The Modern Novel
A Short Introduction

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CHAPTER 1

When and Why: The Rise of the Modern Novel

The "New Novel," circa 1914

He was "the master": that was what young writers called Henry James, who was, by 1900 or so, master of the art of fiction. Not only had he mastered the art; in a sense, he also made it, by helping to prove that fiction was in fact an art-form. It hadn't always been so: before the day of James's early novels – *Washington Square* and *The Portrait of a Lady*, for example, published in 1880–1 – people did not tend to put fiction on a par with poetry, music, or painting. Those were serious arts; the novel, by contrast, was something less – entertaining, and edifying in its way, but not art. But by the 1880s this had begun to change, particularly in the work of one writer often called the father of modern fiction: Gustave Flaubert. In *Madame Bovary* (1857) and other works, Flaubert showed James and the rest of the world that fiction could become a matter of fine artistic planning and execution – of stories intensely imagined, carefully framed, ambiguous in meaning, and intricate in their philosophical designs. This deliberate artistry was of course also at work elsewhere, for example in the Russian writer Ivan Turgenev, whose *Fathers and Sons* (1862) brought to the novel a new intensity of emotion, a newly precise kind of observation, a perfect combination of the complex and the simple, and a bracing nihilism; in the English novelist George Eliot, whose *Middlemarch* (1871) made society's structures an object of keen scientific and moral scrutiny; in the American writer Nathaniel Hawthorne, whose *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) gave fiction's emotional life rich new symbolic and dramatic power. These and other self-consciously artful writers were great

influences on Henry James when he set out to elevate fiction to the higher status it would enjoy as a form of modern art. Which he did not just by writing beautiful books, but by explaining exactly how fiction could *transform* life.

In an essay called "The art of fiction" (1884), James wrote that fiction could even create reality, or add to its significance, and that it deserved "aesthetic" status. He insisted that "fiction is one of the *fine* arts, deserving in its turn all the honours and emoluments that have been hitherto reserved for the successful profession of music, poetry, painting, architecture," and by saying why and how, he reflected a turning point in the history of fiction.[1] Specifically, he pushed the point implied in the imaginative intensity and fine scrutiny of Flaubert, Eliot, and others: that fiction was not just an entertaining description of life, but something that could "compete with life" and improve upon it, capture life for finer purposes. This exaltation – this new mission for the fictional imagination – was crucial to the birth of the modern novel, because it meant fiction could redeem life, by refining, enriching, or intensifying it. As others came to agree with James, or to come to similar conclusions by other means, the novel would transform, from a familiar form of entertainment into a forum for new realities.

What James himself did toward this end was enrich the "consciousness" of the novel. Never before had a novelist ventured so far into the heads of characters, and never had a novelist so much to report about the complexity, subtlety, and limitlessness of what he found there. Less artful fiction would spend much less time with characters' thoughts and feelings, and far more time on plot. Indeed, thoughts and feelings would come up only insofar as they could advance the story. But in James's fiction, "consciousness" was itself the important story. For him – and for many novelists of the future – fiction had meaning only to the extent that its characters were "finely aware and richly responsible," and only to the extent that the novelist could trace all the details of their fine mental awareness. "Their being finely aware . . . *makes* absolutely the intensity of their adventure, gives the maximum of sense to what befalls them," and endows the novel with the richest reality.[2]

One provocation of James's interest in consciousness was contemporary psychology's new theory of mind. Psychology had begun to see

thought in a new way, less as a matter of deliberate units of attention and more as an unconscious, mixed flow. In *Principles of Psychology* (1890) by William James (Henry's brother, and Gertrude Stein's teacher), consciousness is described as "of a teeming multiplicity of objects and relations," flowing like a stream: "Consciousness, then, does not appear to itself chopped up in bits . . . It is nothing jointed; it flows. A 'river' or a 'stream' are the metaphors by which it is most naturally described. *In talking of it hereafter, let us call it the stream of thought, of consciousness, or of subjective life.*"[3] This way of thinking about consciousness influenced Henry James's sense of its complexity (though the influence probably worked in the other direction as well), and as we will see it would later encourage writers to write in a "stream of consciousness" style. And this way of thinking became the dominant one in psychology, which now saw mental life as something far more obscure and fluid, far less even and coherent, than people had presumed it to be. Thoughts built themselves up out of sensations and perceptions in precarious ways; desires were often unknown to those who felt them, or likely to change in unpredictable ways. As Judith Ryan says in *The Vanishing Subject: Early Psychology and Literary Modernism*, although it had once seemed stable, now "the self [was] no more than a bundle of sensory impressions precariously grouped together and constantly threatened with possible dissolution."[4] These new psychological discoveries posed a problem: if the mind was now less subject to coherent and straightforward explanations, how did you describe it? Fiction gave an answer. Fiction, in fact, seemed in some ways to be the best place to develop the styles and perspectives necessary to illustrate and communicate the strange life of the mind.

The modern novel developed new ways to dramatize thought, to pattern out slippery sequences of feeling, to get behind eyes limited by moral blindness or keen with insight; it developed the new styles and tactics necessary to do justice to the mind's "dissolving" complexity. These James brought to bear – in *The Ambassadors* (1903), for example, one of his last great works. The plot of *The Ambassadors* is fairly simple. A young American man has gone to Europe and, to the dismay of his family, not come back. Another man is sent to retrieve him (to serve, that is, as the family's ambassador). The second man, however, is bewitched by Europe as well, and does not do his job: he stays too.

Beyond this minimal plot, however, there is a maximum of psychological inquiry. Motivations, feelings, decisions, and speculations come in for descriptions of endless nuance.

For example, early in the novel, when Lambert Strether has first arrived in Europe, he meets an old friend, and through "deep consciousness of the bearing of his companion," comes to a series of "finely aware" realizations. What he perceives about her is her "expensive subdued suitability" – the way she seems to have made excellent choices, which tell Strether he might do the same. Just before this moment, he has been newly aware of the need to put himself together; after it, he senses he will know better how to do so:

> Nothing could have been odder than Strether's sense of himself as at that moment launched in something of which the sense would be quite disconnected from the sense of his past and which was literally beginning there and then. It had begun in fact already . . . with a sharper survey of the elements of Appearance than he had for a long time been moved to make. He had during those moments felt these elements to be not so much to his hand as he should have liked, and then had fallen back on the thought that they were precisely a matter as to which help was supposed to come for what he was about to do. He was about to go up to London, so that hat and necktie might wait. What had come as straight to him as a ball in a well-played game – and caught moreover not less neatly – was just the air, in the person of his friend, of having seen and chosen, the air of achieved possession of those vague qualities and quantities that collectively figured to him as the advantage snatched from lucky chances.

Strether's fine consciousness catches the air of his friend's perfection and plans some more perfect future for himself; major changes happen in minute discriminations. These movements in his mind are much more important than his real trip to London. The voyages of consciousness replace any real journeys as the focus of the story, and James proves his point about the art of fiction, for once the "real" story gets replaced by plots of the mind, fiction becomes a more aesthetically intense "adventure."

But the "real" story does not really get replaced. It is just that the sense of what is "real" has changed. James's novels are not mental fantasies; in fact, in the depths of the human mind, they find a more profound reality. This is typical: the modern novel begins here as an effort

not only to make fiction an art, but to make the art of fiction a better measure of reality. For James, this combination mainly meant "consciousness," and how it could refine psychological truth. Art got finer, and reality richer, each in turn. For James's contemporaries, this same kind of combination happened in different ways.

Joseph Conrad also widened the scope of the novel in these opposite directions, but for him the result was a kind of fiction more aesthetically vivid and more actively political. Conrad took the novel to Africa, to Malaysia, to South America, and used it as a way of reporting back on imperialism's corruption of western ideals. Most famously in *Heart of Darkness* (1902), Conrad revealed the evils of imperial exploitation and aggression, showing how principles that seemed fine "at home" were annihilating forces for corruption in the imperial powers' "outposts of progress." But these bracingly modern revelations would not have made for modern novels were it not for the particular approach Conrad cultivated. He felt that too much fiction lacked vivacity. He thought that its job, first and foremost, was to describe true physical and sensory life in vivid detail – and that everything else could only follow from that. He felt that fiction demanded "a single-minded attempt to render the highest kind of justice to the visible universe, by bringing to light the truth, manifold and one, underlying its every aspect"; his task, he wrote, was "by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel – it is, before all, to make you *see*." Only if a novelist really tried to "make you see" could he make you understand and believe, and so Conrad paid elaborate attention to the conjuring of vivid sensory images. These, he felt, could not only make you understand and believe, but also make you feel that you belong. They could produce in the world of readers a sense of *solidarity* – of human togetherness, that "latent feeling of fellowship with all creation" – and perhaps in that way fiction could counteract (in its form) the problems of evil Conrad saw around the world. It was in this combination of political content and sensory form – vivid seeing resulting in "solidarity" – that Conrad's fiction set out to reflect the modern world and yet also to shape it.[5]

What "outposts of progress" were to Conrad, the world of wealth was to Edith Wharton. In a very different place, she too saw corruption and annihilation: in elite America, where all values seemed to have given way to that of money alone. In *The House of Mirth* (1905), a beautiful young woman waits a little too long to get married.

Marriage for Lily Bart is a pressing concern, however, because she does not have much money, and her elite social world demands it. But she stalls, not wanting to marry for money, and she stalls too long, with disastrous results: bad luck not only keeps her unwed, but sinks her into poverty, and brings her to the point of fully tragic desperation. Having her ideal young woman fall so low, Wharton stresses the inhumanity and the danger in this economic system, and the particular vulnerability of women, for whom the dangers are greatest. Wharton takes on the modern problem of "materialism," a frequent preoccupation of modern novelists worried about the dehumanizing effects of modern economic forces. But her criticisms are not entirely realistic: "art" comes in here, too, as she clashes together two different *forms* of life. In *The House of Mirth*, a world of grace runs up against a materialist fatalism. On the one hand, Lily is "like some rare flower grown for exhibition, a flower from which every bud had been nipped except the crowning blossom of her beauty," but on the other hand she is a "mere spindrift in the whirling surface of existence." She is beauty made subject to the machine; and it is this combining of forms – the unlikely subjection of high beauty to low mechanism – that makes a modern novel out of the horror of modern materialism.

What we see here in the beginnings of the modern novel, then, are not just life's new, modern realities. Although the modern realities of psychology, of imperialism, of materialism did provoke James, Conrad, and Wharton to write their books, these writers tried to reimagine those things, and to change fiction, too, in the process. Here again is this *balance*, which we might now describe as something essential to the modern novel: a *dialectical* relationship, a fundamental back-and-forth, in which the realities of modernity make the novel more artful, and then the artful techniques developed give back new realities.

What James, Conrad, and Wharton helped begin, other writers were eager to follow up. The future of the novel looked good: so James himself thought, in 1914, when he wrote an essay about "The new novel" of the moment. And yet James also felt that he had reason to worry about the future of fiction. The new fiction seemed to him marvelously rich in new, modern detail, in new realities, but something seemed to be missing. He praised the new fiction because "it gives us the 'new' . . . as an appetite for closer notation, a sharper specification of the signs of life, of consciousness, of the human scene"; but it also prompted him to ask: "where is the interest itself?" In other words,

there was an impressive "appetite for notation," a powerful way of "hugging the shore of the real," and this made the new fiction more exciting and more real than fiction had ever been before. But it lacked the "higher reference" necessary to be meaningful, purposeful, and artistic. It was all just details – realities unchanged by, unsubjected to, the imaginative forms of art.[6] The *dialectic* was not clearly there, and without it, fiction writers were letting modernity swamp fiction and undo its "higher" duties. James hit upon the problem that would trouble the modern novel for all the years to come. As modernity multiplies new, strange, fascinating realities, how should the novel take them all in without losing shape? How to balance life with art – imagination with reality? As experimentation and change take over, how do you guarantee that the novel does not lose touch with a "higher" purpose? Or does it really matter if it does?

These questions lead us to the modern novel's characteristic middle ground. It is possible to say that modernity essentially unbalances things that once went harmoniously together. We might use James's terms and call these things "appetite for notation" (on the one hand) and the need for "higher reference" on the other – life's details and its meaning, the realities and the ideals. These opposites have become more and more distant from each other as modernity has advanced. Faith, meaning, and other idealisms become less available; the realities and details of life become, at the other end, less manageable and less explicable. As these aspects of life draw further away, and draw further apart, it becomes ever more difficult to reconcile the extremes of human thought, feeling, and culture.

This is where the modern novel comes in. According to one very influential theory of fiction, it has always been the mission of the novel to suggest ways of reconciliation, to teach us "how to do justice to a chaotic, viscously contingent reality, and yet redeem it." In *The Sense of an Ending*, Frank Kermode speaks of a "tension between paradigmatic form and contingent reality" – to describe just this problem in which practical realities are hard to reconcile with ideal paradigms. And he says that narrative fiction exists to find the balance between the two patterns of human life: the pattern of *contingencies* (things that happen by chance, due to real circumstances) and the pattern of *providence* (order, larger purpose, ideal rules). According to Kermode, the balance shifts in different directions, depending upon the moods of the times. For the modern novel, the balance became far harder to strike,

for the reasons we have already noted. "Contingencies" were so much more extreme, plentiful, and chancy; "providence" was so much harder to find, believe in, or conceptualize. Nevertheless, the modern novel tries to explore each and to put each in touch with the other. The modern novel tries to build bridges, to make art and life enrich each other, to find providence in contingency, and to ground ideals in reality. It tries for what we might call a *redemptive dialectic*, a reciprocal linkage of art and life, that might keep modernity from breaking our worlds apart.[7]

Seven Modern Novelists

Henry James's comments on the future of the novel came, of course, the year that future got off to a perilous start. World War I put modernity into crisis – or showed how terrible a crisis modernity could be. New powers of technological destruction made themselves shockingly and horribly felt, and old traditions seemed powerless to stop them. Just a few years before, culture had seemed to reach new heights of civilization, inspiring advances in all areas of human endeavor, making peace and prosperity seem permanent. But World War I changed all that, proving that modernity's civilized side was well matched by potential for great chaos and evil. The war's violence was unprecedented, its causes absurd, and the result was profound disillusionment. As Paul Fussell writes in *The Great War and Modern Memory*, the war even "reversed the Idea of Progress," leading Henry James to say that "the plunge of civilization into this abyss of blood and darkness . . . is a thing that so gives away the whole long age during which we supposed the world to be . . . gradually bettering."[8] In *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age*, Modris Eksteins notes that even "the integrity of the 'real' world, the visible and ordered world, was undermined."[9] Everything was called into question, not just the war itself but all ideals, and even reality itself. For the war made it all seem like a lie. "Civilization" was false, modernity was dangerous, and truth seemed to demand some new way of seeing and understanding the world.

This need was perhaps the primary cause of the modern novel's radical innovations. Fiction would have to change utterly, if the very integrity of the real world had been undermined. But there were also

positive reasons for change; people found reason to delight in modernity's opportunities. Old rules – about sex and race, about home life, art, and propriety – were giving way to new ones, in which freedom, self-realization, and creativity seemed more possible. This change was what Virginia Woolf had in mind when she said that "human character changed": "All human relations have shifted – those between masters and servants, husbands and wives, parents and children. And when human relations change there is at the same time a change in religion, conduct, politics, and literature." An example, Woolf said, was "in the character of one's cook," who used to be confined to the basement kitchen, but was now "a creature of sunshine and fresh air" – now far more free.[10] And another example might be the new life for African Americans, described by Alain Locke as the "dramatic flowering of a new race-spirit," in which "Negro life is not only establishing new contacts and founding new centers, it is finding a new soul."[11] Such positive changes were at issue, too, and they were equally the cause of the modern novel's radical new forms.

Because the world had utterly changed, writing could not go on as before; due to the war and to new social relations, "even basic descriptive nouns . . . had lost all power to capture reality."[12] Old plots could not include the new experiences modernity offered up, and old styles of description could not get at the feelings and landscapes modernity created. Hypocrisies needed to be exposed, technological developments had to be interpreted, and even the very basis of civilization had to be rethought. New questions, new subjects, new perceptions had to remake fiction, and new forms were needed to make the changes possible. For airplanes now flew overhead, sometimes dropping bombs, sometimes writing in the sky, but fiction still went on as if life's sounds and spectacles were those of the nineteenth century. The eye now had to take in all the fragments and all the faces crushed together in the modern metropolis, but fiction still went on as if life put things and people all in their proper places. So fiction had to change. It had to *modernize*, and find ways to say what the modern eye now saw, to interpret modern experience, and perhaps even to help shape its chaos into better forms of life.

What would it mean to modernize fiction? How would you make it more responsive to these aspects of modern life? One of the first writers to attempt to answer these questions was Virginia Woolf, whose essays on modern fiction tried to explain how novels might

capture modern realities. We will turn now to her sense of how fiction ought to change, and that of some of her fellow modernists, surveying quickly their main ideas and major novels, in preparation for the more detailed explanations that come in the chapters that follow.

When she wrote "Modern fiction" (1919), Woolf had just begun writing novels herself, but had found no good models for writing about the new world around her. What existed, she felt, were books still working with the conventions of a bygone era, wholly unsuited to the new rhythms and textures of life. In particular, it seemed to her, these books just concerned themselves pointlessly with *material things*. To describe a modern person, most fiction just wrong-headedly ticked off all the things in that person's environment, as if this sort of thoroughness were all. Most books were full of houses and clothes and furniture but empty of *life*; they did nothing to convey the feel of modern life ongoing, the definitive quality of a person, or the changing forms of human relationships. Modern life had become so much more a matter of speed and dynamic change; people had become so different, and so much more mysterious to each other; what people meant to each other bore little relationship to what they had meant even a few years before. Life had changed so much – indeed, had come to be *about* change – but fiction had not. It was stale, and worst of all it was so weighted down with things that it could not at all convey the fleeting, transient feel the world had taken on. The typical novel of 1910 made Woolf ask, is "life . . . like this after all?" She answered "no," and insisted that the modern novel now had to try to render the *impressions* that had made life a matter of change, confusion, and fantastic new intensity:

> 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 . . . Is it not perhaps the chief task of the novelist to convey this incessantly varying spirit?[13]

Straight facts and fixed things would have to surrender to impressions and essences, to the dynamic feel of life in process, and to a sense of the way "life itself" animates human being.

Impressions and essences enliven facts and things in Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1925). For the most part the novel's factual story is minimal: it is just an ordinary life on an ordinary day – specifically, daily life on the day that Clarissa Dalloway is throwing a party. Not much happens, on the outside. Mrs Dalloway makes her preparations, and as these put her in contact with family, friends, and strangers, we follow their daily lives as well. But beneath and around ordinary facts and things, impressions and essences swirl. There, nothing is ordinary, for dynamic changes and intense feelings convey the intensity of modern life. As she makes her way about London, Mrs Dalloway becomes a super-sensitive register of a world in flux. In her first plunge into the streets of London, for example, we see Woolf's way of giving impressions of life:

> For having lived in Westminster – how many years now? over twenty, – one feels even in the midst of the traffic, or waking at night, Clarissa was positive, a particular hush, or solemnity; an indescribable pause; a suspense (but that might be her heart, affected, they said, by influenza) before Big Ben strikes. There! Out it boomed. First a warning, musical; then the hour, irrevocable. The leaden circles dissolved in the air. Such fools we are, she thought, crossing Victoria Street. For Heaven only knows why one loves it so, how one sees it so, making it up, building it round one, tumbling it, creating it every moment afresh . . . In people's eyes, in the swing, tramp, and trudge; in the bellow and the uproar; the carriages, motor cars, omnibuses, vans, sandwich men shuffling and swinging; brass bands; barrel organs; in the triumph and the jingle and the strange high singing of some aeroplane overhead was what she loved; life; London; this moment of June.

The impressions Mrs Dalloway gets, and the essential meanings she discovers in the movements and mysteries of an "ordinary" day, lay bare the essential forms of modern life, the psychological realities beneath it. Felt life, the sense of the moment, dynamic imaginings, "how one sees it so" – these experiential bearings are Woolf's way of freeing fiction from the needless documentation, the inert details, the false judgments to her so dissatisfying in the typical novel of 1910.

Another writer eager to make modern fiction more true to life was Ford Madox Ford. Ford also found too much fiction deplorably fake.

In particular, he felt that too many novels failed to tell stories the way stories are really told: "The novelist from, say, Richardson to Meredith thought he had done his job when he had set down a simple tale beginning with the birth of his hero or his heroine and ending when the ring of marriage bells completed the simple convention. But the curious thing was that he never gave a thought to how stories are actually told."[14] The novelist had tended to tell stories evenly and clearly from start to finish, but when we tell stories, we jump around in time and space, single out some things and neglect others, and often describe our wishes rather than what has actually happened. Ford wanted to make fiction better reflect that actuality, and so he made it more "the record of the impression of a moment" than a "corrected chronicle," of momentary feelings rather than objective realities, all in narratives that haphazardly followed the looping and jagged paths of memory and desire.[15]

Ford's most famous book, *The Good Soldier* (1915), tells its story through the point of view of a man who, sadly, gets it all wrong. He has thought himself a happy man in a happy marriage. As his story unfolds, however, it becomes clear that he has been tragically mistaken, and that the appearance of decency has masked a reality of deceit. His problem is he cannot get things straight, and this is clear in the difficulty he has even telling his story: "I don't know how it is best to put this thing down – whether it would be better to try and tell the story from the beginning, as if it were a story; or whether to tell it from this distance of time." He decides to *try* to tell it from the beginning, but of course, since life is a matter of impressions rather than "corrected chronicles," the story we get is wholly out of order, wholly confused, and, as a result, completely true to life.

There were other ways to make fiction more vital. D. H. Lawrence, for example, thought that the new reality of the novel ought to be the real life of the body – its visceral, sexual, and even violent feelings and experiences. He felt that modern humanity had lost its vitality because it had lost touch with physical being; people had become divided: "I carry a whole waste-paper basket of ideas at the top of my head, and in some other part of my anatomy, the dark continent of my self, I have a whole stormy chaos of 'feelings.'" Lawrence felt that fiction could help solve this problem by grounding itself in felt life. Grounded in more basic physical feeling, the novel could aid in undoing what Lawrence saw as the fundamental modern mistake: the excess ration-

ality, separating mind from body, which had detached intellectual life from its embodied sources: "How shall we ever begin to educate ourselves in the feelings? . . . [W]e can look in the real novels, and there listen in. Not listen to the didactic statements of the author, but to the low, calling cries of the characters, as they wander in the dark woods of their destiny."[16] Stressing embodiment – in its imagery, its description of motives, its sexual detail – the modern novel could undo this bad "dualism," and thereby be both a new source of redemption and a return to primitive authenticity.

These redemptive links among the primitive, the physical, the irrational are the modern framework of Lawrence's *Women in Love* (1920). The novel's apparent concerns are traditional enough: sisters fall in love and try to balance the claims of their relationships with their need for independence; their lovers try in various ways to claim them, and compete with each other; and in the process Lawrence explores the psychology of love and desire. Desire, however, is here far more brutal than it had been in traditional fiction. Brutality is attractive, love is irrational, violence seems sexual – and this is good. For example, when one of the sisters first sees her future lover, "she experienced a keen paroxysm, a transport, as if she had made some incredible discovery, known to nobody else on earth. A strange transport took possession of her, all her veins were in a paroxysm of violent sensation." At first strange, this becomes clearly a sign of those "low, calling cries" of the body Lawrence thinks we must learn to heed. And then as the novel proceeds Lawrence implies that true human motives are often destructive, sadistic, and perverse, and that honest modern fiction ought to present them that way without flinching. To modernize fiction meant to make it more primitive, out of a sense that modernity's worst effect was its "dissociation of sensibility" – the way it detached people's minds from their physical and emotional motivations.

Not all of the first modern novelists saw modernity as cause to welcome in confusion, disorder, or unreason. Willa Cather – the American writer whose novels most often glorified the American West – saw modern life more simply as an opportunity to "defurnish" fiction. In 1924, she wrote an essay, "The novel démeublé," in which she declared that "the novel, for a long while, has been overfurnished," overstuffed with things that blocked its vision. And to make such things as the American landscape once again open to view, Cather held, it would be necessary to "throw all the furniture out of the

window," to get back to the bare essentials, so that "out of the teeming, gleaming stream of the present" fiction could "select the essential materials of art."[17] Like Woolf and Ford, she felt fiction needed to pare away the conventions of writing that could no longer get stories across, and this selectivity was an essential motivation for many writers of the moment. Writers who wanted to make a difference agreed that the clutter had to be cleared; that it was time to get back to basics; and that only by being light, quick, or flexible, and even fragmentary, incomplete, or spare, could fiction get into the kind of shape necessary for it to vie with modernity.

Sometimes, this meant making modern writing more *simple*. Ernest Hemingway is best known for paring sentences down, and making the barest bones the sparest embodiment of modern life. His approach to the modern meant sentences like these (from "Up in Michigan" [1923]):

> Liz liked Jim very much. She liked it the way he walked over from the shop and often went to the kitchen door to watch for him to start down the road. She liked it about his mustache. She liked it about how white his teeth were when he smiled. She liked it very much that he didn't look like a blacksmith.

Here, modernization means sharp and simple clarity. For the most part, however, to be modern meant to be difficult. As T. S. Eliot put it, "Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results," so that literature of the modern moment "must be difficult."[18] To shake the world out of its complacency, to force it to see things in new ways, many writers felt it was necessary to make it hard for readers to find easy pleasure in fiction. Or even more importantly, they felt it necessary to make the language of fiction as complex as the chaos of modern life. They thought that the experience of reading, even the very relationship among the words on a page, should mimic the disorienting experience of modern living. And so we get the broken, obscure, streaming stories of William Faulkner, whose *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) is a model of modern difficulty.

In Faulkner's novel, the Compson family has fallen to pieces: long in decline from its genteel Southern eminence, wrecked by scandal,

drink, and madness, it has devolved into a generation of brothers desperately obsessed in one way or another with the past, and with the disgrace of their sister. Each section of the book takes us into the head of a different brother, into psychic worlds of mental retardation, suicidal depression, and vengeful mania, with such immediacy that the reading becomes as difficult as these states themselves. Faulkner knew that an immediate relation to modern madness would mean that fiction would have to risk insane literary structures. He had to have the groundwork of his story "laid by the idiot, who was incapable of relevancy,"[19] even if it meant obscuring his story in utter difficulty. Form would have to follow content, even into incomprehensibility, if the novel were to truly become as strange as what it would describe.

Faulkner's difficulty had psychological justifications. Sometimes, the justifications for difficulty in the modern novel were more social, or more aesthetic. They were social in Jean Toomer's *Cane* (1922), one of the most experimental works of literature published during the Harlem Renaissance, that explosion of creative activity that remade black America in the 1920s. As we have seen, *Cane* jumbles together diverse forms of writing and diverse stories, images, and moods, containing them all in a loose plot of migration among the geographic spaces of African-American life. Things hang together very little because the elements of African-American identity cannot be unified in art: this is the problem finally described by the novel's only real protagonist, as he laments the disorganization in his soul. Difficult form follows social trouble, as the dislocation of black identity becomes a matter of literary disintegration. To modernize the novel here meant making it disintegrate to match African-American culture, so that the gaps, fragments, and ambiguities of the one would directly express those of the other.

In *Cane*, *The Sound and the Fury*, *Mrs Dalloway*, and others, we have an initial sampling of the intentions behind some of the first modern novels. Before we turn now to explore more fully the forms and techniques these intentions created, we need to pause over one last example. The quintessential modern novel – the one that combines all of these intentions, and others – is James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922). To reflect the intensity, dynamism, and confusion of ordinary life; to catch its fleeting impressions; to get at the essence of life, too, and to return to the more physical realities; to explore the psychologies of madness and desire; to break fiction into fragments, to defurnish it, and yet also

to make it as difficult as modernity: *Ulysses* shares these intentions with its contemporaries, but then also makes these intentions achieve the modern novel's two most overarching goals. *Ulysses* was in many ways the book that started it all – inspiring *Mrs Dalloway*, for example, and encouraging modern writers everywhere as it appeared serially from 1918 to 1922 and then in new editions for decades afterwards. It was also a book that right away reached the farthest poles of modernist ambition, evoking realities more intense than any novel had yet achieved, and designing new forms more original than novels had yet imagined.

Ulysses is, like *Mrs Dalloway*, relatively plotless. Over the course of its thousand pages it narrates nothing very dramatic; it is a story of Dublin life on an ordinary day, focused mainly through the thoughts of two men. Stephen Dedalus (a young, intense intellectual, idealistic but disaffected, impressive but lost) and Leopold Bloom (his older counterpart, a Jewish outsider, engaged by his job in advertising but alienated from his wife, who cheats on him this very day) wander about Dublin, from work to the streets to the bars, encountering various Dubliners in various establishments and finally striking up a friendship before heading home. In strong contrast to the heroics of the epic poem from which *Ulysses* gets its name, these ordinary activities show us just how far modern culture has fallen from the greatness of cultures past. But then again the ordinary activities become epic in their own way. This ordinary day takes in all of life, all of language; it is encyclopedic, comprehensive, and insofar as Dedalus and Bloom survive it, they are real heroes after all. Each chapter of the novel finds a new way to describe a world of explosive possibility; each chapter, that is, is like a modern novel of its own, focused on an aspect of modernity and formed in some new style. This scope makes *Ulysses* the epitome of the modern novel's two overarching goals: taking in new realities so comprehensively, *Ulysses* epitomizes the modern novel's effort to reflect modern life; doing so with such encyclopedic attention to many forms of writing, it epitomizes the modern novel's aesthetic renewal. Comprehensively real and exhaustively reflexive, *Ulysses* sums up modern fiction, and marks a good place to sum up this first pass at what it meant for fiction to modernize. Mainly, it meant making fiction capacious enough to take in the full chaos of modern life, but then also making it artful enough to ensure that literature could be equal to the reality.

Exactly how it meant all this – and how *Ulysses* and other novels show it – will be the concern of the next three chapters of this book. We will turn now to see exactly how Joyce, Woolf, Faulkner, Cather, Ford, Lawrence, Toomer, and a host of other writers modernized specific aspects of the novel. We will go from questions of plotting, closure, and realism to questions of character and symbolism; to the modes of narration for representing modern consciousness, the way time fragments in modern fiction, and the specific things that make this fiction productively difficult; and finally we will get to open questions, the uncertainties and unfinished business of the modern novel in its first forms, in preparation for what forms come next.

CHAPTER 2

"What is Reality?": The New Questions

When the moderns took it up, the novel had long been a form of *realism*. Its main goal had been to create the illusion of real life in action. As Ian Watt writes in his study of "the rise of the novel," it aimed at a "full and authentic report of human experience," an "air of total authenticity," with "verisimilitude" as its proof of success.[1] But this "formal realism" (this making form mimic reality) had really always really been a set of conventions. That is, the novel may have seemed just to present reality directly, but it always did so based on some shared set of norms, some customary way of seeing, particular to the times. Modernity exposed this "conventionality": it became clear to writers like Woolf, Cather, and Lawrence that "realism" was arbitrary – not some sure, timeless, perfect way to describe life in action, but odd techniques dependent on the priorities and preferences of the moment. Moreover, modernity put the priorities and preferences of the modern moment into a perpetual state of change. In the past, traditional social, religious, and scientific frameworks might have given reality a certain backing – enough consensus to make "human experience" seem regular and knowable. But modernity had replaced them with change, and replaced consensus with questions.

So whereas writers of the past might have thought they could take a certain "reality" for granted and get right to the work of writing, modern writers had to pause at the outset and self-consciously ask: what *is* "reality," exactly – and how do we know it? And how do we go about providing a "full and authentic report" of it?

These questions about reality might be clarified in a metaphor. Stendhal (the nineteenth-century French author of *The Red and the*