumptions:

1. The form of the novel – style, structure, and narrative technique – expresses its value system. Put another way: form discovers the meaning of content.
2. A work of literature is also a creative gesture of the author and the result of historical context. Understanding the process of imitating the
external world gives us an insight into the artistry and meaning of the work.

3 A novel imitates a world that precedes the text, and the critic should recapture that world primarily by formal analysis of the text, although knowledge of the historical context and author is often important.

4 Humanistic criticism believes that there is an original meaning, a center, which can be approached by, and often almost reached by, perceptive reading. The goal is to discover what authors said to their intended audience then, as well as what they say to us now. Acts of interpretation at their best – subtle, lucid, inclusive, perceptive – can bring that goal into sight.

5 Human behavior is central to most works, and should be the major concern of analysis. In particular, these critics are usually interested in how people behave – what they fear, desire, doubt, need. Although modes of characterization differ, the psychology and morality of characters must be understood as if they were real people, for understanding others like ourselves helps us to understand ourselves.

6 The inclusiveness of the novel’s vision in terms of depth and range is a measure of the work’s quality.

Following Wayne Booth’s eloquent insistence on asking “who is speaking to whom” and “for what purpose,” scholars of the novel focused in the 1960s and 1970s on the narrator, not only on the role of such figures as Marlow in the turn-of-the-century works such as “Youth,” *Heart of Darkness*, and *Lord Jim* and the later *Chance*, as well as the captain narrator’s act of telling in “The Secret Sharer” and *The Shadow Line*, but also on the complex omniscient narrators that we find in the texts of Hardy, Forster, Woolf, Joyce, and Lawrence.

The theoretical explosion of the 1980s and 1990s has dramatically reshaped the way we read the modern British and Irish novel. Bakhtin’s *The Dialogic Imagination* has given us better tools to discuss pluralistic perspectives in fiction and taught us to be attentive to a novel as a dialogue among perspectives. In the wake of new historicism’s return to mimesis and the implications of representation, cultural criticism needs to enter into a dialogue with older forms of contextualism. While trained as a formalist, I have always regarded literary texts as cultural artifacts. In my books such as *Reconfiguring Modernism: Explorations in the Relationship between Modern Art and Modern Literature* (1997) and *The Case for a Humanistic Poetics* (1991), I have advocated a wider cultural criticism that moves beyond micropolitical and macropolitical issues and includes inquiries into such cultural configurations as the relation among Picasso, Joyce, and Wallace Stevens in the genealogy of Modernism.
and how our understanding of each of them depends on seeing them as a cultural triptych.

We need think about why and how readers choose the critical narratives they do at a given time. I am interested in these choices as interpretive history, as products of socioeconomic forces, and as a history of individual values and temperaments. A dialogue between the neglected underbelly of socioeconomic forces – including micropolitical relations within genders and suppressed classes – and the dominant paradigm of intellectual and social history will necessarily create new, multi-layered cultural and literary history as well as vigorous analyses of what texts represent. For example, when we understand the homoerotic nature of male bonding among the Malay warrior culture, the suicide of Jim in *Lord Jim* becomes not only Jim’s abandonment of Jewel but his ritualistic acceptance of punishment for violating a consummated intimacy with Dain Waris.

Rather than a noun that names positions, cultural criticism needs to be thought of as a verb, as a process of inquiring, teaching, and reading. Cultural criticism needs to address the category of the aesthetic and its relationship to the political and the ethical. Now that literary studies has returned since the late 1980s or so to a criticism that focuses on contexts, we need also ask what is the place of the aesthetic in cultural criticism? Why do we find some works beautiful, moving, and pleasing; and why do we respond to the quality and integrity of mimesis – the way the parts of a work are unified – as well as to other formal ingredients of a work, including narrative voice, verbal texture, and characterization? How can we speak of ethical and political value without surrendering the value of the aesthetic? We do not have to subscribe to the view that all art is a separate ontology, its value intrinsic to itself, to ask how we can maintain a place for the aesthetic.

*Reading the Modern British and Irish Novel* explicitly and implicitly proposes the ingredients for a humanistic cultural criticism that has a place for the aesthetic. A humanistic cultural criticism seeks to define cultural configurations that go beyond positivistic influence studies, and to re-create the economic, social, and political world that the authors inhabit. It tries to define an awareness of the cultural position of the critic and to understand interpretive history as a history of awareness – of aesthetic assumptions, political interests, world views – but also as an idiosyncratic history of individual critics. It seeks a dialogue among various social, economic, and historical factors, between literature and history, between literature and the arts. It tries to operate in a dialogic manner but insists on retaining a place for the aesthetic.

I argue for a cultural criticism which explores similarities that go beyond the borderlines between art forms and between national literatures. At the
same time as Modernists were making similar experiments in fiction, Picasso was embarking on Cubism – on scrambling the distinction between foreground and background, on freeing color from the morphology of representation, and on including multiple perspectives on the same subject. Do we not need more courses that juxtapose paintings such as Matisse’s 1910 *Dance II* and its sequel *Music* – with their vermillion figures, blue skies, and green hills – not merely to major texts of British and Irish literature but to roughly contemporary texts of other literatures, such as Mann’s *Death in Venice* (1912)?

My discussions take account of recent developments in theory and cultural studies, including post-colonial, feminist, gay, and ecological perspectives, and show how reading the modern British and Irish novel has changed in the face of the theoretical explosion since the early 1980s. While still a formalist interested in the inextricable relationship of form and content within an imagined ontology, I stress the historical and theoretical framework a bit more than I once did. In each of my readings, I test some of the claims of recent theory, even while articulating the humanistic poetics that underlie my entire critical project for over three decades.

II  Cultural and Historical Contexts: Modernism in Literature and Art

The experiments in technique and theme of Joseph Conrad, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, D. H. Lawrence, and E. M. Forster – as well as T. S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens, and such European counterparts as Thomas Mann and Franz Kafka – parallel the challenges to mimesis of Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, and Paul Klee. Their experiments in color, line, space, and abandonment of representation provided a model for writers who challenged traditional narrative linearity and concepts of lyric. My own story of Modernism is a quarry of memories, recollections, images, and metaphors. This seems appropriate for a tradition that is part elegy, part nostalgia for a time before the fault line between present and past, and part a self-conscious enactment, like Picasso’s collages, of fragmentation.

Modernism in painting took diverse paths. Cubism fractured objects into component planes and dramatized diverse perspectives which the perceiver would be able to reconstruct into the object in space as the painter had imagined it. Surrealists, such as Max Ernst and Giorgio De Chirico, sought to tap the irrational world of dreams and the unconscious. Ernst was interested
in presenting chance meetings and remote realities in a plane that was, according to conventional expectations, unsuitable to those objects. Theo Van Doesburg in *Art Concrete* called for art that was impersonal in execution and based on scientific or mathematical data. Indeed, Jean Metzinger and Albert Gleizes – notably in his book *Du Cubisme* – related Cubism to Einstein’s idea of relativity, a fourth dimension, and Modernist notions of simultaneity of perception. While nineteenth-century realists and naturalists hold nature to be the center of the universe, various symbolists – anti-materialistic, anti-positivistic – rejected rules of reason while exalting feeling, dreams, and mystery. Symbolists followed Schopenhauer, who believed that everything is an infinite succession of transitory phenomena.

Modernism sought new ways of doing what art always does: sharing the immediacy of artistic experience in an effort to connect oneself to the rest of the world. Neither Picasso nor Matisse ever abandoned figure representation. Both held to the belief that art has access to the world; yet their art calls attention to their awareness of the fictionality of art. Art represents – signifies an a priori signified, perhaps a vision of the self or of others and/or of an anterior place and time – but does not copy its subject. Modern art depends on two forms of essentialism. First, often modern art self-consciously and knowingly uses a web of signs – that is, not the artist’s original perceptions but a condensation and intensification that transforms what the artist sees into the essential nature of things; that condensation is mediated by conventions and, often, by a sense of audience expectations. Do we not think of Eliot’s objective correlative when the art critic John Elderfield discusses Matisse’s technique? “The mental image he is painting condenses not the appearance of the subject but the feeling it evokes in him. The painted image that results will therefore correspond to that mental image – will become a transposed, realized form of that mental image – only when it evokes the same emotions that the subject itself did originally.”¹ Second, following Romantic antecedents, Modernism often embraced the view that the response to the nature of things needs to be personal and engaged – a mixture of what the mind perceives and what it creates.

We must not look for reductive consistency in our narrative of Modernism. Modernism depends on the interpretive intelligence of a reader’s perspective. We need to look at the assumption that form discovers meaning from a postmodern point of view that is open to destabilizing such an assumption. But we also need to try to understand the world of modern authors and painters by responding to how they intervene, intersect, transform, and qualify the culture in which they are a part, and how they do so with an intense belief in the inextricable relationship between form and content.
As Charles Altieri notes,

Although the Modernist poets and painters worried a good deal about history as a general phenomenon, for the most part they had little interest in the specific texture of their own historical moment. Theirs was a lonely and, ultimately, self-regarding art, more concerned for the intensity and clarity of its constructed sites than for the social world out of which the sites were made, and to which they had to return for their validation.²

Lacking preconceived metaphysics, Modernism understands artistic creation as self-discovery. The playwright David Mamet once remarked, “What you say influences the way you think, the way you act, not the other way around.”³ The very act of writing the word, painting the canvas, carving the stone – all these formal processes shape the way the artists think and act.

Modernism is a response to cultural crisis. By the 1880s we have Nietzsche’s Gay Science (1882–7) with his contention that God is dead as well as Krafft-Ebing’s revolutionary texts on sexuality; we also have the beginnings of modern physics in the work of J. J. Thomson. All challenged absolutist theories of truth. Let us also recall that Origin of Species appeared in 1859 and Essays and Reviews, which questioned the Bible as revealed history, in 1860. In the period from 1865 to 1870, Karl Marx began to publish Das Kapital, Alfred Nobel invented dynamite, while Otto Von Bismarck and Benjamin Disraeli dominated Europe and colonialism expanded its reach.

Modernism is paradoxically both an ideology of possibility and hope – a positive response to difficult circumstances – and an ideology of despair – a response to excessive faith in industrialism, urbanization, so-called technological progress, and the Great War of 1914 to 1918, called for a time the “War to End All Wars.” Notwithstanding some notable exceptions, such as Woolf’s To the Lighthouse and Between the Acts, the Great War is the absent signifier in much of the literature and art from 1914 to well into the 1920s. What does Claude Monet’s obsession with water lilies in 1917–18 tell us about his historical sense and the position of the artist? Is the presence of the classical in Eliot and Joyce a response to the disorder and chaos of the war? In 1922, the year of The Waste Land and Ulysses, Jean Cocteau’s version of Sophocles’ Antigone – a play set in the aftermath of war – was put on in Paris with sets by Picasso. Yet where is the Great War in either Eliot or Joyce? And what do Stevens, Matisse, and Picasso have to say about the Holocaust? As Paul Fussell writes in The Great War and Modern Memory, “It was a hideous embarrassment to the prevailing Meliorist myth which had dominated the public consciousness for a century. It reversed the idea of Progress.”⁴ Yet it is well to
remember that Arnold’s “Dover Beach” (1859, 1867) speaks of a world without “certitude, nor peace, nor love, nor light” where “ignorant armies clash by night.” In “The Darkling Thrush” (1900), using ironically the traditional Romantic image of the bird’s association with poetry, song, and joy (as in Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale,” Shelley’s “To a Sky-Lark,” Hopkins’s “The Windhover”), Hardy grimly sees the departing century as a skeleton and imagines the thrush throwing itself upon the gloom. Both Hardy and Arnold anticipate the angst and dubiety of Eliot.

In response to the Great War, Matisse’s paintings became more disciplined and less decorative. One might say he responded to despair by finding hope in the formal solutions of his art. Compare the sensuality of *The Red Studio* (1911) with *The Piano Lesson* (1916); as Kenneth Silver writes of the latter, “[Iits] narrow horizontal band of arabesques formed by the continuous frieze of the music stand and the balustrade and, at his right, . . . a tiny Matisse bronze of a lounging nude . . . tauntingly suggests the sensual fulfillment and [aesthetic flights]” of Matisse’s past works. Yet *The Piano Lesson* owes much to the formal rigor of Cubism; Matisse redid it as the less abstract *The Music Lesson* (1917). Picasso reverted to pre-Cubist themes and representation. Note that Matisse and Picasso exhibited jointly at Galerie Paul Guillaume in 1918, as if, in celebration of the war’s end, they would, at least temporarily, suspend their lifelong rivalry.

Modernism, as James Clifford notes, takes “as its problem – and opportunity – the fragmentation and juxtaposition of cultural values.” Isn’t Modernism a search for informing principles that transcend cultures as well as a recognition of both the diversity and continuity of culture? Modernism sought to find an aesthetic order or historic pattern to substitute for the crumbling certainties of the past. Yet at the same time Modernists were aware that the order was elusive – as Eliot put it, fragments to shore against the ruins of their present lives. Certainly *Ulysses*, where Joyce describes a pacifistic, humanistic, urban, family-oriented Jew whose adventures take place within the space of his mind, finds cohesion in both aesthetic order and cultural continuity. Picasso’s *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* – with its ethnographic masks in a European brothel fronted by a still life – affirms a delicate balance between tradition and innovation, between the quest for order and inchoate forces of anarchy and misrule within the work. Yet within each of these seminal texts are strands of irony and disunity, for the fragmentation – the 18 techniques in *Ulysses*, the breakdown of representation and perspective in *Les Demoiselles* – undermine the possibility of a unilateral perspective giving shape and coherence to a single vision.

Modernism goes beyond previous cultures in engaging otherness and questioning Western values. As Clifford notes, in 1900 “‘Culture’ referred to
a single evolutionary process.” He articulates an important aspect of Modernism:

The European bourgeois ideal of autonomous individuality was widely believed to be the natural outcome of a long development, a process that, although threatened by various disruptions, was assumed to be the basic, progressive movement of humanity. By the turn of the century, however, evolutionist confidence began to falter, and a new ethnographic conception of culture became possible. The word began to be used in the plural, suggesting a world of separate, distinctive, and equally meaningful ways of life. The ideal of an autonomous, cultivated subject could appear as a local project, not a \textit{telos} for all humankind.\footnote{7}

Modernism contains the aspirations and idealism of nineteenth-century high culture and the prosaic world of nineteenth-century city life; both are colored by an ironic and self-conscious awareness of limitation. Often convictions are framed by or within an ironic stance, an awareness of the difficulty of fulfilling possibility. Prior to Modernist questioning, the possibility of a homogeneous European culture existed. As Elderfield puts it, “history was not always thought to be quite possibly a species of fiction but once comprised a form of order, and might still.”\footnote{8} In “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” Eliot wrote that tradition meant writing with an historical sense that

compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order . . . No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead. I mean this as a principle of aesthetic, not merely historical, criticism.\footnote{9}

Modernism is inclusive, containing both the aestheticism and complexity of high culture, the straightforwardness and earthiness of working-class culture, and an ironic awareness of its own self-consciousness. Just as writers like Thomas Hardy and D. H. Lawrence not only include the working class, agrarian workers, and miners but focus on their lives and aspirations, Modernist painters focus on the vernacular in painting – Cézanne’s card players, Degas’s laundresses, Picasso’s whores, café life, and circus performers. Yet writers such as William Butler Yeats, Joyce, and Lawrence also believed in the power of art and in the artist as visionary prophet. Indeed, Yeats and Lawrence
flirted with totalitarianism, and Ezra Pound embraced it. Joyce believed that he – the artist hero – along with his humanistic, pacifistic, family-oriented, secular Jew Bloom, could be the heir to Charles Parnell as the hero that Ireland required. Justifying the Dadaists and his own retreat to Zurich during World War I, Hans Arp wrote, “We were seeking an art based on fundamentals, to cure the madness of the age, and a new order of things that would restore the balance between heaven and hell.” Yeats and Joyce derived from an Irish tradition which believed in the power of art; it believed that artists could become possessed by inspirational forces and reveal hidden truths. Phillip Marcus argues, “As seers, the bards had direct access to ideal images. Viewed historically, those images were to be found in the past, closer in time to the Edenic or pre-lapsarian state, and in sacred texts where they had been embodied by bardic predecessors and preserved through a tenaciously conservative tradition.”

Modernism is often a dialogue between Platonism and empiricism. In contrast to Eliot’s empiricism, one strand of Modernism – what we might call the Platonic strain – believes in the power of art to reveal higher truths, invisible reality. Yeats, a Neoplatonist, felt that Joyce and Pound were seduced and enslaved by whatever happened to enter their minds. For Yeats, whom we now categorize as a Modernist, Modernism often meant values he ostentatiously rejected: positivistic science, Newtonian physics, pragmatism, democracy, and a kind of naturalism he abhorred. Rather naively, Yeats articulated a credo of purity of mind and ascetic contemplation; he mourned the gradual loss since the eighteenth century of an organic community and a systematic worldview. He would have agreed with Klee: “Today the reality of visible objects has been revealed and the belief has been expressed that, in relation to the universe, the visible is only an isolated case and that other truths exist and are in the majority.”

Modern painting is a journey toward abstraction; yet abstraction expresses meaning, and often – as Kandinsky argued in Concerning the Spiritual in Art – transcendental ideas. He believed that contemporary humans had lost their ability to see the spiritual and that his art could awaken dormant imaginative, intuitive, and inspirational powers. Abstraction was often part of the Symbolist movement, which sought to go beyond traditional representation to create higher realities and discover cosmic order. As Pepe Karmel writes, “The Symbolists rejected the scientific rationalism of late 19th-century society. Instead they sought new sources of faith, turning to pagan myth, Oriental religion and the childlike, uncritical Christianity of peasants. Or they decided that the real truth of human nature lay in the instinctual drives toward death and reproduction.” Kandinsky was influenced by Paul Gauguin’s primitivism and mystical imagery and by Matisse’s freeing color from naturalism and his
integrated painting, theater, music, and poetry. Influenced by Scriabin, he wrote *The Yellow Sound* (*Der Gelbe Klang*); he used colored lights: yellow is a “worldly color,” while blue signifies spirituality. Like Diaghilev’s Russian ballets, Matisse’s *Dance* and *Music* are efforts to integrate painting, dance, and music.

One cannot cite an exact moment when color and form begin to share with subject the focus of painting. When we see Vincent Van Gogh’s *La Salle de danse à Arles* (1888), we know something has happened and that explosive blocks of color, seething dynamic line, the material and energy of paint have changed the very nature of painting. Painting expands infinitely until one subject is paint, whether it is Camille Pissarro’s layering or Monet’s experiments with light. When reading literature we always recuperate the word into subject. Yet, in modern painting, too, the stress on formal experimentation and stylistic innovation does not overwhelm the centrality of the subject: even such an abstract painter as Klee believed in the centrality of the human subject. Finally, for Klee, “Art does not render the invisible; it renders the visible.”

Imagism in its effort to catch the response to experience at an intense moment parallels Impressionism – recall that Monet was already painting his water lilies in 1912 to 1914 – and in its formal rigor, precision, and effort to achieve objectivity parallels Postimpressionism. In his 1913 manifesto, Ezra Pound called for hardness (“Direct treatment of the ‘thing,’ whether subjective or objective”), exactness (“To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation”), and cadence (“As regarding rhythm; to compose in sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of the metronome”). In Pound’s two-line poem “In a Station of the Metro,” he juxtaposes his response to an experience with an image that renders it: “The apparition of these faces in the crowd / Petals, on a wet, black bough.” The poem evaluates and structures the experience as an epiphanic moment of revelation for the speaker. In the characteristic Modernist way, it is a poem about looking. Even if the first time we read from left to right and down the page, we can choose in these short poems – as a kind of exercise in seeing – to let our eye rove on the page to discover other patterns. Our memories of texts, particularly short texts, are rarely in narrative order but usually are partly visual, even if the visual may have the distortions of dreamscape.

Modernist texts such as *Ulysses*, *The Secret Agent*, *Mrs Dalloway*, *The Waste Land*, and “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” show the intricate network that holds together the modern city. The city – and the texts about the city – rescues space from neutrality, laying invisible tracks of human connection, even while highlighting terrible moments of marginalization, isolation, and loneliness. The self is cut loose from its spiritual attachments, often from
family, and from a common place, such as a village or a piece of land. The Jews – embraced by Joyce, rejected by Eliot and Pound – become an image of the deracinated, rootless self. Eliot’s pejorative image of the Jew in *Gerontion* is the obverse of Bloom:

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the jew squats on the window sill, the owner,
Spawned in some estaminet of Antwerp,
Blistered in Brussels, patched and peeled in London.
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Modernism responded to modern urban culture. As Conrad and Eliot – and Dickens before them – saw, the city can be huge, drab, dirty. When Eliot writes in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” of

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half-deserted streets,
The muttering retreats
Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels
And sawdust restaurants with oyster shells,
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he asks us to recompose the city’s fragments into our mental neighborhood. The vast interconnections of elaborate canvases with their separate neighborhoods, such as *Moroccans* and *Guernica* – or Eliot’s “Prufrock” and *The Waste Land* – as well as novels with one-word titles that imply pulling together vast networks of relationships, such as *Ulysses* and *Nostromo*, may be the result of living in cities or imagining the city as a labyrinth. Such large canvases and texts are pulled together by a willful and often visionary overview. While leaving the city to experience cultural otherness and difference, Matisse, and Gauguin before him, never left its imaginative environs. Underneath Gauguin’s Tahitian paintings and Matisse’s Moroccan paintings is the wish to resolve the difference, diversity, busyness, and commotion of urban life into a unified and even reductive picture.

### III Modern Art as Quest for Order

Modernism stressed cultural and personal fragmentation and sought techniques to express this idea. Emphasizing how each of us is changing every moment, Henri Bergson wrote in *Creative Evolution,*
Duration is the continuous progress of the past which gnaws into the future and which swells as it advances . . . The piling up of the past upon the past goes on without relaxation. In reality, the past is preserved by itself, automatically. In its entirety, probably, it follows us at every instant; all that we have felt, thought, and willed from our earliest infancy is there, leaning over the present which is about to join it, pressing against the portals of consciousness that would fain leave it outside.\textsuperscript{16}

Bergson continues: “What are we in fact, what is our character, if not the condensation of the history we have lived from our birth?”\textsuperscript{17} Note the parallel to Bakhtin’s concept that when each of us speaks or writes, our prior systems of language voluntarily and involuntarily manifest themselves in a heteroglossic voice. Given the multiplicity and ever-changing nature of self, each of us has multiple selves and points of view; that shared perception of Modernism is a cause of the dramatized consciousness of James and Conrad, Joyce’s diverse techniques in \textit{Ulysses}, and the development of Cubism. Is there not a continuity between Oscar Wilde’s concept of lying and Henri Bergson’s concept of duration in their mutual effort to transform the tick-tock of passing time – what the Greeks called \textit{chronos} – into significant time or \textit{kairos}? As a way of trying to transcend time Wilde, hounded for his homosexuality, created in \textit{The Picture of Dorian Gray} a mask – an invented lie – of the aesthete and decadent who flouts conventions of society. Indeed, Wilde poignantly did the same in his own life.\textsuperscript{18}

Painters, too, search in the forms of art for a coherent identity. In \textit{Notes of A Painter}, a text begun in November 1908, Matisse wrote, “Underlying this succession of moments which constitutes their superficial existence of being and things, and which is continually modifying and transforming them, one can search for a truer, more essential character, which the artist will seize so that he may give reality a more lasting impression.”\textsuperscript{19} We see the obsessive presence of the past in Matisse’s paintings, but in \textit{The Red Studio} – full of references to his prior work – we also see the promise of the future in the plant as well as in the crayons and pencils that will be used to create a work of art. The clock without hands suspends time while paradoxically calling attention to the perpetual presence of time, and expresses an awareness that clock time is an arbitrary measurement imposed by humans. Such self-consciousness about the self as an artist, revealed as self-referentiality, is characteristic of Modernism. It is a feature of Eliot’s and Stevens’s poetry and is exemplified by the continuity of Marlow and Stephen Dedalus in the works of Conrad and Joyce. Thus in the “Scylla and Charybdis” chapter of \textit{Ulysses}, Joyce calls attention to the presence of Shakespeare the artist in the latter’s
Introduction

It was until recently argued that Matisse and Picasso represent diverse streams of Modernism. Never far from the here and now or from bourgeois desires, Matisse wanted, we thought, always to maintain a dialogue with and response to nature, while Picasso sought to show that the imagination could do what it wished when it wished. Yet as the recent Picasso–Matisse exhibition in London, Paris, and New York showed, these distinctions hold no more than those formerly applied to the following pairs of writers: Lawrence and Joyce, Eliot and Stevens, E. M. Forster and Woolf – with the second member of each pair emphasizing the independence of art from representation.

Yet in some ways the Modernists thought of themselves as essentialists and often tried to insulate art from history and even to apotheosize the aesthetic. While aestheticism is an ironic comment on materialism, it is also another form of essentialism. Why did so many Modernists recuse themselves from the Great War and from history itself, while finding refuge in inner systems, fantasy versions of politics, or art as fetish? Modernism’s focus on the past can be a way of eschewing present-day politics and history. At times the retreat to art is an escape from history and leads to a kind of historical myopia. In *Death in Venice* Mann analyzes the necessary relationship between the two. Among other things, *Death in Venice, Metamorphosis*, and *The Death of Ivan Ilych* are about the impossibility of escaping history. The effort to eschew history by Matisse, Picasso, Stevens, and Eliot has been ironized by history. That the present is a relentless fury is an important Modernist theme; yet, paradoxically, at times Modernists have a myopic view of the past. Mann dramatizes how Aschenbach idiosyncratically turns myth and history into versions of his own life; Mann weaves a perspective in which Aschenbach, imagining himself to be Socrates, inevitably is caught in the web of his own making. In his understanding of how we myopically turn the subjective into seemingly objective reality, Mann provides a postmodern critique on Modernism. Yet paradoxically – and inevitably – he does the very thing he critiques in Aschenbach; he creates a myth out of his own experience. Indeed, he is an ironic Dedalus, a maker of his own labyrinth.

For the great Modernists, art was a quest; as Jack Flam writes of Matisse and Cézanne, “great painting was not merely a matter of stylization and technique but the result of deeply held convictions about vision in relation to life.” While the impulse to make oneself the subject of one’s own art includes Rembrandt’s self-portraits, the impulse crystallized in the nineteenth century with Courbet’s *L’Atelier* (1854–5) – known as the “Real Allegory Determining a Phase of Seven Years of my Artistic Life” – with its intense focus
on Courbet at work. In the middle of that painting is a godlike Courbet with a model— if I may quote Julian Barnes, “reinventing the world. And perhaps this helps answer the question of why Courbet is painting a landscape in his studio rather than en plein air: Because he is doing more than reproducing the known, established world, he is creating it himself. From now on, the painting says, it is the artist who creates the world rather than God.” Does not this description recall Stephen’s argument about what the artist does in the “Scylla and Charybdis” section of Ulysses, and remind us of how Eliot’s artist creates order from cultural and personal fragments?

To suggest his own biographical relationship to Ulysses, Joyce has Stephen propose his expressive theory of the relationship between Shakespeare’s art and life. What makes Shakespeare a man of genius is that he encompassed in his vision the “all in all in all of us” (IX, 1049–50). Joyce re-creates Shakespeare according to his own experience of him, and thus becomes the father of his own artistic father and the artist whose imagination is so inclusive and vast that it contains the “all in all” of Shakespeare plus the very substantial addition—or, in current terminology, the supplement—of his own imagination. Like Joyce, Shakespeare used the details of everyday life for his subject: “All events brought grist to his mill” (IX, 748). The major creative artist discovers in his actual experience the potential within his imagination: “He found in the world without as actual what was in his world within as possible” (IX, 1041–2). To activate that potential, the artist must have as wide a range of experience as possible; to get beyond the limitations of his own ego in order to achieve the impersonality and objectivity that is necessary for dramatic art, his imagination must have intercourse—and the sexual metaphor is, I think, essential to understanding Joyce’s aesthetic—with the world: “His own image to a man with that queer thing genius is the standard of all experience, material and moral” (IX, 432–3).

Joyce, like Mann, is aware of the irony of his youthful artist comparing himself to the master artist or thinker. Joyce’s relationship to Stephen in “Scylla and Charybdis” reaches a turning point when he twice penetrates Stephen’s mind to show him briefly imposing dramatic form upon his experience by using the traditional typography of plays to organize his monologue (Ulysses, IX, 684ff, 893ff). In the second and longer instance, a play that lasts little more than a page, Stephen is the major character speaking to his friends about the same issues he has been discussing throughout the chapter. And the entire chapter puts the argument about the relationship between the author’s life and his work in the form of a virtual monodrama. If, according to Stephen’s theory, Shakespeare’s transparently disguising his identity in his early work foreshadows A Portrait of the Artist, the more subtle disguises of biography in Hamlet anticipate the technique of Ulysses.
Chapter 1

“I Was the World in Which I Walked”: The Transformation of the British and Irish Novel, 1890–1930

I Introduction

In the Sculpture Garden of the Museum of Modern Art stands Rodin’s large 1897 statue, Monument to Balzac. The imposing figure of Balzac is 10 feet tall, and it rests on a 5-foot-high slab. At first, the observer may wonder what this seemingly realistic piece is doing in the citadel of Modernism. But gradually one realizes that the work is a crystallizing image of Modernism, for it depicts the artist as outcast and hero. Towering above onlookers, Balzac is wearing an expression of scornful magisterial dignity. With back stiffly yet regally arched past a 90-degree angle, Balzac looks into the distance and the future as if oblivious and indifferent to the opinions of the Lilliputians observing him from below. The large mustache, massive brows, flowing hair, and enormous ears and nose all emphasize the figure’s immense physical stature. As observers we crane our necks to see the features of this commanding figure whose gigantic head is disproportionate to his body. His features are boldly outlined but not precisely modeled. His huge head dominates the massive form; the body enwrapped in a cloak is a taut cylinder; the only visible feature is the feet, which are in motion as if they were going to walk off the slab. Indeed, one foot actually overhangs the slab as if it were about to depart. In the geometric shape of an isosceles triangle, the intimidating figure asserts the dependence of content upon form.