The Modern Novel
A Short Introduction

Jesse Matz

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*

Black [1830]) once described the novel as a kind of *mirror*, passing along a road and reflecting the life around it: “A novel is a mirror carried along a high road. At one moment it reflects the blue skies, at another the mud of the puddles at your feet.” The modern novelist wanted to carry on this tradition of broad reflection, but became even more concerned with questioning it. How did this reflection work? Could the mirror reflect reality perfectly? Might it not be more interesting, and more necessary, to examine the mirror itself rather than carry it with a confidence modernity would no longer permit?

Even in Stendhal’s day such questions began to be asked, but with the rise of the modern novel it became fully clear that the questions were themselves the thing. They *remained* questions, meant not to be answered but enacted, in fiction that almost always devotes itself to posing reality not as a fact but as a problem. As Eugene Jolas (1927) put it, “we are no longer interested in the photography of events,” but in exploring the process of picturing, the way events are framed.[2] Whatever the particular plot or theme of any particular modern novel, beneath it all is this fundamental questioning – this interest in wondering what makes things real to us. Questioning reality transformed realism in the modern novel, producing a *new* realism based strangely on doubt about reality itself.

Three fundamental attitudes follow from this fundamental questioning: *skepticism*, *relativism*, and *irony*. Skepticism here does not necessarily mean doubt (although doubt is a major mood of the modern novel). It means testing truths, inquiring into fundamentals, never resting content with explanations. It means not accepting givens – not presuming that life works a certain way – but resisting presumptions, scrutinizing what is given, looking beneath foundations. Skepticism means that the modern novel tends almost to work backwards. It does not proceed from some given starting point into a story; rather, it works back from the starting point to see how we got there, to see what has led to the “reality” from which our stories depart. This is not to say that modern novels are always “philosophical.” It means that they are mainly about the problem of knowing what reality matters most, and why. And it also means that they no longer presume that there are any “absolute” truths. Truth, now, is relative – not a transcendent, permanent, god-given certainty, but a matter of how you see it.

And at worst, if truth recedes entirely, if there is a great difference between lost truths and bad realities, irony results. Irony – the bleak difference between what is and what ought to be, the wry gap between what is said on the surface and what is really meant – is often the endpoint of the modern novel, where questioning and skepticism lead ultimately to the dismal discovery that things are very much not what they seem.

Beneath all the drama of *The Good Soldier*, for example, is the basic question: how do we know the truth about our lives? What is the reality – and what is illusion? Whose truth is the real truth? Such questions come up when John Dowell is forced to revisit what he thought had been a happy life. When that apparently good life turns out to have been rotten at the core, Dowell has to wonder: what is the reality – the way things seemed, or the way they were? He asks: "If for nine years I have possessed a goodly apple that is rotten at the core and discover its rottenness only in nine years and six months less four days, isn't it true to say that for nine years I possessed a goodly apple?" This kind of question really becomes the point of the novel. *The Good Soldier* may be about adultery, betrayal, hypocrisy, but more fundamentally it is about reality itself and how we make it up. It is about how truths vary, depending upon different perspectives, and how life is essentially the process of testing them.

Such testing tends to happen in the modern novel in four key ways. Modern novelists tend, first of all, to concern themselves with the difference between *appearance and reality*. Second, they tend to wonder about the difference between *subjective and objective* perception. They search for *essential* meanings, in the hope that these might replace the structures of belief and custom that modernity has destroyed. And finally modern novelists begin to become self-conscious about the way fiction works as a form for the *mediation* or interpretation of reality.

At one point in *Ulysses*, Stephen Dedalus does an experiment: he closes his eyes, and tries to see what becomes of reality once it no longer appears to him. He tries, in other words, to see if there is a reality apart from appearances. First, he considers how much the visual is our primary way of perceiving: "Ineluctable modality of the visible: at least that if no more, thought through my eyes. Signatures of all things I am here to read." Then, he closes his eyes, to "see" what the world is like without seeing: "Stephen closed his eyes to hear his boots crush crackling wrack and shells. You are walking through it how-

somever. I am, a stride at a time." And finally he opens his eyes, wondering, "has all vanished since?," but finding it is "there all the time without you: and ever shall be, world without end." There is a reality beyond appearances, and yet still appearances are our reality. How can both things be true?

This kind of question, this kind of experiment, happens in one way or another in much of modern fiction. Writers test the difference between they way things seem and what actually turns out to be true. They wonder how the surfaces of things reveal – or hide – what is behind them. These experiments can lead in very different directions. Sometimes, they lead to despair, if appearances turn out to have little to do with reality. Sometimes, they lead to joy, as glimpses of things lead to revelations. Despair is the result in *The Good Soldier*, as John Dowell discovers beneath the appearance of civility a terrible truth: "No, by God, it is false! It wasn't a minuet that we stepped; it was a prison – a prison full of screaming hysterics." Joy comes in Woolf's fiction, where even the oddest perceptions have profound connection to vital truths, if characters are able to let the connections come:

> She [Clarissa Dalloway] pursed her lips when she looked in the glass. It was to give her face point. That was her self – pointed; dartlike; definite. That was her self when some effort, some call on her to be her self, drew the parts together, she alone knew how different, how incompatible and composed so for the world only into one center, one diamond, one woman who sat in her drawing-room and made a meeting-point, a radiancy no doubt in some dull lives, a refuge for the lonely.

Seeing her appearance in the mirror, Clarissa also sees her essential self, so that in this case, even a superficial appearance opens the way to crystalline insight.

These writers also test reality by showing how much it is "subjective." In modern fiction there are few objective realities: little is permanently, universally the same for everyone who perceives it. Modern novels therefore rarely describe things objectively; they tend to give the personal "point of view" of particular characters. Such subjective seeing enables the modern writer to test different versions of reality – and to show how reality gets made up in particular cases. In *The Sound and the Fury*, for example, we never get any objective account of what has brought such misery to the Compson family. Instead, we get it

from four different subjective points of view: the first section gives us the point of view of Benjy, the family's mentally retarded sibling; the second gives us the point of view of Quentin, years earlier, at Harvard – and so on. Faulkner described these variations negatively: "I wrote the Benjy part first. That wasn't good enough so I wrote the Quentin part. That still wasn't good enough. I let Jason try it. That still wasn't enough. I let Faulkner try it and that still wasn't enough."[3] No single view here is enough, but in the different tries, we get compensation for those failures: we get not only different ways of seeing the Compson family, but different ways of seeing reality in general. One character's reality is tragic regret; another's is shaped by paranoia. There is, finally, no single reality, as Faulkner takes more of an interest in the ways realities subjectively develop.

How can this amount to a "new realism," if reality is so much in question? Reality now becomes not a thing, but a process. It is not something out there, for sure, that the novelist must describe. It is a process of engagement, a set of subjective acts, a psychological performance, something always ongoing. And once it has shifted from thing to process, the novelist has a lot more to do, and a lot more to say. For this process must be the "essence" of our lives. If reality is not something already given, but something we are always making, then the novelist has a crucial job to do: he or she can show us how this process works, dramatizing the essence of reality, and making fiction something perhaps more necessary than it had been before.

Here we come to the fourth and final way reality tends to get questioned in the modern novel. Interested less in what is real than in what we do to make it so, modern novelists become interested in the acts of interpretation or *mediation* through which we transform the vast world of experience into what matters to us. The novelists focus on the means of mediation – what we put before us to bring the world to us – and in so doing they discover just how vital their own writing can be. If reality is a fiction we make, then fiction is the key to reality, and novels self-conscious about fiction's function can become the expositor of life itself. Or they can become testament of failure – of the way our fictions delude and misguide us, and the way irony results. The modern novel tends to operate with this mixed sense of mission, confident it is vital, but unhappy about the ironies its perpetual questions often reveal.

Virginia Woolf knew that modernizing the novel meant some reckless destruction. Writers were "led to destroy the very foundations and rules of literary society." The "smashing and crashing" had begun, she said; "it is the sound of their axes that we hear," and there would have to be a "season of failures and fragments" before new building could begin.[4] This smashing and crashing, this iconoclasm, was Modernism's founding gesture: especially in the early years, everything had to be broken down and made anew. The primary impulse here was violent change – an impulse nicely exaggerated in the attitude of the "futurist" poet F. T. Marinetti: "Up to now literature has exalted a pensive immobility, ecstasy, and sleep. We intend to exalt aggressive action, a feverish insomnia, the racer's stride, the mortal leap, the punch and the slap."[5] In this spirit of aggressive action, the modern novel defined itself as a slap in the face of "literary society." It broke all the rules: if good literary form seemed to demand order and decency, regularity and clarity, the modern novel would deliver instead rough disorder, eccentricity and confusion. It would deliberately deform fiction, in perpetual rebellion against customary techniques, plots, styles, and expectations.

But before we see how, we ought to get some perspective on this "ideology of revolt." Modern writers thought they were smashing and crashing and making something wholly new – but were they? Did they really make the difference that Woolf and Marinetti expected? And was it really as necessary as they claimed? Or was this all largely a matter of what one critic has called "the *myth* of the modern"? Perry Meisel has argued that the modern was not the vital and radical break Woolf and Marinetti celebrated. They and other writers needed to think it was, however, so they would not have to worry that everything had already been done: "The will to modernity we commonly equate with the structure of modernism as a whole is largely a defensive response to the increasingly intolerable burdens of coming late in a tradition."[6] Did these modern writers worry about being belated arrivals to an overcrowded literary tradition, and did they therefore fake their revolution? Even if we conclude that they did not – even as we now go on to see how their "aggressive action" *did* make major differences – we should keep in mind the possibility that the new forms we are about to cover were not all quite as new as the "myth of the modern" might have us believe.

Of the differences the modern novel made, the main one was this: fiction, now, would have less *plot*. Strong plots now seemed unlikely. Full of romance, intrigue, adventure, and incident, they were at once predictable and artificial. "Good stories" were false stories, too well shaped by triumph and tragedy, marriage and death. The feel of life fell out of books too fully plotted. They smoothed out life's rough edges, faked conclusions and coincidences, and they overlooked the ordinary adventures modern life now seemed to enact. Wanting to be more attentive to the true texture of real experience, modern writers preferred things uneventful. They could not do without plot entirely, of course, but their plots were deliberately minimal, often relatively pointless, largely anti-climactic, and loose enough to allow for the random openness of human existence.

E. M. Forster expressed a typical dissatisfaction with plot in his *Aspects of the Novel*: "Yes – oh, dear, yes – the novel tells a story. That is the fundamental aspect without which it could not exist. That is the highest factor common to all novels, and I wish that it was not so, that it could be something different – melody, or perception of the truth, not this low atavistic form."[7] Forster found the need to plot a story a hindrance to fiction's higher arts; it seemed like a throwback to times of more rudimentary entertainments. Gustave Flaubert expressed a similar impatience when he expressed a desire to write "a book about nothing, a book dependent on nothing external, which would he held together by the internal strength of its style . . . a book which would have almost no subject, or at least in which the subject would be almost invisible, if such a thing is possible."[8] It may not have been possible (as Forster also admitted), but modern writers still tried for "something different" – to make the novel less dependent on the sort of stories and subjects that lost truth and loosened the hold of style.

Think again of Mrs Dalloway simply preparing for her party, or Joyce's characters wandering the streets of Dublin. Or think of the purposeless wanderings of Gertrude Stein's *Melanctha* (1908): Stein's heroine is a woman whose life never seems to change, who comes and goes and begins and ends relationships with little difference made, whose existence is entirely tied to a merely passing present. Finally, she dies, but the death is a non-event – just a stopping point in a narrative that never develops much at all: "Melanctha went back to the hospital, and there the Doctor told her she had the consumption, and before long she would surely die. They sent her where she would be

taken care of, a home for poor consumptives, and there Melanctha stayed until she died." What could have been a dramatic climax is left alone, to keep from giving a pointless life a falsely climactic finish.

Stein's refusal to let plot thicken is extreme. Many modern novels retain plots of no small drama, and even the relatively plotless novels of Woolf and Joyce gather to moments of great intensity and eventful change. Or what seems like plotlessness is a shift in attention to the small-scale plots of everyday life. But even in these cases, and more generally, modern novels decrease substantially the role played by plot in fiction's designs.

Moreover, they decrease fiction's tendency toward any consistent patterns. Regular movements from one event to the next, strong links and connections among situations, characters, and places, careful inclusion of all relevant information: these, too, proved too artificial for the modern novelist. Rather than have things flow evenly through series of events well-related to each other, modern novelists chose randomness, inconsistency, deviation, omission. Jagged, jumpy, and erratic, their stories aimed to reflect the incoherence and incongruity of real life, in which things seldom go at any regular pace or hang fully together. Splintered and split, these stories aimed to reflect the diversity in modern experience, due to the fact that broken communities and lost traditions had made it impossible to thread together the diverse outlooks and activities of the modern world. Set structures gave way to "aleatory" ones – to patterns of random circumstance and inconsistent motivation.

Inconsistency broke the modern novel into fragments. Whereas novelists of the past might have tried to pattern a story's different elements into shapely coherence, modern writers often tried deliberately for fragmentation. Sometimes, this fragmentation is visible even on the printed page, where breaks and ellipses shatter sentences and paragraphs into pieces; sometimes, it is a matter of incomplete connections among the chapters, descriptions, and events that make up the book as a whole. Or sometimes it is psychological – a kind of schizophrenic dissociation of the thoughts and observations of characters through whom we see the world. It is all of these things in *Manhattan Transfer* (1925) by John Dos Passos. To capture the disintegration and dynamism of modern urban life, Dos Passos deliberately fragments his characters' experiences, even to the point of letting inner lives become as chaotically mixed as outer landscapes:

> Moi monsieur je suis anarchiste . . . *And three times round went our gallant ship, and three times round went* . . . goddam it between that and money . . . *And she sank to the bottom of the sea* . . . we're in a treadmill for fair
>
> J'ai fait trois fois le tour du monde
> Dans mes voy . . . ages
>
> Declaration of war . . . rumble of drums . . . beefeaters march in red after the flashing baton of a drummajor in a hat like a longhaired muff, silver knob spins flashing grump, grump, grump . . . in the face of revolution mondiale. Commencement of hostilities in a long parade through the empty rainlashed streets. Extra, extra, extra. Santa Claus shoots daughter he has tried to attack. SLAYS SELF WITH SHOTGUN . . . put the gun under his chin and pulled the trigger with his big toe. The stars look down on Fredericktown. Workers of the world, unite. Vive le sang, vive le sang.

These fragments bespeak a broken culture – a disintegration caused by modern war and anarchy, destructive to the modern mind, and reproduced on the page by writers out to give startling formal proof of the way the world has gone out of joint.

But these fragments also reflect something positive. In their brokenness, they generate a new kind of energy, which in turn reflects the vitality brought on by modernization. They may be less coherent than information normally presented, but they are also more dynamic, and more exhilarating. Is this contradictory – to call fragmentation both a bad disintegration and a good dynamicism? It may be, but if so, the contradiction is built into the modern novel itself. When "things fall apart" in the modern novel, they may do so because the world has fallen into chaos, but also because modernization has invigorated life and broken it free of old restraints. The fragmented page might be an incoherent one, but it might also represent a form of thought open to new experiences.

Fragmentation and plotlessness typically end in defiance of *closure*. As we have seen, books that end too happily in marriage or dramatically in death came to seem artless and false, and this was often because of their tendency to tie up all loose ends. Real life never gives full last explanations; its stories always continue, and some details always remain extraneous. In recognition of this continuance, of the

necessity of loose ends, modern novels stay open-ended. Plots end abruptly, with questions unanswered and expectations unfulfilled. If closure comes, it tends to come ironically, or as a total surprise.

Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), for example, has last words that ironize the whole possibility of entertaining satisfying last thoughts. Jake, the novel's protagonist, distrusts stories that hang together. And from beginning to end Jake's story is adrift, since it is the haphazard story of dissolute Americans killing time abroad. Brawling drunkenness, violence, and aimless mistakes are the norm throughout, keeping things open even as the story draws to its close. And then at its close even the smallest amount of closure gets undone. Jake's former lover tries to put a positive last spin on their relationship, but to her sentimental closing words he responds, "Isn't it pretty to think so." Even this amount of closure, he suggests, is just false prettiness, and the truth is that no last or lasting comforts can be taken.

Even when reassurance does come, it comes as a question, as it does at the endings both of *Ulysses* and *Mrs Dalloway*. *Ulysses* ends with Leopold Bloom apparently received back into his marital bed. Thinking of him beside her as she lies awake, Molly Bloom recalls the day she accepted his proposal of marriage, and then finally comes to what seems like a powerful last affirmation of their life together. Although the novel as a whole has been fairly negative, her last thought is "yes," and it seems we are meant to take this as a strong assertion of closure: "then he asked me would I yes to say yes my mountain flower and first I put my arms around him yes and drew him down to me so he could feel my breasts and all perfume yes and his heart was going like mad and yes I said yes I will Yes." In no uncertain terms, it seems, Bloom's quest has ended. But can these words reverse so many prior pages' doubt and irony? And since Molly's last thoughts are orgasmic, don't we have to question the staying power of this final affirmation? Joyce gives us closure, but then also demands that we wonder about it. Similarly, at the end of *Mrs Dalloway* we get what sounds like a powerful final statement. Mrs Dalloway appears, at the end of her party, at the top of the stairs, and a friend thinks, admiringly, "for there she was." A very strong affirmation, this last sentence is also an open question, for it only extends what has been the novel's question all along: what does it mean, simply, to *be*?

To reject closure, plot, consistency, and unity may seem destructive – "smashing and crashing," spitefully to make fiction as disappointing as modern life. But these rejections were meant more to improve fiction's subtler powers of verisimilitude and inquiry, to make it a better register of actuality. Plotless, fragmentary, unresolved fiction might seem likely to be clumsy, unilluminating, and inartistic, but in fact it could have a finer grain of plain incident, patient questioning, and free exploration. It could come at life unshaped by conventional expectations, and let life itself provoke whatever form might be necessary to communicate its truth.

Modern fiction could, in other words, pay better attention to ordinary reality. And *ordinary* reality – lived experience, in rich detail, intensely seen – has been the modern writer's main concern. Before, it seemed, novels only cared to deal with things in some way special, exemplary, or dramatic, things that could be the basis for a lesson, for excitement, for social criticism. To the modern novelist, this focus had too often failed to provide insight into aspects of more fundamental human existence; moreover, it made fiction insensitive to changes in the fundamental nature of experience – especially those made by modernization. It seemed important to shift the focus and bring out what mattered about ordinary things and events, to get more directly at the substance of simple existence, to pay close attention to modernity's effects on basic human relationships. It seemed important to write fiction more true to daily life, primary feelings, deep desires, and subtle changes, and to reveal what Aldous Huxley called "the astonishingness of the most obvious things."[9]

Such was the focus of *Mrs Dalloway* and of *Ulysses*, both of which take place on a single ordinary day, and do so largely to weave the texture of dailiness. Unusual things happen in both books, of course, and both are as far as possible from ordinary, but they linger longest over what might otherwise be the most commonplace of acts and feelings. In these, they find much to wonder at. For as Leopold Bloom and Clarissa Dalloway walk the streets of Dublin and London – hearing and seeing the sounds and spectacles of modernity – their ordinary reactions can be presented in ways that show us astonishing things about the world and about human character. Ordinary life becomes extraordinary in its own way. Fiction's habit of description changes, focusing now on matters of minor detail, but with the rhetoric of reverence, wonder, or intensity ordinarily reserved for great things and high

ideals. Indeed, the modern novel tends to reverse the relation between the ordinary and the extraordinary, prompting us always to ask, when Joyce or Woolf treat things that seem not to matter, how apparently insignificant things disclose greater truth and finer beauty than things that might seem far more critical or conclusive.

The reversal also changed the nature of *symbolism* in the novel. Unlikely things, now, could be taken for wonders symbolical of transcendent meaning. An example from Willa Cather's *My Antonia* (1918) shows how. One day, at sunset, the novel's protagonists sit looking at the sky when "a great black figure suddenly appeared on the face of the sun." The figure turns out to be just a plow, made to look huge by the way the setting sun throws it into silhouette:

> On some upland farm, a plough had been left standing in the field. The sun was sinking just behind it. Magnified across the distance by the horizontal light, it stood out against the sun, was exactly contained within the circle of the disk; the handles, the tongue, the share – black against the molten red. There it was, heroic in size, a picture writing on the sun.

The plow made vast and heroic symbolizes the greatness of the ordinary. What had seemed to be something of mythic proportion turns out to be a simple thing – and so what seems to be simple and ordinary gets the attention necessary to reveal to us its real grandeur. Things are "strengthened and simplified," in a type of symbolism that is, as the symbolist poet Arthur Symons put it, an "endeavor to disengage the ultimate essence, the soul, of whatever exists and can be realised by the consciousness . . . [a] dutiful waiting upon every symbol by which the soul of things can be made visible."[10] Such symbolism was not itself new; poets had long preferred it. But such a waiting upon "whatever exists," for the purpose of laying bare the "soul of things," was fairly new for fiction, where ordinary realism had tended to distinguish "souls" and "things."

In a way, these new priorities – this interest in the ordinary, the unplotted, the open – all have to do with the new way of seeing "reality." For older generations of novelists, reality had been what was established, what drove the social and natural worlds, in full factual detail. But modernity had flooded those worlds with so much new experience and new incident that a new, smaller, sidelong focus seemed necessary. Reality came to lie in the perplexed, individual

experience of random, ordinary things. So the subject-matter of fiction changed, but then so did its organization, and so did its proximity to the things it described. Whereas before the emphasis had often been on an orderly telling of important events, now it fell on a haphazard wondering at lower-level experiences.

The main difference here, perhaps, is between *telling* and *showing*. What the modern writers tried for, above all, was a style that would enact life rather than just describe it. The way to give readers a real experience, it seemed, was to break down the artificial structures built up by efforts to tell a good (rather than a real) story. And above all it was vital to keep telling from becoming *preaching*, and to keep the writer's own "ideas" out of fiction altogether. "Don't be viewy" was Ford Madox Ford's advice; William Carlos Williams claimed that there should be "no ideas but in things." Didacticism was the mortal enemy of modern fiction, which tried for direct showing rather than intrusive, explanatory telling.

The technical term for this style of showing is *mimesis* (direct imitation of reality). This central change – away from stories neatly told to realities directly shown – accounts for the other changes we have been considering here. It undid plot, frayed endings, and gave to fiction the more ordinary shapes of life's everyday experiences. But this did not mean that it weakened fiction's powers of expression. Much to the contrary: this effort to give readers the feel of immediate realities demanded new powers of precision, sensitivity, and evocation. And nor did this change mean that fiction could no longer get at higher truths. It simply meant that these would be grounded, now, in real experience – much the way Cather's epic silhouette begins in a plow on the land.