The Modern Novel
A Short Introduction

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CHAPTER 4

New Difficulties

In the modern novel's new versions of consciousness, its heteroglossia and its symbolism, its aleatory patterns and its ambiguous characterizations, we see the unique way modern writers tried to make fiction's forms a match for modernity. Modernity had brought new psychological discoveries, put new discourses into play, changed human relations; modern fiction in turn developed new forms to reflect those developments, and perhaps also to make them make more sense. At best, it even found possibilities for good form despite formlessness – languages and structures that could wrest truth or beauty out of the modern world's disorder. At least, modern fiction offered a way to pose the right questions – to call into question the changes modernity seemed to entail.

We turn now to look more closely at the way the forms of modern fiction might have made this difference – at least provoking questions, at best giving answers that could help people get imaginative control over modern life. We will see, among other things, how these forms aimed to comprehend modern *time* and *space*; what they intended by their notorious *difficulty*; and why they were committed above all to what we might call *aesthetic truth* – and with what consequences.

Ford Madox Ford noted that "what was wrong with the Novel, and with the British Novel in particular, was that it went straight forward."[1] Novels had tended to put things in chronological order, to tell their stories in linear fashion, and to Ford and other modern writers this practice seemed artificial. For even if events do happen in linear time, we tend not to experience them that way. At any moment, memories intervene, taking us back into the past even as we proceed into the

future; or hopes project us forward, coloring the present with expectations of change; and other people's time frames often collide with our own to produce all kinds of temporal confusion. In recognition of these ways in which time is actually experienced, modern novelists often tried to break the sequence, to put things out of order, to work from the present back into the past, to dissolve linear time in the flux of memory and desire. Moreover, they found the potential for such temporal chaos so intriguing that they often made time itself the subject of their books. Often, they not only experiment with the presentation of time, but make it a focus for characteristically fundamental questions: what *is* time? How does it structure our lives? And how has modernity transformed it?

These were pressing questions for everyone, in these years, because time itself had demanded new attention. In the 1880s, the very measurement of time changed: it became *standardized*. To make trains run better, and to make factories more productive, clocks around the world were synchronized. As Stephen Kern writes in *The Culture of Time and Space: 1880–1918*, time therefore changed from a "heterogeneous," free pattern for private life to a system for homogeneous, public routine.[2] This change had two main effects. First, people came to see time as a force for standardization – and to resent it. A sense of freedom required some resistance to standard time, to mechanized linearity. The second effect is related to the first. People came to feel that they had within themselves a private time that was different from public time. Public time was lived by the clock; private time was idiosyncratic, and free. One inspiration here was the philosophy of Henri Bergson, who had encouraged writers to explore real inner "duration" – time as the "succession of our conscious states . . . which melt into each and permeate each other, without precise outlines."[3] This more obscure private time would become a mode for fiction, as would other changes: the world had begun to speed up, and fiction had to find a new pace in order to keep up with it; modernization had begun to leave past traditions behind, making writers wonder what meaning the past ought to have for the present; and even discoveries in physics would eventually suggest that time was not absolute, but relative – not uniform, but different depending upon your position in relation to it.

The new attitude toward time is summed up early in *The Sound and the Fury*, when Quentin Compson smashes the watch handed down to him by his father:

When the shadow of the sash appeared on the curtains it was between seven and eight oclock and then I was in time again, hearing the watch. It was Grandfather's and when Father gave it to me he said I give you the mausoleum of all hope and desire . . . I went to the dresser and took up the watch, with the face still down. I tapped the crystal on the corner of the dresser and caught the fragments of glass in my hand and put them into the ashtray and twisted the hands off and put them in the tray. The watch ticked on. I turned the face up, the blank dial with little wheels clicking and clicking behind it, not knowing any better.

When Quentin smashes clock-time, Faulkner announces a very typical modern intention: to defy chronology, to break free of linearity, to let life fracture more freely into all of its natural forms. Quentin can be taken as symbolic of the modern novelist, who wanted likewise to break free of the conventional temporal pattern, to depart from chronology, and to see how things would go if thought, feeling, and language could melt into "duration." Virginia Woolf also expressed the desire to investigate this temporal freedom, in the voice of the narrator of *Orlando* (1928):

Time, unfortunately, though it makes animals and vegetables bloom and fade with amazing punctuality has no such simple effect upon the mind of man. The mind of man, moreover, works with equal strangeness upon the body of time. An hour, once it lodges in the queer element of the human spirit, may be stretched to fifty or a hundred times its clock length; on the other hand, an hour may be accurately represented on the timepiece of the mind by one second. This extraordinary discrepancy between time on the clock and time in the mind is less known than it should be and deserves fuller investigation.

As "punctual" time became more strictly regular and linear, private time came to seem, by contrast, more erratic. As public time sped up, it seemed to demand, from writers, better ways to reproduce the rushing dynamicism that, for better or for worse, now determined the feel of ordinary life. Writers responded to these challenges in many ways, but mainly by stressing the vagaries of memory, by exploring the intensity of the present moment, and by letting the new temporalities transform the old patterns of narrative fiction.

When we remember the past, we do so incompletely, vaguely, and often in error – if we remember it at all. To explore these vagaries of

memory, modern fiction writers tried to show how memory had to be a matter of difficult, creative, and even hazardous exploration. The most famous example of fiction devoted to the exploration of memory is Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* (1913–27), which revolutionized modern fiction by showing how real recollection (or true retrieval of the past) depended upon more peculiar and intense effort than people had thought. Writers of an earlier day might have presumed that the past was easily available to memory – that a writer need only think back in order to recall and to recreate the past. But Proust made it clear that the past is far more elusive, and that memory requires a far stranger process, one in which involuntary recall (when, for example, a smell or sound suddenly brings back a past moment very vividly) and hard work (involving, for example, the concentrated effort of writing and revising) only sometimes come together accurately and effectively to bring the past back to us. Proust wrote that the essences of life are strangely trapped beyond our reach, "and so it is with our own past. It is a labour in vain to attempt to recapture it all: all the efforts of our intellect must prove futile. The past is hidden somewhere outside the realm, beyond the reach of the intellect." If we are to regain it, it can only be by chance, or through the reaches of literary recall.

In general, this sense of memory as a problem came to pervade all of modernist storytelling, because stories are so often just someone's recollection of the past. In the modern novel, any such recollection happens fallibly, and the narrative result is confused and chaotic. *The Good Soldier* is the best example of this confusion. The confused protagonist tries to tell a coherent story, but since memory is faulty, he cannot just tell the story from start to finish. He has to keep backtracking, covering old ground, adding things forgotten and changing things misremembered. Toward the end of his story, he admits:

> I have, I am aware, told this story in a very rambling way so that it may be difficult for anyone to find their path through what may be a sort of maze. I cannot help it . . . [W]hen one discusses an affair – a long, sad affair – one goes back, one goes forward. One remembers points that one has forgotten and one explains them all the more minutely since one recognises that one has forgotten to mention them in their proper places . . . I console myself with thinking that this is a real story and that, after all, real stories are probably told best in the way a person telling a story would tell them.

The problem of memory here, as in much of modern fiction, destroys linearity, which had perhaps falsely suggests that memory has no problem getting the stories right.

And the *present* was no less mysterious. Just as it now seemed hard to recapture the past, it was hard accurately to convey a sense of the way time acts and feels as it passes in the present. Here the problem is not that the present is hidden from us; here the problem is that just what gives us the feel of the present – what makes us feel like we're living in the moment, that possibilities are unfolding, that things are becoming – is hard to convey in fiction. For fiction, which asks us to process words on a page, inevitably means some kind of removal from immediacy. How, then, to give readers the feel of immediate life, of the present moment, of time going by? And how to do this specifically in modern times, when present moments had grown so much more intense?

Evoking presence could mean vivid descriptions, or it could mean trying to capture the shape of a moment. It could mean giving a feel for the way things change, or trying to look behind change for what makes some moments eternal. Intense moments were perhaps the main preoccupation here, and perhaps the signature of the modern approach to time is the moment rendered at once ordinary and reve-latory, at once a passing thing and a route to transcendence. There was precedent for this moment of transcendence in Romantic poetry: in *The Prelude* (1805/1850), William Wordsworth had written of "spots of time," moments in life distinguished by "deepest feeling," which "with distinct pre-eminence retain a renovating virtue" in future times of sadness or hopelessness. The modernist version of this transcendent moment reached its best-known formulations in what Woolf called "moments of being" and what Joyce called "epiphanies" – those flashes of insight achieved when, having been able to make "time stand still here," characters isolate moments from the rush of time and distill their fullest significance. Stopping time in this fashion, these moments partake of eternity, and perhaps model for us how we might find islands of meaning in the ordinary rush of time's stream.

In contrast with such possibilities, a regular linear time-sequence came to seem not just false, but oppressive, for it obliged readers and writers to follow a regular pace, and presumed simple relations between cause and effect, when in fact fiction could allow for more freedom, and more creativity, more questions. So the writers let time

stop and start, leap ahead and slow down; they let time vary the way it seems to at the different moments of our ordinary lives. One way to describe this variation would be to say that modern writers made more extensive and creative use of the "speeds" always available to fiction.

There are four basic narrative speeds: scene, summary, pause, and ellipsis. *Scene* is perhaps the norm. It is the speed in which the time spent narrating is equal to time that passes in what is narrated (so it is most like a scene in the theater or in film). *Summary* happens when the narrator sums up a lot of time in a relatively shorter amount of narration. When a narration *pauses*, time stops, and the narrator takes the opportunity to fill in information. And finally, *ellipsis* is the term for what happens when a lot of time passes in a gap in the narrative – when the narration breaks, and jumps ahead, and a lot of time has passed even if no time has been spent on that time's passing.

If you think about these four speeds for a moment, you can fairly easily imagine how a deliberately conventional story might use them. Summaries might come at the beginning and end of chapters; scenes might be the main focus; pauses might come in the middle of scenes, for a narrator to fill in more background or evaluate the action; and ellipses would separate each chapter from the next. When modern fiction experiments with time, these speeds vary, in very strange ways. Sometimes, scene and ellipsis disappear altogether. Why? So that fiction can reflect the fact that there are really no moments in our lives where things fully pause or break off. (Woolf, for example, tends to try for a more seamless kind of writing, in which any breaks only take you to another place, rather than another time, and you feel that time never stops moving.) Sometimes, short scenes are full of long descriptive pauses, to reflect the fact that any thought or action can have a long history that needs explaining. In these cases a very short amount of time passes, but the length of the telling is long. And finally, in some cases, writers undo the difference between scene and summary. Their scenes are scenes of people remembering, or thinking in summary fashion about their lives. Since they are summing up, we get summary, but since we see them remembering, summary is scene. We get both at once. These are but a few examples of the ways that modern novels play with traditional narrative speeds in order to find better ways to convey the texture of modern life. Once again, the key sign of the

modern is the mixing: speed varies, in ever new combinations, in order to reflect the irregularity of our real lives in time.

But not only in order to reflect it. Modern writers experimented with the representation of time in these various ways also in order to defy the temporality of modernity. Modernity seemed more and more to mechanize life. That was the problem with linearity, with public time: it seemed to restrict human possibilities, and subordinate them to the times of factories and calendars. The modernists believed that they could help restore a sense of free human possibility. The hope was that breaking linear sequences could help people toward a fuller sense of open possibilities – toward a sense of the way things could have been otherwise, and yet might change; or a truer sense of the past, in all the ambiguity memory contributes to it; or, finally, a keener sense of the richness of the present, and how one might even make time seem to stop by appreciating all of the "being" in any single moment. Or to trade the "life in time" for what E. M. Forster called the "life by values"[4] – life lived according to permanent, transcendent beliefs. When it comes to time, modern novels have a revolutionary purpose, for they aim to smash the clocks of the modern world, and break their hold on temporal freedom.

Does modern fiction have a similar purpose when it comes to *space*? Had modernity changed the nature of space in the same way it changed the nature of time, and did the changes inspire modern writers to reflect the difference? How did they do so?

Modern *city life* deeply changed the very nature of the novel. It meant a whole new set of interpersonal relationships. It meant new modes of contact: people were thrown together in new ways, without the kind of knowledge of each other they might have had in other, older places. Metropolitan perception had to be different. It was faster, more superficial, more unnerving. It saw things that were suddenly very desirable – and then suddenly very threatening. It had to deal in spaces that seemed not at all made for human life, and yet adapt to them. As the sociologist Georg Simmel claimed in 1903, metropolitan life meant an "intensification of emotional life due to the swift and continuous shift of external and internal stimuli." Fiction, to be true to this new life, had to develop new registers of intensity, speed, and flux. But it also had to work against the pattern of metropolitan life, because these stimuli were not just intensifying, but deadening. As

Simmel also claimed, "the metropolitan type . . . creates a protective organ for itself against the profound disruption with which the fluctuations and discontinuities of the external milieu threaten it." The city-dweller becomes "blasé," and so it also became fiction's job to keep the city-dweller from hardening into defensive lifelessness.[5] So one way the novel responded to the new spaces of modern life was to trace the swift and continuous shift of urban stimuli; another was to compensate for urban excess by providing readers with emotional restoration. What were others?

It became a "spatial form." Novels had tended to take one small space at a time. They were mainly temporal forms – unfolding in time, in particular spaces along the way. But the modern city expanded the spaces that fiction had to take in all at once. Any adequate cross-section of city life had to take in a lot of people and a lot of places at the same time. "Spatial form" was the way to do it. It meant stopping time, effectively, and spreading out description all over an urban space, letting the connections from one thing to the next be juxtapositions in space rather than time. One thing would lead to the next not in temporal sequence but in spatial proximity.

A good example comes in the very middle of *Ulysses*. Dublin's epic, the novel has a chapter that takes a panoramic view of the city's inhabitants. The chapter begins by following a leader of the church around town, giving us access to what thoughts he has in response to the sight of the people he serves. When these thoughts are troubled by the sight of a promiscuous young couple, our attention shifts to them, and then onward to other Dubliners, until the chapter has wandered about among a vast cross-section of the city. The things we see are not significantly sequential in time. They do not follow each other in the way events in a story typically proceed. They are proximate in space, and by moving through proximities from one to the next, *Ulysses* takes an entirely new approach to the presentation of space. Its structures become the structures of the story – whereas otherwise only individual spaces might have figured in it, as backgrounds for moments in time.

As Joseph Frank first defined it, "spatial form" is what happens more generally when writers "intend the reader to apprehend their work spatially, in a moment of time, rather than as a sequence." In this sort of spatial narrative, "the time-flow of the narrative is halted; attention is fixed on the interplay of relationships within the immobi-

lized time-area. The relationships are juxtaposed independently of the progress of the narrative, and the full significance of the scene is given only by the reflexive relations among the units of meaning."[6] In other words, the content of the fiction is not something that unfolds in time, but something that is a spatial structure, like a painting. We are meant to consider it as a design rather than a story, and in this way space transforms fiction into a structural field. And we are meant to puzzle over the tension here between the fixed structure and the moving story – between moving narrative time and static spatial design, life in process and purer aesthetic form.

Fiction now also made space mutable. The fixed, predictable backgrounds of the past – the stereotypical settings, which served mainly to set the scene – gave way to places as inchoate as the minds that perceived them. In other words, fiction became interested in spaces for the way they varied depending upon who moved through them. In *Mrs Dalloway*, London's parks are open spaces where one person might see a threatening chaos while another finds a peaceful seclusion. Rather than stress any single landscape, Woolf chooses to show how space is relative. In *My Antonia*, Cather makes the vast landscape of the Nebraska plains a changeable factor. At first, when her protagonist is new to the place, the endlessness of the sky obliterates his sense of self; it means his insignificance: "Between the earth and that sky, I felt erased, blotted out." Later, when he feels more at home, he sees the endless sky as a symbol of some greatness in which he can play a part: obliterated before, now he thinks, "that is happiness; to be dissolved into something complete and great." Obliterating but the inclusive, the sky is not a fixed background. It is an actively changing, complicated participant in the story, subject to the same variation as human consciousness. Landscape had often played such a role in fiction, but now the *question* of its role is more directly a concern: as in *My Antonia*, its symbolic function in human "happiness" is perpetually tested and perpetually reconfigured.

But *My Antonia* is unusual for the way it presents a space in which its protagonist can eventually belong. Alienation more typically prevails, in modern fiction, and this means that protagonists tend to feel excluded from the spaces in which they move. The conflict here can mean different things for the representation of space. It can mean that spaces get personified, and given actively threatening personalities. It can mean that they get washed out, deprived of specificity, to reflect

the way they fail to be habitable. Or they can get wholly remade in the mind – to become but projections of the alienated human consciousness. In any case they are rarely given in introductory description, as spaces of the past had been. That is, chapters of modern novels will rarely begin with descriptions of spaces, because of the fact that their protagonists do not inhabit space in the usual way. They conflict with it, and so appropriate description of space can no longer be the neutral, introductory scene-setting it might have been before.

And there is another reason why modern novelists would want to change their descriptions of space. As we have seen, modern writers often resist "materialism," believing that a materialist stress on objects and environments rules life out. New fiction had to trade material details for impressions, essences, things in flux, to free human character from definition solely in terms of the world of objects. Space, too, would have to recede from view. To let impressions of dynamic characters flow, to let subjective consciousness become central, and to trim fiction down to the spare essentials of thought and language, space would have to lose the fixity and solidity that had constrained fiction to the material world. And indeed it did so, just as time did, as Proust noted: "The places that we have known belong now only to the little world of space on which we map them for our convenience. None of them was ever more than a thin slice, held between the contiguous impressions that defined our life at that time; remembrance of a particular form is but regret for a particular moment; and houses, roads, avenues are as fugitive, alas, as the years." Space too would dissolve into the welter of impressions. The use of it in fiction would change, making it often that which would recede or dissolve away so that real life could return to the world of the novel.

Would these changes in the representation of space make a positive difference to modern life – the sort of positive difference modern writers hoped to make in their revolt against time? To some degree, modern writers hoped that they would. "Spatial form" would make people better able to conceptualize the modern city – to create the cognitive maps necessary to make the metropolis navigable. And the perspectival view of space could help people to understand how use makes space, how space cannot be a neutral background. But as an "outer" world, the world of space may not have been as central to the mission of modern fiction as the "inner" world of time. The modern novel, as we have seen, was largely a matter of moving inward. In that

movement, it met more profoundly with time than with space. Indeed it might be possible to say that this new fiction left space behind, as strange as that may sound. As we will see, this departure, and this relative lack of engagement with public place, may have been one of the things future modern novelists would want to change.

In all of these changes to fiction's ways of enacting, describing, or patterning consciousness, time, space, there is a fundamental design upon the reader. The design relates back to the modern novel's main motivation, to try for something new. Newness would take the world and make it strange; by making it strange, it would require that people see it anew – or, see it truly for the first time. The word for this making-strange, coined by the formalist critic Viktor Shklovsky, is *defamiliarization*. Virtually every work of modern fiction aims to defamiliarize the world, and in so doing to surprise people back into real contact with it.

Modern fiction shocks us out of our complacent ways of seeing things. Unhappy with the way fiction had become too conventional, modern novelists were also unhappy with the way perception itself had become too routine. They felt that we took too much for granted – that the world had become so familiar that we no longer truly saw, felt, or understood it. So they wanted to take the familiar and render it unfamiliar, to redescribe things in such a way as to surprise and to shock, so that we would again pay real attention to them. Here is how Shklovsky described this problem and its solution in art:

> Habitualization devours works, clothes, furniture, one's wife, and the fear of war . . . And art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects "unfamiliar," to make forms difficult.[7]

Such *defamiliarization* had always been the job of literary language. In its ways of describing things metaphorically and emotionally, literary language had always been about giving fresh attention to things that had fallen into ruts of perception. But with the modern novel, a few things changed, to make this defamiliarization more complete.

First of all, a style of language typically more common in poetry got applied to fiction: the style of fiction became more *poetically dense*, as

writers tried more self-consciously to place stranger weight on every word and every description. And second, the fiction writer now set out self-consciously to *shock*; there was a change in the sense of mission, as writers went from feeling it was their job to present a transparent window on the world to feeling they ought to block the normal view. So a writer like Joyce, for example, now felt it important to slow down over the description of a funeral – to poeticize and sabotage it so that a reader, shocked and disoriented, could no longer look at a funeral in the same way again. And so Lawrence, in a famous scene in *Women in Love*, would now describe a rabbit as a savage, muscular beast, full of violent energy. Whereas your usual rabbit, according to hackneyed presumptions, might be soft, skittish, and harmless, Lawrence presents his rabbit "lunging wildly, its body flying like a spring coiled and released," "magically strong," a "thunderstorm": "The long demon-like beast lashed out again, spread on the air as if it were flying, looking something like a dragon, then closing up again, inconceivably powerful and explosive." The description in this case takes the familiar image of the rabbit and renders it very unfamiliar; in readers' minds, perhaps, rabbits then go from being insubstantial, cartoonish things to being things with actual, potent reality.

Defamiliarization may be the best justification for what sometimes gives modern art its bad name: its *difficulty*. We have already noted that trying for something new in fiction often meant making it a lot harder to read. There are many justifications for that difficulty, and defamiliarization is a main one. If it is necessary to shock people out of their conventional ways of seeing things, to make them aware of and not just subject to the changes modernity makes, then difficulty is a necessity.

What are some of the other motivations for making modern fiction so difficult? To answer this question it helps to know that the motivations fall into three basic categories. One is shock – the category into which defamiliarization falls, which has to do with the way difficulty forces change. A second has to do with imitation. If modern life has become more complicated, strange, and confused, then modern fiction must become as difficult, in order to reflect it accurately. And the third pertains to an entirely different agenda. Some writers felt that the future of the art of fiction depended upon a very fundamental departure from straightforward reference. That is, they felt that fiction could not be made of ordinary language, for then it would be nothing other

than an ordinary form of communication. It needed to become more indirect, more a product of its own kind of language – more *abstract*. A third justification for difficulty in modern fiction was this wish to make fiction less a matter of direct reference to the world and more an abstract arrangement of artistic words, phrases, and meanings.

Joyce's funeral and Lawrence's rabbit redescribe familiar things in such a way as to shock us out of our normal preconceptions. Once we have read these descriptions, we not only see these particular things in terms of more vivid actualities, we learn to see everything this way. We absorb the shock, and all our perceptions then become more intense, more thorough, more alive. So the difficulty is justified, and even more so when we realize that the shocks of modern fiction very often came in imitation of the shocks of modern life. Many modern writers would have said that the difficulties of their fiction were not really their own inventions. Modern life was responsible – and modern fiction just responded, in imitation, in order to force people to face realities they might have been trying to deny. If *Cane* is hard to read, it is not just because Jean Toomer has decided to give us a hard time. Toomer wrote about *Cane* that "People have remarked its simple – easy flowing lyricism, its rich natural poetry; and they may assume that it came to bloom as easily as a flower. In truth, it was born in an agony of internal tightness, conflict, and chaos."[8] If such agony was its source, shouldn't that agony feature prominently in the product as well? Life now makes such conflicting claims upon an individual's identity that character can only be given in fragments; it now comes so often to crisis that plot can only move in fits and starts; it presents so many surprising appearances that literary description must often sound like nonsense. These difficulties are not fiction's creations. Fiction imitates the new "agony" of modern life, and if the result is hard to read, it is also entirely realistic. And if it seems unrealistic – if *Cane*'s fragments and challenging descriptions seem made up – then perhaps that is because we have been refusing to face up to reality. The effort of a book like *Cane* may be to force us to stop simplifying. To stop simplifying, and to accept if not "agony" then *ambiguity*: perhaps the strangest thing about life for someone like Toomer was not the pain but the uncertainty, the fact that life (and therefore also the novel) seemed now impossible to unify.

This difficult imitation of modern life also derives from less dramatic changes – from changes as helpful, for example, as the advent of the

telephone. Henry Green, who wrote novels like *Living* (1929) only in *dialogue*, did so in part because of the effect of the telephone on human communication:

> if [fiction] exists to create life, of a kind, in the reader – as far as words are concerned, what is the best way in which this can be done? Of course, by dialogue. And why? Because we do not write letters anymore, we ring up on the telephone instead. The communication between human beings has now come to be almost entirely conducted by conversation.[9]

Green's books are often very hard to read, because they omit communication other than dialogue; we get nothing other than the spoken words that characters exchange among each other. But this difficulty, according to Green, is warranted – by the fact that reality is ever more a matter of such strictly conversational meanings.

Unless *Cane* and *Living* also have a different mission: not to imitate reality, but to *abstract* fiction away from it. In that case, we have an entirely different justification for their difficulty.

How can fiction be abstract? Abstraction would seem impossible for the language of fiction, which is necessarily "referential." Painting is different: it is possible for a painting just to be an abstract design, which does not refer to something that exists in the real world. Not all paintings need be landscapes, or portraits. Some can be simple shapes, things in themselves, compositions of colors. But is there any equivalent in fiction? Can fiction also present merely abstract shapes, and not have its language refer to something beyond itself? Some modern fiction writers thought so – that it was possible for fiction to go abstract, and that it was even necessary, if fiction were to become something other than a slave to reality. For fiction to become truly artful, truly a matter of imaginative design and compositional beauties, it would have to give up trying to be realistic, and try instead to make its words something more like the compositions of abstract painting. This belief was relatively rare. As we have seen, for the most part modern fiction writers aimed at achieving a better realism. But in some cases, they tried to push things in another direction. When they did, a wholly different kind of difficulty resulted.

Abstraction creates much of the difficulty of *Ulysses*. The book is mainly hard to read because it tries to imitate the confusions of inner

and outer life. The vagaries of consciousness and the chaos of urban life are the primary complexities. But Joyce is not only out to imitate the world. He is also out to redesign it – or to produce his own abstract composition that has much less to do with reality. *Ulysses* has eighteen chapters, each with its own formal pattern. Chapter 11, for example, takes the form of a musical fugue; chapter 13 bases its language on that of women's magazines; chapter 17 is like a catechism, a series of questions and answers, like a scientific inquiry:

> What action did Bloom make on their arrival at their destination?
> At the housesteps of the 4th of the equidifferent uneven numbers, number 7 Eccles street, he inserted his hand mechanically into the back pocket of his trousers to obtain his latchkey.
> Was it there?
> It was in the corresponding pocket of the trousers which he had worn on the day but one preceding.
> Why was he doubly irritated?
> Because he had forgotten and because he remembered that he had reminded himself twice not to forget.

This passage is representational, in that it does describe something, but it is very much abstract as well, because it is about form; it is not only describing Bloom coming home, but also enacting the form of the catechism. And the more Joyce focuses on the form, the less he tries to imitate reality. He seems hardly concerned to be describing something that might really be, and much more concerned to make some new literary shape, to create some new aesthetic style. Then, we get an abstract kind of difficulty. It is not one meant to defamiliarize or to imitate harsh new realities; it is one that happens as a result of an effort to complicate the art of fiction, to make it a forum for its own unreal designs.

Is this kind of difficulty justified? It may seem like the least valid of the three. The others try for truth and progress. They try to see reality more bravely and to make us more perceptive. But this third one may seem too self-involved, too precious. Then again, it may seem most admirably idealistic, for in his abstract artistry Joyce is trying to extend the boundaries of fictional art, and make it capable of new kinds of creativity. Fiction that devotes itself to strange new patterns with no realistic intentions may seem pointless; it may, however, also become

most beautiful, most exciting, and most fun. So it often goes, with purely "aesthetic" endeavors: when writers like Joyce devote themselves solely to the abstract forms of writing, they risk pointlessness for the sake of art, meaninglessness for the sake of style. When they risk difficulty as well we sometimes want to refuse to go along with it. Perhaps art and style should mean pleasure – and perhaps difficulty is simply displeasing. Unless we enlarge our definitions of pleasure. And that is exactly what modern novelists like Joyce have wanted us to do: to take pleasure in difficulty, out of a sense that the best art is that which brings unimaginable beauty into the world.

As soon as it becomes clear that the modern novel involves both abstraction and imitation, it might seem that our definition of it has failed. How can this kind of fiction be defined in terms of something and its opposite? How can it be both real and unreal and still be one thing? Here it is necessary to admit that modern fiction is often a forum for opposite attitudes, practices, and purposes.

For example, we have noted that modern fiction has a redemptive mission. When writers like Woolf bring out the essential wonder in the ordinary elements of life, they do so in the hope of making us better able to enter this state of wonder ourselves; when Lawrence stresses the physical, and its necessary relation to thought and action, he does so in the hope of returning mental life to a state of real physical vitality. Such states would work against the degradations of modernity, in which we otherwise become subject to routine, to materialism, to "dissociated" sensibilities, and to dehumanization. But then again there are novels that stress dehumanization, with no redemptive purpose, but just a critical one. There are no moments of wonder; instead, there are just moments of defeat. In Faulkner and in Ford there are none of Woolf's "moments of being" – and no sense that we are being trained to counteract modernization with new forms of faith and idealism. Instead we get characters worn away by falsehood and disappointment, and if learning about them improves our lives at all, the process is only very indirect. So there are two tendencies here – opposite to each other, and yet equally central to modern fiction. There is the redemptive tendency, on the one hand, and the critical one, on the other.

Even when it comes to the whole question of modernity there is ambivalence. For some writers, modernity was a threat, against which fiction had to create protection. The modern novel, that is, had to work

against modernization. But to other writers modernity was an opportunity – an opportunity for free creativity and more open expression. And modernization was therefore an inspiration, something to aspire to in fiction rather than something to reject. Even within single novels we see both impulses. In *Mrs Dalloway* characters wonder together at sky-writing – and yet clearly modern warfare has made a mess of the human psyche; urban change is exciting, and yet the past is recalled with a sad sense of loss. No one attitude finally prevails, even when it comes to the fundamental question of the meaning of the modernity to which the modern novel by definition responds.

But there is one constant. No matter what the purpose, and no matter what the cause, these modern novels share a strong commitment to what we might call "aesthetic truth." They all presume some vital link between fictional form and the finest justice. Whether it be in the link between defamiliarized description and revitalized perception, or between "epiphanies" and revelation, or between fragmentation and ironic insight, this commitment to aesthetic truth distinguishes the modern novel from other kinds of fiction that do not put such faith in form. As we have seen, the modern novel aims above all to do justice to the modern world. But the kind of justice it seeks is an aesthetic justice, an artful form of judgment, handed down from the topmost imagination and given in new forms for new realities.

Aesthetic truth, however, was often sought for its own sake. It could be a matter of refining people's perceptions and making them more capable of critical insight, but it could also be a matter of "art for art's sake" – of pursuing fine forms for no purpose at all. Some writers wanted fiction to become, like the finest arts, wholly gratuitous, a world of its own, not a way to get a purchase on modern reality, but a refuge from it. And as we will now see, this aspect of the faith in form, this extreme "aestheticism," would make the modern novel controversial for years to come.