

Early Twentieth-Century Fiction
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(Murray 019, Mondays 2:30–4:30)

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(36 Union St. 217, Wednesdays 12:00–2:00)

September 8, 2014. Fiction and aestheticism.

office hours

- ▶ AG today and every Monday 2:30–4:30, Murray 019
- ▶ ED Wednesdays 12:00–2:00, 36 Union 217
- ▶ you do not have to e-mail ahead
- ▶ you do not have to have a specific question/problem

review: what happened? (I)

Answer I: modernism

- ▶ break with traditions (narrative, moral, ...)
- ▶ aesthetic disruptions / shock effects
- ▶ interpretive difficulty

review: what happened? (2)

Answer 2: literary modernity

- ▶ explosion of quantity of novels 1880–
- ▶ new reading publics (“reading culture”)
- ▶ diversity of writers

today's question ...s

- ▶ What should fiction do? What is it for? Is fiction an “art”?
- ▶ What is “realism”? What is its opposite?

legitimacy

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“The Art of Fiction” (1884), 572



Henry James
(1843–1916)

fiction: sketchy!

These books [the “works of fiction”] are written chiefly to the young, the ignorant, and the idle, to whom they serve as lectures of conduct, and introductions into life. They are the entertainment of minds unfurnished with ideas, and therefore easily susceptible of impressions; not fixed by principles, and therefore easily following the current of fancy; not informed by experience, and consequently open to every false suggestion and partial account.

Samuel Johnson, *Rambler* no. 4 (1750)

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- ▶ Society of Authors founded in UK (1884)
- ▶ first literary agents (1890s)
- ▶ international copyright (1889, 1891, 1909)

(lessons in snark)

For the rest I should find it difficult to dissent from any one of these recommendations. At the same time, I should find it difficult positively to assent to them, with the exception, perhaps, of the injunction as to entering one's notes in a common-place book. (579)

legitimation problems

“Art”...is supposed in certain circles to have some vaguely injurious effect upon those who make it an important consideration....That, I think, represents the manner in which the latent thought of many people who read novels as an exercise in skipping would explain itself if it were to become articulate. (575–76)

Certainly this [seriousness of the novel] might sometimes be doubted in presence of the enormous number of works of fiction that appeal to the credulity of our generation... a commodity so quickly and easily produced. (577)

taste

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The young aspirant in the line of fiction whom we continue to imagine will do nothing without taste, for in that case his freedom would be of little use to him. (587)

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Discussion

What are the characteristics of James's version of realism? Consider both prescription and proscription.

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(mimesis and diegesis)
- ▶ “Try to be one of the people on whom nothing is lost!” (581)
- ▶ The air or reality (solidity of specification) seems to me to be the supreme virtue of a novel. (581)
(reality effect/effet de réel—Roland Barthes)

rejecting realism



Oscar Wilde
(1854–1900)

As a method, realism is a complete failure. (25, 54)

The ancient historians gave us delightful fiction in the form of fact; the modern novelist presents us with dull facts under the guise of fiction. (8)

“The Decay of Lying” (1889; revised 1891)

art vs. life

“And as for Life, she is the solvent that breaks up Art, the enemy that lays waste her house.” (20)

“Art begins with abstract decoration with purely imaginative and pleasurable work dealing with what is unreal and non-existent.” (21–22)

aestheticism

Those who find beautiful meanings in beautiful things are the cultivated. For these there is hope. They are the elect to whom beautiful things mean only Beauty.

Preface to *Dorian Gray*



Wilde against realism

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I can quite understand your objection to art being treated as a mirror. You think it would reduce genius to the position of a cracked looking-glass. But you don't mean to say that you seriously believe that Life imitates Art, that Life in fact is the mirror, and Art the reality? (31)

This idea...really blew my mind. (“MM”)

the autonomy of art

(*auto-*: self; *nomos*: law)

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The only form of lying that is absolutely beyond reproach is Lying for its own sake, and the highest development of this is, as we have already pointed out, Lying in Art. (52)

The very condition of any art is style. (24)

Wilde-James

Discussion

What does Wilde's account of fiction have *in common* with James's?

James: autonomy

The good health of an art which undertakes so immediately to reproduce life must demand that it be perfectly free. It lives upon exercise, and the very meaning of exercise is freedom. The only obligation to which in advance we may hold a novel, without incurring the accusation of being arbitrary, is that it be interesting. (“Art of Fiction,” 577)

James: autonomy (2)

We must grant the artist his subject, his idea, his *donnée*; our criticism is applied only to what he makes of it. (584)

Art is essentially selection. (584)

Selection...is the very spirit of art. (Wilde, 23)

Questions of art are questions...of execution; questions of morality are quite another affair (James, 591).

There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all. (Wilde, "Preface")

next

Read “The Jolly Corner”

(thinking about James’s and Wilde’s arguments)

back to theory next Monday: readings up on Sakai by tomorrow