

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 15, 2014. “Modern.”

review

- ▶ Jamesian style: delayed specification of referents
- ▶ making an impression
- ▶ why does James make you sweat?
- ▶ the experience of expatriation: distance and lateness

modernity from outside?

“It’s only a question of what fantastic, yet perfectly possible, development of my own nature I mayn’t have missed.” (“Jolly Corner,” 501)

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The differences, the newnesses, the queernesses, above all the big-nesses... He saw that actually he had allowed for nothing; he missed what he would have been sure of finding, he found what he would never have imagined. Proportions and values were upside-down...the “swagger” things, the modern, the monstrous, the famous things...were exactly his sources of dismay. (491–492)

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Such an identity fitted his at *no* point, made its alternative monstrous.... The face was the face of a stranger.... for the stranger, whoever he might be, evil, odious, blatant, vulgar, had advanced as for aggression, and he knew himself give ground. (519)

gaining interest

[Alice:] “I had accepted him....Before, for the interest of his difference—yes.” (525)

[Brydon's state was] that of a man who has gone to sleep on some news of a great inheritance, and then, after dreaming it away, after profaning it with matters strange to it, has waked up again to serenity of certitude and has only to lie and watch it grow. (521)

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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)

the question ...s

- ▶ What makes fiction “modern”?
- ▶ Who gets to say?

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THE GERMAN EMPIRE, 1867-1914

and the German Unity Movement

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MODERN NOVELS.

In making any survey, even the freest and looser, of modern fiction it is difficult not to take it for granted that the modern practice of the art is somehow an improvement on the old. With their simple tools and primitive materials, it might be said, Fielding did well and Jane Austen even better, but compare their opportunities with ours! Their masterpieces certainly have a strange air of simplicity. And yet the analogy between literature and the process, to choose an example, of making bicycles scarcely holds good beyond the first glance. It is doubtful whether in the course of the centuries, though we have learnt much about making ourselves, we have learnt anything about making literature. We do not come to write better; all that we can be said to do is to

for its soul. Of course, no single word reaches the centre of three separate targets. In the case of Mr. Wells it falls notably wide of the mark. And yet even in his case it indicates to our thinking the fatal alloy in his genius, the great clod of clay that has got itself mixed up with the purity of his aspiration. But Mr. Bennett is perhaps the worst culprit of the three, inasmuch as he is worst for the best workman. He can make a book so well constructed and solid in its craftsmanship that it is difficult for the most exacting of critics to see through what think or crvice decay can creep in. There is not so much as a draught between the frames of the windows, or a crack in the boards. And yet—if life should refuse to live there? That is a risk which the creator

this, the essential thing, has moved off, or on, and refuses to be contained any longer in such ill-fitting vestments as we provide. Nevertheless we go on perseveringly, unconsciously, constructing one thirty-two chapters after a design which more and more ceases to resemble the vision in our minds. So much of the enormous labour of proving the solidity, the illogicalness of life, of the story is not merely labour thrown away but labour misplaced to the extent of obscuring and blotting out the light of the conception. The mediocrity of most novels seems to arise from a conviction on the part of the writer that unless his plot provides scenes of tragedy, comedy, and excitement, an air of probability so impeccable that it all his figures were to come to life they would find themselves dressed down to the last button in the fashion of the hour, he has failed in his duty to the public. If this, roughly as we have stated it, represents his vision, his mediocrity may be said to be natural rather than imposed; but as often as not we may suspect some moment of hesitation in which the question suggests itself whether life is like this after all? Is it not possible that the accent falls a little differently, that the moment of importance came before or after, that, if one were free, and could set down what one chose, there would be no plot, little probability, and a vague general confusion in which the clear-cut features of the tragic, the comic, the passionate, and the lyrical were dissipated beyond the possibility of separate recognition? The mind, exposed to the ordinary course of life, receives upon its surface a myriad impressions—trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms, composing in their sum what we might venture to call life itself; and to figure further as the semi-transparent envelope, or luminous halo, surrounding us

Woolf: strategy (1)

Certain paths seem to lead to fertile land, others to the dust and the desert; and of this perhaps it may be worth while to attempt some account. (146)

The proper stuff of fiction is a little other than custom would have us believe it. (150)

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did not the reading of *Ulysses* suggest [i.e., if only it didn't suggest] how much of life is excluded or ignored (152)

Woolf: strategy (2)

Any method is right, every method is right, that expresses what we wish to express. (152)

Everything is the proper stuff of fiction. (154)

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Everything is the proper stuff of fiction. (154)

These three writers are materialists. It is because they are concerned not with the spirit but with the body that they have disappointed us. (147)

Woolf: prescription (1)

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Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad impressions—trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. (149–150)

Woolf: prescription (2)

If a writer were a free man and not a slave, if he could write what he chose... there would be no plot, no comedy, no tragedy, no love interest or catastrophe in the accepted style, and perhaps not a single button sewn on as the Bond Street tailors would have it. (150)

Mr Joyce is...concerned at all costs to reveal the flickerings of that innermost flame...and in order to preserve it he disregards with complete courage whatever seems to him adventitious. (151)

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Early criticism: Wilson

The literary history of our time is to a great extent that of the development of Symbolism and of its fusion or conflict with Naturalism. (Edmund Wilson, *Axel's Castle* [1931; New York: FSG, 2004], 21.)

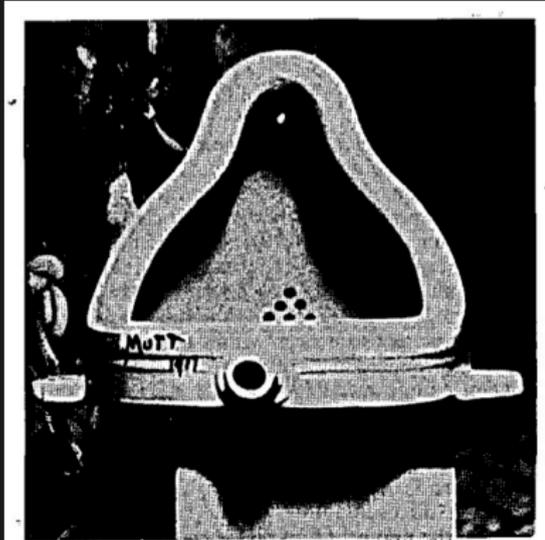
discussion (1)

Where does “The Jolly Corner” (1907) fit in Woolf’s map of modern fiction? Think about her discussions of “Mr Wells, Mr Bennett, and Mr Galsworthy”—and of Joyce and Chekhov.

Bürger: description (I)

Although in different ways, both sacral and courtly art are integral to the life praxis of the recipient. As cult and representational objects, works of art are put to a specific use. This requirement no longer applies to the same extent to bourgeois art. (48)

Bürger: description (2)



Marcel Duchamp, *Fountain by R. Mutt*, 1917. © by ADAGP, Paris, 1982.

The European avant-garde movements can be defined as an attack on the status of art in bourgeois society. What is negated is not an earlier form of art (a style) but art as an institution that is unassociated with the life praxis of men. (49)

Bürger: prescription (I)

They [avant-gardists] assent to the aestheticists' rejection of the world and its means-end rationality...[but they also] attempt to organize a new life praxis from a basis in art. (49)

Bürger: prescription (2)

This [reintegration] has not occurred...[Instead we have] pulp fiction and commodity aesthetics...a literature whose primary aim it is to impose a particular kind of consumer behavior on the reader is in fact practical, though not in the sense the avant-gardistes intended. Here, literature ceases to be an instrument of emancipation and becomes one of subjection. (54)

Casanova: description (I)

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high renown
well endowed
central
metropolitan
up to date

low renown
deprived
peripheral
provincial
behind the times

Casanova: description (I)

high renown	low renown
well endowed	deprived
central	peripheral
metropolitan	provincial
up to date	behind the times

The only boundary—at once abstract, real, and necessary—that provincial writers are agreed in recognizing is what I have called the Greenwich meridian of literature. (95)

Casanova: description (2)

We only know that certain gratitudes and hostilities inspire us; that certain paths seem to lead to fertile land, others to the dust and the desert.
(Woolf, 146)

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We only know that certain gratitudes and hostilities inspire us; that certain paths seem to lead to fertile land, others to the dust and the desert. (Woolf, 146)

The only true moderns, the only ones to fully recognize and know the literature of the present, are those who are aware of...this system of literary timekeeping. (Casanova, 94)

Casanova: prescription

The success of newcomers to literary space and time in breaking into the ranks of the established moderns, and earning for themselves the right to take part in debates over the definition of the latest modernity, therefore depends to some extent on their familiarity with the most recent innovations in form and technique. (91)

(Casanova criticized)

Casanova thus fails to comprehend the real nature of the expansion and rearrangement of this until then largely European space in the course of the philological revolution [of the 18th century]. It is through the philological knowledge revolution—the “discovery” of the classical languages of the East, the invention of the linguistic family tree whose basic form is still with us today...—that non-Western textual traditions made their first entry as literature, sacred and secular, into the international literary space....This moment...is mistaken by Casanova for a redrawing of the internal cultural map of Europe rather than as a reorganization that is planetary in nature. (Aamir R. Mufti, “Orientalism and the Institution of World Literatures,” *Critical Inquiry* 36 [2010]: 459)

discussion (2)

How do Woolf's, Bürger's, and Casanova's accounts of what makes literature modern differ? Use examples from their texts to think about contrasts either in description or prescription. Is there a unifying factor?

next: back to the future

- ▶ *Heart of Darkness* (focus on pts. 1–2)