The Modern Novel
A Short Introduction

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CHAPTER 5

Regarding the Real World: Politics

Did their passion for aesthetic justice keep modern novelists from doing justice to the real world? Did ambiguity, difficulty, movement into "consciousness" wreck the novel's power to pay attention to outward things? Did the novel's new dispersals and dissolutions make it impossible for the novel to deal responsibly with social and political problems? Some people thought so – George Orwell, for example, who noted in 1940 that "in 'cultured' circles art-for-art's-saking extended practically to worship of the meaningless. Literature was supposed to consist solely in the manipulation of words. To judge a book by its subject matter was the unforgivable sin."[1] Had the modern novel become so concerned with art that it had become "meaningless" to the wider world?

In a moment, we will explore Orwell's complaint more fully. First, however, this chapter will stress that strange new *forms* did not necessarily mean "worship of the meaningless." The hope was that there would be no need to choose – that form and politics could come together, if advances in form could make the novel a more sensitive, responsive, and expressive form of engagement. But could the novel be both aesthetically innovative and engaged with real-world problems and issues? What were some of the ways it tried to do so?

There were many – and in a sense the combination was unavoidable. For the new forms of the modern novel were of course *provoked* by real-world social and political problems and events. Social change was one of the main provocations for the novelist's sense of new opportunity (remember Woolf's cook). The war was perhaps the main provocation for the need to question reality (for example, in the way

it refuted the "idea of progress"). And other major real-world developments – in imperialism, in city life, in the rise of consumer culture – figured dominantly not only in the modern novel's subject-matter, but in all the experimental forms that sometimes seem simply "aesthetic." It was Conrad's horror of the excesses of Belgium's imperial exploitation of the Congo that led him to feel a need for the kind of "solidarity" he hoped the novel's aesthetic intensity could achieve; it was Joyce's frustration with Ireland's role as "the cracked looking glass of a servant" before its English master that prompted him to turn the novel into a broken reflection of reality. The new feel of "metropolitan perception" intensified the novel, and urban living also wholly changed the writer's job, by making life a matter of overwhelming crowds, lonely isolation, and cosmopolitan connections to the larger world of commerce and culture. So even if the modern novel often seems *autotelic* – focused inward on itself, concerned only with its own styles and structures – it was utterly formed by public problems and responsibilities.

Moreover, the new forms of modern fiction also enabled new public commitments. As we will now see, the new effort to ground fiction in the details of physical life made it better able to deal with the new sexuality that had become so controversial and essential a feature of modern life. The new sense of space and of perspective made fiction more responsive to life in regions of the world that had formerly been thought merely peripheral. Perspective also helped explore the new realities in social-class relations, and in the lives of minority groups. In these and other ways, the modern novel's aesthetic experimentation enabled new purchase on the real world.

Willa Cather, for example, brought new aesthetic distinction to the American West, and thereby argued for its cultural centrality. Seeing the western landscape through a powerful modern style of symbolism, describing it in the new "defurnished" language of aesthetic intensity, Cather made the West seem as important as more central places, and helped change the nature of "regionalist" writing. In the past, regional writing had inclined toward what we call "local color": it tended to treat the outlying regions of America and England as quaint, charming, exotic – not *normal*, but also not seriously important. Outlying regions were often described as places of peace or of adventure; their inhabitants were charming types; regional writing was for cultured people to take mental vacations, or imagine exciting places not

inhabited by truly real people. But Cather (and writers like her) saw regional life very differently. She saw it for real, using modernized styles and approaches to describe regional life as something just as gritty, just as ordinary, and just as interesting as life in the centers of culture. Her places were demanding, difficult, truly inspiring places; they were populated by shrewd hard workers, sophisticated immigrants, and real problems; it took good aesthetic effort to appreciate them, and the result was a true sense of the real hardships and satisfactions of regional life. Making this kind of difference, Cather did something that was both new and socially important, and she herself says as much in *My Antonia*. Her protagonist is reading Virgil, the great Roman poet who had brought new dignity to the description of rural life centuries before. In her account of what it means to read Virgil, Cather implies that she may be his modern-day counterpart – bringing to the American West the dignity he had brought to his world long ago: " '*Primus ego in patriam mecum . . . deducam Musas*'; 'for I shall be the first, if I live, to bring the Muse into my country.' "

Real life in America's regions was one of the modern novel's discoveries. Another was the truth about imperialism – the realities of the western exploitation of other parts of the world. By 1900, Great Britain had become an imperial master of much of the world. It ruled lands everywhere – in India, in Africa, and all over the globe. But its mastery of the people of these places was not seen in the way we are inclined to see it today: whereas today we tend to reject as immoral and unfair the domination of one people by another, before 1900 the attitude was very different. For example, even John Ruskin, the marvelous Victorian art critic, could write, in 1870, that England as "true Daughter of the Sun" must "guide the human arts, and gather the divine knowledge, of distant nations, transformed from savageness to manhood, and redeemed from despairing into peace."[2] The general attitude held that Great Britain's imperial rule was or could well be a wonderful thing – a force for civilization, a moral right, something glorious. Around 1900, however, this general attitude began to change. People came more and more to question Great Britain's right to world domination, and to see as immoral and even evil the way it treated its subject peoples. Fiction played an important part in this change of mind. Not right away: for a long time, novels tended to glamorize imperialist adventure. But around 1900 they began to take a more balanced view, and, ultimately, a much more critical one.

For example, Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* (1901) shows us fiction changing – partially glamorizing imperialist adventure, but then also revealing the truth about it through the modern novel's innovative perspectives. In *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said notes the change in attitude behind this shift: "It was as if having for centuries comprehended empire as a fact of national destiny either to be taken for granted or celebrated, consolidated, and enhanced, members of the dominant European cultures now began to look abroad with the skepticism and confusion of people surprised, perhaps even shocked by what they saw."[3] The change from taking empire for granted to becoming skeptical and confused is a change the modern novel was well suited to document and encourage. And in *Kim*, we see it dramatizing what Said describes as "an ironic sense of how vulnerable Europe was" – when, for example, Kim's identity as a westerner is repeatedly thrown into question:

> A very few white people, but many Asiatics, can throw themselves into a mazement as it were by repeating their own names over and over again to themselves, letting the mind go free upon speculation as to what is called personal identity. When one grows older, the power, usually, departs, but while it lasts it may descend upon a man at any moment.
>
> "Who is Kim – Kim – Kim?"

Kim's identity becomes modern, it seems, as a result of his experience in India, as a result of being "an insignificant person in all this roaring whirl of India," and in showing how, this modern novel helps to update and to complicate fiction's treatment of the problem of imperialism.

One year later, Conrad published his far more scathing account of the results of imperialism in Africa (*Heart of Darkness*, which, as we have seen, brought a new kind of critical intensity to the modern novel). And then by the 1920s, skepticism about imperialism had become a key feature of the novel's more general suspicion about modern life. E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924) became the first classic of anti-imperialist writing, for the way it laid bare the hypocrisies and inauthenticity of British government in India.

Forster depicts the British in India as petty, stifling, and unjust, and he contrasts their smallness with the relative grandeur of the Indian landscape and Indian spirituality. And the plot makes it clear that the

British presence in India is a force for chaos and confusion rather than civilized rule. An Indian man is wrongly accused of rape; the accuser, a good British woman new to India, had been disoriented in the Marabar Caves (whose sinister mysteries are perhaps symbolic of the Indian spirit Britain could never control), and in her disorientation she thought that her friend and guide had raped her. Immediately the British establishment gears up into outraged action; hysteria and injustice follow, and by the time the man is finally exonerated, it has become clear that these two cultures cannot coexist. It becomes clear that the British presence in India is a farce – and moreover, that western presumptions of superiority make no sense at all, that "Englishmen like posing as gods" but no longer fool anybody when they do so. Forster also takes pains to evoke the different power of Indian religions and to prove that they demand concepts different from what the British could imagine. Here, we get a new indictment of imperialism, through the difference the modern novel could make. In the past, the novel had largely been "empirical": it began in the real details, and worked from there to build toward more general theories, beliefs, and conclusions. But Indian spirituality seemed to demand of Forster a more "ideal" approach – an approach that would somehow begin in a sense of mystery, in a world of abstractions. So when it comes to describing the Marabar Caves – the primeval locus of the novel's big "muddle" – Forster stresses the limits of language:

> He finds it difficult to discuss the caves, or to keep them apart in his mind . . . Nothing, nothing attaches to them, and their reputation – for they have one – does not depend upon human speech. It is as if the surrounding plain or the passing birds have taken upon themselves to exclaim "extraordinary," and the word has taken root in the air, and been inhaled by mankind.

Wanting to debunk the myth of British imperial superiority, Forster tried to evoke the truly "other" pattern of eastern reality. To do that, he had to go with the modern novel beyond a traditional "empirical" bias, and insofar as he was successful, we might say the "essential" attitude of the modern novel was instrumental in promoting political justice.

It played a similar role when it came to the problem of social class. Just as Forster and others used the modern novel to take a new view

of imperialism, writers took a new view of what it meant to be rich, to be poor, to be middle class. These things had, of course, always been the subject of fiction, but the modern novel helped to get at the very foundations of what D. H. Lawrence called "class-bound consciousness," or the ways people's very minds were secretly molded by social-class presumptions. Forster, for example, famously admitted the class-bound consciousness of his set in *Howards End* (1910), his great novel about the "condition of England" at the time of modern social upheaval: "We are not concerned with the very poor. They are unthinkable, and only to be approached by the statistician or the poet. This story deals with gentlefolk, or with those who are obliged to pretend that they are gentlefolk." This statement is indicative: the poor *had* tended to be "unthinkable" for the typically middle-class novelist. But as Forster's statement also indicates, novelists had become more self-conscious about that fact, and concerned to unmask the "pretenses" of social class. And as Virginia Woolf wrote, the writer who had stood comfortably atop a tower of privilege, "scarcely conscious either of his high station or of his limited vision," found himself around 1914 far more self-conscious, and felt his tower leaning down toward the ground.[4]

D. H. Lawrence gave fiction new class consciousness. As the novelist Angela Carter has noted, his novels were unique for the way they "describe the birth of the upper working, lower middle, upwardly-socially-mobile-via-education class as a force to be reckoned with."[5] Lawrence's approach to the lives of the working classes was new for the way it involved no condescension, no hand-wringing, no superficial treatment; by contrast, it found in working-class subjects the same aesthetic complexity most novels previously found only among more elevated people. And it went even further than that. As we have noted, Lawrence wrote under the influence of the belief that physical life was what really mattered, the basis and determining thing in all our higher thoughts and feelings. This outlook made him see working-class life with no prejudice against physical labor – and instead with the belief that the life of the body is the true one, the more truly spiritual and fulfilling aspect of human being. So his fiction not only introduced other classes of experience into the modern novel; it did so with the implication that this experience was superior. Closer to the true physical basis of being, unspoiled by the high pretensions of other styles of life, honest and direct and motivated by practical need and feeling, the

subjects of Lawrence's writing helped to free "consciousness" from its class-based biases.

If Lawrence helped to change thought about the lower classes, other novelists tried to lay bare fantasies of wealth and privilege. F. Scott Fitzgerald most famously documented the excesses and evils of the rich – the recklessness of America's new culture of prosperity, the way it could ruin lives, and the difficulties it created in relations between wealthy America and the world beneath it. But Fitzgerald also changed class consciousness, by exploring the fantasies that perpetuate inequitable systems, the delusions about wealth that make aristocracies seem worth keeping. In *The Great Gatsby* (1925), the rich are notoriously reckless, and the society they represent comes under a new and devastating kind of scrutiny, which reveals its emptiness and irresponsibility. At the same time, however, *The Great Gatsby* treats the rich with all the obsessive, starry-eyed admiration characteristic of Fitzgerald's culture. Fitzgerald knew that no amount of bad behavior would end America's romance with the rich, and the fantasy involved – the combination of tragic recklessness and endless appeal – was his great modern subject.

But perhaps the most innovative writer on the subject of class was a writer who managed to combine the experimentalism of Joyce with the social sensitivities of Lawrence and Fitzgerald. This was Henry Green, who wrote a series of novels that enact cross-class interactions with very extreme objectivity. As we have seen, in these novels there is hardly any description, no "consciousness," no authorial explanation or evaluation; there is mainly just dialogue – mainly just the characters themselves speaking their positions and perspectives. *Living* gives us working-class factory life directly in the voices of the people on the factory floor; *Loving* (1945) gives us life at all levels in an Irish mansion, again only in the dialogue through which masters and servants perform their complicated cultural minglings. Like Lawrence and Fitzgerald, Green is out to tell unspoken truths about class differences, and to present lower-class life in new, realistic detail. But he has chosen to find a different form to do so: he seems to think that these differences and details are all in the very language different classes actually use, to make love, to get things done, to work, to complain, to describe themselves. Here, from *Loving*, is an example of a typically terse yet revealing interchange:

"I feel we should all hang together in these detestable times."
"Yes Madam."
"We're really in enemy country here you know. We simply must keep things up. With my boy away at the war. Just go and think it over."
"Yes Madam."
"We know we can rely on you you know Arthur."
"Thank you Madam."
"Then don't let me hear any more of this nonsense. Oh and I can't find one of my gloves I use for gardening. I can't find it anywhere."
"I will make enquiries. Very good Madam."

Green seems to think that putting these languages into dialogue is the best way to enact social class in fiction, the best way to show it to you directly rather than just to tell you about it. Thinking this way, he took the heteroglossia of the experimental novel in a very different direction: whereas in Joyce and Woolf it had gone toward dissolution and fragmentation, in Green it becomes strictly external and as fully intelligible as practical speech itself. For Joyce and Woolf, experimental fiction meant subjective fiction; for Green, wanting to tell the truth about social class, and wanting to find a new form for the telling, experimental fiction had to become objective fiction to a newly extreme degree.

How formal difference helped to make a real social difference is perhaps nowhere more clear than in the difference made in novels by and for women. Just at the moment in which fiction had most clearly started going modern, women had begun to agitate with new ferocity for equal rights. The year 1910 was the one in which Virginia Woolf said "modern fiction" had become a necessity. In the following year, the suffragette movement in England found women breaking windows and committing suicide in order to try to get the vote. The change in tactics – the new energy in feminism around this time – made itself felt as well in fiction. First of all, in direct ways: women writers tried more overtly to get at women's unique experiences – and male writers more and more had to reckon with increases in female power and independence. But there was a stranger and more fascinating result, too, that had to do with fiction's treatment of *interiority*.

The modern novel served feminist interests most obviously by helping women to defy the conventional plots of social life. If

traditional plots ended in marriage, the new plots (or plotlessness) of the modern novel could help modern women imagine different options. The drive of *Mrs Dalloway*, for example, is not toward social conformity, but toward the fullest exploration of "being"; it could therefore help real-world women imagine how to change the focus of their actual lives. Perhaps the most famous example of this change in focus is what happens in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899). The novel created a huge scandal by presenting a woman who, unhappy in marriage because too passionate and too imaginative, has an adulterous affair, and ultimately commits suicide rather than return to the conformity of acceptable womanhood and conventional marriage. By the time the woman, Edna, finally walks into the sea, and thinks, "How strange and how awful it seems to stand naked under the sky! how delicious! She felt like some new-born creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known," she has enabled a new awareness in women's lives, and though her life ends in suicide, in a sense she dies so that other women will not make the mistakes that led her to that fate.

But the modern novel also served feminist interests by innovating a new form for expression of female consciousness. In a way, women's minds were a key site for modern experimentation. We see the connection at the end of *Ulysses*, where Molly Bloom's thoughts become the model for the novel's most completely "streaming" consciousness. But we first see the connection before that, in the work of a woman writer often said to be the original innovator of stream-of-consciousness writing. Dorothy Richardson's *Pilgrimage*, a multi-volume exploration of a woman's developing mind, developed a new style in order to convey the shape of a woman's thoughts. Richardson spoke of her efforts to "produce a feminine equivalent of the current masculine realism," a feminine alternative in which "the form of contemplated reality [had] for the first time in [her] experience its own say."[6] If in fact the alternative to realism – the modern novel's interest in "contemplated reality" – developed even in part as a result of Richardson's effort to find a "feminine equivalent," then we might say that a feminist effort was key to the modernization of the novel. Moreover, we might say that fiction's new alternative to masculine realism was necessary to appreciate women's ways of thinking, and that the modern novel therefore gave new meaning to women's minds. In other words, even in the apparently autotelic form of "contemplated reality," there

was perhaps this important new social effect: women's minds were finally given full, unique, and inspiring consideration.

The question of the modern novel's social causes and effects is most perplexing when it comes to the fiction of the Harlem Renaissance. That movement produced many novels that were truly unprecedented: never before had African-American life been presented so accurately and honestly, and rarely had it been allowed to take center stage in fictions of real modern life. When featured in fiction before, African Americans had mainly been "characters," sources of peculiar interest, charming folk-tales, and amusing dialect. Now came the chance to see African-American life realistically, and the modern novels that did so were therefore also forces for social justice. But *Cane* – which used modernist techniques to dramatize the agonies of the African-American soul – was not the norm here. The norm was much more normal, because of the need felt among African Americans to stress normality and to create a tradition. Writers like Woolf and Joyce could break with the past and risk strangeness because they had a long tradition behind them and not so much to lose. African-American writers, by contrast, had responsibilities; they felt required to depict coherent selves and functional communities – and not to defy tradition, but to start one. Although these writers often wanted to devote themselves to pure art, and go where modern art was taking the rest of the western world, they also felt more strongly the need to stick with positive social realism – the kinds of books that would not lose themselves in experiment or call fundamental realities into question.

Here, then, the relation between modern experiment and social realities is different, and demands a different way of thinking about what it means to be modern. In *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, Houston Baker addresses this difference by noting that

> the moment of the 1920s known as the "Harlem Renaissance" has frequently been faulted for its "failure" to produce *vital, original, effective* or "modern" art in the manner, presumably, of British, Anglo-American, and Irish creative endeavors. To wit, the signal outpouring of black expressive energies during the American 1920s is considered . . . as "provincial" . . . The familiar creators of Harlem . . . do not, in the opinion of any number of commentators, sound "modern."[7]

They don't sound modern, but they are so in their own way, and Baker stresses that we must consider the difference context makes. In

exploring the modern fiction of the Harlem Renaissance, we have to keep in mind that the sources of experiment and its desired effects are not those of fiction by Woolf or Joyce, and that what looks traditional is often experiment by other means.

One example of this very differently modern writing is *Quicksand* by Nella Larsen (1928). *Quicksand* is about a biracial woman who is simply never allowed to live a normal life. In black society, she never feels black enough: she never wants to commit wholly to the wishes and politics of Harlem or the black university where she teaches for a time. But then of course she never feels at home in white society, either: when she goes to stay with relatives in Copenhagen, she becomes an exotic – beloved, but never really included, and never comfortable with the utter lack of black cultural life there. Caught between races, never able to fit in, she runs perpetually from one situation to the next, really just digging herself deeper into trouble. All this is described conventionally enough. This is not *Ulysses*, and it does not try for the psychic dissolutions, linguistic defamiliarizations, time-shifts, or abstractions of other aggressively experimental books. But its protagonist really embodies experimentation. Any plot based upon her would have to be new, not only because the racial questions she raises had not been raised before, but because she perpetually seeks change. No current conditions can be right for her, and in the search for better ones she drives fiction onward toward new, modern discoveries. There is an inescapable modernity, for example, in the fact that she "can neither conform, nor be happy in her unconformity," in her "indefinite discontent," which make her identity and her life's plot so fragmentary. And so there is something wholly new in Larsen's effort to reflect African-American modernity.

Even fiction written in extremely traditional forms could become modern in this different cultural context. Zora Neale Hurston wrote her fiction deliberately in the old style of the African-American folktale. She was an anthropologist as well as a novelist, and she used her research into traditional black culture as a way to re-establish a distinctly African-American style of storytelling. In her essay on "Characteristics of Negro expression," for example, Hurston reports her findings that in African-American folk language, "words are action words," and "everything is illustrated" and given to "rich metaphor and simile." These characteristics have already "done wonders" for the English language – and Hurston extends them further to give her

fiction the vitality other modern writers sought by other means.[8] Since the style was "traditional," it was really the antithesis of modern; but since it brought new sensibilities, new ethics, and new plots to fiction, it created a new cultural consciousness. In, for example, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), tradition becomes radical innovation, because Hurston develops a narrative voice not heard before – a voice that speaks out of the past of folk wisdom but into a future of progressive change. The style is, after all, abstract; it is not so different from the styles of more obviously experimental fiction, because it describes things in terms of their spiritual, essential significance. For example, Hurston tends to describe objects as if they were alive and conscious; by contrast, she sees certain aspects of people merely as lifeless things. This reversal shows how she achieves, by other means, those higher meanings and skeptical insights other novelists got by trying something completely new. What was new to them came to her out of the past. But since that past was new to the world of the novel – since it was product of African-American folkways not let in before – it could produce wholly modern effects.

For Hurston and Larsen and other writers associated with the Harlem Renaissance, there always persisted a big question about the duty of fiction: should it try for aesthetic experimentation, in the interest of becoming as artistic as possible; or should it try for political significance, in the interest of advancing the causes of the race? The writers and artists of the Harlem Renaissance perpetually debated these questions about purpose of art. Was it to be beautiful, or to be useful? Should it, in other words, try always for greatness on the aesthetic front, or was it more important that it aim for the political good? Of course the dilemma was never solved. And of course these questions were asked by everybody – and would pull the novel in opposite directions for all the years to come. Art or politics; form or content; experimentation or accessibility: these dilemmas would subsequently become the action of a kind of pendulum, swinging the novel back and forth between its aesthetic and social commitments. As we have already seen, from the start people questioned the way the modern novel dealt with these different commitments. At best, they could be one – as they were for Forster, for Green, and for Hurston. Soon, however, this unity came to seem much harder to achieve, as social and political demands began to call the forms of the modern novel into question.

It was not long before the mood of the modern began to change. The impulse to try something new to redeem modernity was soon challenged. What had set out around the time Henry James championed the "art of fiction" (1884) and reached a pinnacle perhaps at the moment of *Ulysses* (1922) hit stumbling blocks when the 1920s gave way to the 1930s. Times of prosperity and peace (good conditions for purely aesthetic experiment) gave way to times of hardship, danger, and intense political demands. Due to the economic hardships of the Great Depression, and due to the rise of extreme political parties (Fascism on the one hand and Communism on the other), writers everywhere found it more and more necessary to take a political stand, even in their fiction. And as these political developments led to violence, writers thought it would be almost obscene to fritter away their time in precious aesthetic experiments. Aesthetic experimentation came to seem like an impossible luxury, at a time in which the very basis of human existence seemed to be in peril. For the modern novel, this meant (as the novelist Aldous Huxley put it) that "a reaction had begun to set in – away from the easy-going philosophy of general meaninglessness towards the hard, ferocious ideologies of nationalistic and revolutionary idolatry."[9]

One good index of the change is what happened to the fiction of Virginia Woolf. She has been one of our central modern writers, for the way she sought to disclose "life itself" through a defamiliarizing focus on ordinary "moments of being." In 1931, she published a novel that most completely met these goals: *The Waves*, Woolf's most difficult book, is pure "consciousness," and nowhere in it does the real world seem to violate the pure minds of what are less real characters than essences of humanity. But just after publishing *The Waves* Woolf turned toward something completely different. Like everyone else, she came to feel that fiction now required new social and political responsibility, and so she began to try to write what she called an "essay-novel." The plan was to "take in everything, sex, education, life," and it found Woolf "infinitely delighting in facts for a change, and in possession of quantities beyond counting"; it found her saying, "I feel now and then the tug to vision, but resist it" – very strange for a novelist whose visionary impressions had helped to define the modern novel.[10] This essay-novel – called *The Pargiters*, and not published as such in Woolf's lifetime – was as different as possible from what had come before. It depicted mundane social reality and focused on social problems, and

evaluated them directly in "essay" statements of fact and opinion. This more socio-historical outlook would become typical in fiction for a number of years. Many writers would begin to seek a more essayistic, even documentary realism, out of a sense that new political exigencies demanded more direct and interventionist engagement with the world.

"Social realism" returned. But could it be compatible with the priorities of the *modern* novel, which, as we have seen, wants to stretch the limits of what counts as reality? If the new novels of social realism were out simply to describe, to document, and to criticize, could they also create new realities in the spirit of modern fiction? Some people say no: they stress a striking difference between *modernism* in the novel and the *realism* that returned with the political climate of the 1930s.

Could the best fiction have it both ways? The best writers knew that their social and political message would most effectively get the attention of the world if they truly opened up new ways of seeing and feeling about things, and if they described things in compelling new ways. To understand how the aesthetic and the political could join together in this way – and to understand why, at this moment, they would have to – we might turn to the work of the writer who best represents the political moment in the middle of twentieth-century fiction: George Orwell.

Orwell had always been something of a critic of the aesthetic bias of the modern novel. To him, extreme experiments had always seemed precious: detachment from reality, radical skepticism, and playing around with language looked to him fairly self-indulgent. Moreover, such tendencies seemed to him not idealistic, but just a privilege of wealth. Wondering about the causes of the modern attitude, Orwell wrote: "Was it not, after all, *because* these people were writing in an exceptionally comfortable epoch? It is in just such times that 'cosmic despair' can flourish. People with empty bellies never despair of the universe, nor even think about the universe, for that matter."[11] And yet in the 1930s Orwell also disliked the way things had gone too far in the other direction. He noted that the highly politicized atmosphere of the decade had made good fiction impossible. People were all too concerned to write sociological works and to pamphleteer; imaginative prose, as a result, became barren, and (according to Orwell) no good fiction got written: "No decade in the past hundred and fifty years has been so barren of imaginative prose as the nineteen-thirties. There

have been good poems, good sociological works, brilliant pamphlets, but practically no fiction of any value at all . . . It was a time of labels, slogans, and evasions . . . It is almost inconceivable that good novels should be written in such an atmosphere."[12] What Orwell thought necessary was some kind of middle ground, between political responsibility and imaginative freedom. He himself achieved it, in his great imaginative works of political criticism: *Animal Farm* (1945) and *1984* (1949). In these books, he found creative means to argue political points, most notably in the choice of the form of the *dystopia* – the vision of a bad future world.

In Orwell's bad future world, totalitarianism (the threat presented in the 1930s and after by Communism and Fascism) has come to dominate the world and to mechanize every aspect of people's lives. No freedom is possible – not even the freedom to think. Language itself has been remade, in "Newspeak," to rule out the possibility of subversive thought, as we learn when one of its creators describes it:

> Do you know that Newspeak is the only language in the world whose vocabulary gets smaller every year? . . . Don't you see that the whole aim of Newspeak is to narrow the range of thought? In the end we shall make thoughtcrime literally impossible, because there will be no words in which to express it . . . The Revolution will be complete when the language is perfect.

Even the truths of history are subject to revision, all in order to guarantee full subjugation of the individual mind. Had Orwell simply meant to argue that these could be the results of totalitarian politics, he might have written an essay, or documentary fiction, but then he would have been giving in to the "barren sociology" of the fiction he disliked. Instead, he chose an imaginative form for his polemical content; dystopia was the ideal brainchild of the conflicting political and aesthetic demands of the day. Moreover, *1984* carried on the experimental tradition of the modern novel in other, indirect ways: "Newspeak" is an experimental language exactly opposite to what the modern novel had tried to develop; "thoughtcrime" is a psychological possibility exactly opposite to what the modern novel had wanted to discover. Dramatizing these negations, Orwell indirectly championed the innovations of the modern novel, at a time in which history seemed to have no time for them.

To get right to *1984*, however, is to skip over the political fictions of earlier years. By 1945, Orwell had come up with good ways to be both political and aesthetic. Earlier, it was more difficult both to try for modern innovation and yet to be politically realistic, and so the achievements of those writers able to do so are well worth noting.

Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), for example, is an earlier attempt to do what Orwell would do fifteen years later: combine the experimental outlook with social responsibility. Another dystopia, *Brave New World* also dramatizes social dangers not by exposing them directly, but by imagining a world in which they have come fully to dominate. The new scientific approaches to cultural organization – in Fascism, in Communism, and also in the attempts in England and America to engineer a fairer distribution of wealth – are presented here in their most extreme form, as a system in which human beings are scientifically produced and systematically administered. As Huxley would later say, the book is about "the nightmare of total organization," in which "modern technology has led to the concentration of economic and political power, and to the development of a society controlled . . . by Big Business and Big Government," and in which "nonstop distractions of the most fascinating nature . . . are deliberately used as instruments of policy, for the purpose of preventing people from paying too much attention to the realities of the social and political situation."[13] Because this last problem – of brainwashing, of propaganda – seemed to him most fundamental, Huxley felt he could not just speak against the "nightmare" straightforwardly. He wanted to sound a political warning, but could not do it directly, if he wanted to compete with the "fascinations" at work in the brave new world of modernity. He had to do some "hypnopaedia" – some hypnotic teaching – himself, for "unfortunately correct knowledge and sound principles are not enough." A real "education in freedom" would require "thorough training in the art of analyzing [propaganda's] techniques and seeing through its sophistries." The key word here is "art": an aesthetic power over language was what the world needed, and this perhaps is what Huxley provides by couching his political warning in an aesthetic form.[14]

But the main trick, for the modern writer wanting also to be a responsible political writer, was to find some way to make the documentary voice an artful one – some way to make realism a transformative style of seeing. Politics would then not reduce fiction to

preaching; art could advance even as the fiction advanced its ideas; the "dialectic" could continue to enrich life and art alike. One writer who did the trick was Christopher Isherwood. He was well placed to appreciate the political crises of the 1930s: he spent those years in Berlin, watching Hitler rise to power, and seeing the violence of World War II build. And he described these political developments in fiction, from a peculiar documentary point of view. The narrator of *Mr Norris Changes Trains* (1935) and *Goodbye to Berlin* (1939) at first calls himself a "camera," implying a certain direct realism, but that camera-view is always ultimately very much involved with personal lives: "I am a camera with its shutter open, quite passive, recording, not thinking. Recording the man shaving at the open window opposite and the woman in the kimono washing her hair. Some day, all this will have to be developed, carefully printed, fixed." Indeed Isherwood's narrator sees the rise of Fascism in Europe exactly as a real camera might: plainly, but also from someone's point of view, in the strange way photographs are at once just reality and also someone's choice of subject and composition. The result is a fascinating new combination, in modern fiction, of the personal and the political. We get a new sense of the requirements of subjective self-involvement, for we see how even a camera cannot really be detached from the real world. It does not depart from "objective" reality; it participates in reality, too, and can become complicit in political evil if it fails to admit it (to "develop" what it "records"). If we think back to what it meant to see things subjectively in the earlier, more deliberately experimental modern novel, we see how this represents a variation and an advance – how it makes the new political demands enhance rather than reduce the experiments of modern fiction.

The point here is that the new political novels of the 1930s were not simply realistic. If their writers took a documentary point of view, they did so with the prior decades' insights into the problem of "objectivity" in mind. Or, they did so knowing that their books would be ineffective if they were simply realistic. The novelists knew that they would have to *remake* social realism – make it more intense, different in its focus – in order to make it feel real to readers. This latter approach characterizes one of the century's most explosive works of social realism: *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck (1939). He set out to reveal the terrible conditions into which the Great Depression had put America's agricultural workers, many of whom had to migrate in

hopeless search for work and for food. Steinbeck himself knew how bad things were: he had lived and worked among the migrants in order to do his research for the book. And to some readers, the research too excessively showed: this was less fiction, they felt, than flat propaganda. Nevertheless, the book does not seek simply to protest the bad lives of migrant workers in full realistic detail. It remakes realism itself, by crossing it with something that is formally very different: the language and meaning of the Bible. It is not at all unusual for fiction to make use of biblical imagery and to model itself on biblical plots. But in *The Grapes of Wrath* there is a particularly modern tension between the real and the biblical – a tension that becomes one of the main means through which Steinbeck produces a critical view of reality. Were it not for this tension, his book might have been little different from the mass of bluntly political fiction produced in the 1930s. But the split vision and its results made for a more powerful indictment of the Depression's social disaster: indeed, it is almost as if the "mythic" irony at work in *Ulysses* (where we always compare the modern-day Ulysses to his heroical, mythic counterpart) is at work here too, and at work even more extremely, since in this case we have a much wider gap between the positive myth and the negative reality. Steinbeck's social realism makes fine use of a very modern ironic gap between the possibility of salvation and the reality of squalor. Even though it might seem plainly realistic, *The Grapes of Wrath*, like the novels of Christopher Isherwood, smuggles in modern form and characteristically modern concerns for aesthetic restitution.

In a way, then, modern experimentation continues, despite the fact that fiction seems to go political in the years leading up to World War II. Or it might be more accurate to say that experimentation could not cease. Once the first modern novelists made it clear that "reality" depended on how you saw it, that "defamiliarizing" descriptions were best at getting people's attention and changing the way they thought, that skepticism about progress was a necessary kind of wisdom in modern times, writers could no longer simply "write realistically." Even if they wanted directly to show bad social and political conditions, in order to help make vital arguments in a dark phase of history, they knew that realism was not some simple matter of saying what you saw.

But for some writers of the 1930s, the best way to engage creatively with dark realities was to mock them savagely – to take advantage of

the way wicked parody could at once be an engaged and an imaginative form. The master of this mode was Evelyn Waugh, whose novels share much with those of the modernists, but have a different attitude toward modernity's "opportunities." In *A Handful of Dust* (1934), fragmentation rules, and we are limited in the modernist fashion to the perspectives of particular characters. London life, defamiliarized, is also the context here, and there is no question that the skepticism of Ford and Faulkner is out in full force. But something has changed: whereas for Ford and for Faulkner skepticism works in the service of lingering higher hopes about humanity, in Waugh's novels humanism has given way to a sense of humanity's utter sinfulness. The title comes from T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922), and the waste land Waugh sees in modern life is one in which all values have been cheapened – in which a child might die without its mother caring, in which marriage and tradition mean nothing, in which the rich have no responsibility to the poor. But for Waugh these modern travesties are comic absurdities, and revealing them as such is a matter of ironic deflation rather than "questioning reality." The purpose is no longer to find a better form for modern reality; instead, it is to let the worst possible reality diminish fiction to bitter (if thrilling) comedy, all in order to clear the air for a return to traditional values. Waugh would ultimately speak of his objectives in terms of a reaction against modern writing – and a bid for re-establishment of the morality lost when fiction abandoned traditional moral centers:

> The failure of modern novelists since and including James Joyce is one of presumption and exorbitance . . . They try to represent the whole human mind and soul and yet omit its determining character – that of being God's creature with a defined purpose. So in my future books there will be two things that make them unpopular: a preoccupation with style and the attempt to represent man more fully, which, to me, means only one thing, man in his relation to God.[15]

Waugh's sense of responsibility – very different from but still related to that which made his contemporaries more politically engaged – ultimately meant a religious reaction against modern "exorbitance." At first, however, it meant a satirical one, which was yet one more way to limit modern innovation to "the real world."

What, then, becomes of the modern novel, in these satires and dystopias and other forms of compromise between aesthetics and pol-

itics? There are perhaps finally two views to take – two ways to see the possible survival of the modern novel into the bleaker, more political, less aesthetic years of the 1930s and beyond. First, the view that sees the modern surviving, and improving itself through a kind of correction; having become too detached, autotelic, and idealistic, the novel now chastens its aesthetic excesses and fits them out for better social responsibility. And second, the view that sees the modern failing, dying away due to changed historical circumstances; having become too detached and idealistic, the modern proves useless once the moment of aesthetic excitement has passed. Which view you take perhaps depends on what you think happens next – what happens after the political intensities of this period give way to yet other historical circumstances.

But finally we should note that some of Modernism's most extreme experiments in fiction came in or after this decade of anti-modernist activity. All through the 1930s, Joyce wrote *Finnegans Wake* (1939), which takes stream-of-consciousness narration, difficult allusion, and heteroglossia to unprecedented extremes – abandoning the "outer" world for a single night's dream which subordinates all of history to the mythical imagination. In 1936 Djuna Barnes published *Nightwood*, which devoted itself entirely to personal, sexual, and psychological eccentricity. Samuel Beckett's *Murphy* (1938), as we will see, suggests that the most important reality is that which one discovers when the mind roams free of all real-world encumbrances. And Woolf's last book, *Between the Acts* (1941), also subordinates history to what aesthetic forms can make of it – specifically, to the form of communal theater, which finds the truth about English history "between the acts" of real historical events. Here, experiment persists, unchastened and undiminished, although perhaps extended beyond Modernism. Perhaps these last experiments look ahead – to the moment in which the modern novel will get the replenishment of *postmodernism*'s new, experimental energy.