The Modern Novel
A Short Introduction

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Conclusions

Four Contemporary Modern Novelists

If it is true that the modern novel has survived – into the postmodern, the postcolonial, to be renewed and replenished by them – can we see some *contemporary* novelists continuing and replenishing what we saw in some of the *first* moderns? Are there writers writing today with some of the same motives – vying with modernity through experimental writing, in the hope that such writing might make a difference? Many writers today align themselves with the modern tradition, and here are four examples – four contemporary writers who often seem to want to continue what was begun by their modernist precursors. Many things make them modern (even though they are writing in the year 2000 rather than 1900), mainly their tendencies to explore subjective "impressions" of reality; to cultivate the life of literary language; to rebel against moral and creative convention; and to open fiction always to the truth of change.

Philip Roth was at first among those who wanted to turn the novel away from formal invention toward a more straightforward kind of realism. His essay on the state of American fiction around1960 called for writers to take from the extremities of American culture all they needed of invention: the American "here and now" was enough, he thought, to make fiction a truly modern enterprise (see p. 104). And it has been enough to make his own fiction extraordinary. Especially in *Goodbye, Columbus* and *Portnoy's Complaint*, Roth has made American desire – sexual, cultural, political – the subject of powerful skepticism. More recently, however, he has allowed key aspects of the modern

impulse to launch his fiction into new realms of invention, after all. Specifically, the metafictional view and the alternative patterns of purely physical urges have made his fiction a source of new forms for the American cultural imagination.

In much of his recent fiction, Roth has focused on characters very much like himself. In fact, his characters are sometimes writers, living lives hard to distinguish from his own, and the focus here gives him the chance to take a serious metafictional view of the ways that desires create reality. Most clearly in *The Counterlife* (1987), he experiments with the different fictions our desires force us to take for reality: here, a novelist like Roth himself gives us a set of contradictory stories, each of which elaborates upon different possibilities. But these metafictions tend to have a unique obsession: how do the imaginative fictions of desire try to fight against the cruel realities of physical mortality? How, in other words, do these opposite aspects of our physical being together generate the overall, half-real and half-imaginary, stories of our lives?

The obsession reaches its apotheosis in *American Pastoral* (1997). Here, Roth's familiar narrator, a writer named Nathan Zuckerman, takes on the making and unmaking of a vital American myth. A school reunion gets him thinking about the young man who had been the local hero – everybody's idea of the perfect American male. "The Swede" (called that because of his perfect blond good looks) seems to have had the ideal life. Jewish, he has nevertheless been able to cross over, and live the life Roth's narrator himself dreams of living. But Zuckerman discovers some flaws, some problems, and on the basis of the impressions they produce in him, spins out a speculative story very different from that of all-American perfection. On the basis of minimal information, he decides to "think about the Swede for six, eight, sometimes ten hours at a stretch, exchange my solitude for his, inhabit this person least like myself, disappear into him, day and night try to take the measure of a person of apparent blankness and innocence and simplicity, chart his collapse, make of him, as time wore on, the most important figure of my life." In Zuckerman's story, the Swede raises a daughter who becomes a terrorist – defying in every way the ideal life the Swede has tried to build for himself. She destroys him, in Zuckerman's version of the story, "transports him out of the longed-for American pastoral and into everything that is its antithesis and its enemy, into the fury, the violence, and the desperation of the counterpastoral

– into the indigenous American berserk." But we never know if the story is actually "true": it could be Zuckerman's jealous wish, to see perfection spoiled – to see the Swede suffer. And so this story becomes an extended "impression" rather than a reality. For that reason, however, it becomes a more essentially truthful document of American desire, of American fantasy. Roth makes the subjective reality the truer one – and *American Pastoral* is therefore a modern novel, experimenting with subjective truths in order to explore the fantasies and fears American modernity inspires.

Roth, then, is one contemporary novelist still committed to the modern enterprise. Another is Toni Morrison. In the speech she gave when she accepted the Nobel Prize for Literature, Morrison told a story. In the story, some young people visit a wise old woman, to ask her a question. They carry in their hands a bird, and ask the old woman whether it is alive or dead. The wise woman chooses to answer the question in a strange way. She tells them that whether or not the bird is alive, it is in their hands. For Morrison, the story is an allegory, in which the bird stands for language, and the old woman represents the writer: the writer is one who alerts the world to the way language and its powers rest in their hands. Morrison goes on to explore a theory about language that contains important connections to the past of the modern novel, and a strong affirmation of its future. Language lives always in danger of dying, through misuse and exploitation; it is always available to violent, racist, or mindless misappropriation, which make it act in suicide. Writers save its life, by turning it in the other direction, toward imagination and possibility, and by so doing they save us: "Word-work is sublime . . . because it is generative; it makes meaning that secures our difference, our human difference – the way in which we are like no other life. We die. That may be the meaning of life. But we do language. That may be the measure of our lives."[1] In this theory about literary language, Morrison reveals herself to be a modernist, in the tradition of Woolf and Faulkner, but also to be a modern writer with a newer sense of the way that a more fantastic imagination can help create new and better realities.

In *Beloved* (1987), Morrison makes the supernatural the means of adding to language the story of slavery that had been heretofore excluded by the bad kind of relationship between language and power. In its racist misappropriations, the language of power left no room for the remembrance of those who died, in slavery, beyond official history.

To change the official story so that it can now better include the stories of slaves, Morrison resorts to supernatural fantasy: Beloved is the ghost of a baby killed by her own mother, Sethe, who chose to end her baby's life rather than have her grow up in slavery. The event actually happened, but Morrison reimagines it, in order to supply the statements and expressions necessary truly to do justice to it and to the effects acts like it have had upon African-American culture. Beloved returns twenty years after her death to haunt her mother, and to compel recognition and remembrance. As a result, the reasons for the infanticide come out – as do the fully imagined implications of the deed and what it symbolizes for the state of African-American motherhood. What Morrison achieves here is a remarkable restitution, in line with her theory about fiction's service to language: what had been an historical trauma (a painful gap, a killing silence) gets answered through the supernatural power of a language that undoes death by speaking for the creative imagination.

Without what creative language does in and through the imagination, history would remain a matter of trauma; the vitality of culture would drain away, into what ignorance and violence would prefer to make of it. Morrison's writing embodies this conviction, and in so doing champions modern fiction as few writers have ever done: she justifies as never before the effort to try something new, in the face of modernity, for the betterment of the world. And she is not alone, for many other contemporary writers are willing to avow such literary idealism – to make such explicit connections between literary innovation and the health of culture. For example, Jeanette Winterson: not only in her novels, but in her writings about the purpose of fiction, Winterson has also championed the modern impulse to make the language of fiction a redemptive force.

Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit (1985) makes a hybrid of two very different things: evangelical Christianity and lesbian sexuality. You might expect that the second would follow and rule out the first – that lesbian sexuality would mean rebellion against traditional values. And to some degree, that is how it goes in Winterson's novel. Her heroine comes to see the hypocrisy and narrowness of the beliefs according to which she has been raised, and her modern self-realization is all about defying those beliefs in favor of liberating eroticism. But although Winterson's heroine is an iconoclast, she does not quite leave evangelicalism behind. In fact, its passions and excesses segue fairly well into those

of her new sexuality, and its structures (the chapters of the Bible) give shape to the novel itself. There is a hybrid here, a fantastic mixture of the discourses of religion and eroticism, and in it we see how tradition and modernity might mix in a new kind of revolutionary selfhood. The hybrid gives new life to a modern aspiration: modulation of traditional faith enables authentic consciousness, all in a new, bold language for sexual desire – all the product of Winterson's intention to "create an imaginative reality sufficiently at odds with our daily reality to startle us out of it."[2]

Winterson writes with the full confidence that the novel, in this sort of innovation, can create better realities. For her, writing is a kind of prophecy; it anticipates life, articulating the feelings and needs that would remain frustrated and ineffective, were it not for the writer's unique sensibility. Here we have most manifest the survival and extension of the modern novelist's hope to give better imaginative shape to modern possibility. In *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* and Winterson's other novels, we have most clearly the continued effort on the part of the modern novel to sketch out the emotional structure necessary for people to have powerful feelings at all. For Winterson would say that passion – what comes surprisingly in the combination of evangelical traditions and erotic subversions – can come to a world otherwise muted and pinched by modern priorities only through the experimental language of fiction. And she has said that thinking this way makes her an inheritor of the modern novel:

> To assume that Modernism has no real relevance to the way that we need to be developing fiction now, is to condemn readers and writers to a dingy Victorian twilight. To say that the experimental novel is dead is to say that literature is dead. Literature is experimental. Once the novel was *novel*; if we cannot continue to alter it, to expand its boundaries without dropping it into even greater formlessness than the shape tempts, then we can only museum it. Literature is not a museum it is a living thing [sic].

Winterson is committed to "a fresh development of language and to new forms of writing," out of a sense that language is "something holy."[3]

Far less rapturous is the South African novelist J. M. Coetzee, whose experience of the political turmoils of apartheid and its aftermath has

ruled out most forms of hope. Steeped in the impossibly grave situation of postcolonial South Africa, Coetzee has a perfect awareness of the obstacles there to justice and to happiness; steeped in the literary tradition of the modern novel, he has a perfect sense of just how far its forms might go in making a positive difference. What results, in his fiction, is a remarkable application of fictional invention to political exigency – something that entails uniquely provocative use of fiction's resources.

The Life and Times of Michael K. (1983) is a story about a very simple man, whose needs and feelings are few and mild. He finds himself, however, in the midst of the dystopian South African world. Chaos has shaken him out of his humble job (as a gardener) and the very modest home he shares with his ailing mother. A state of siege casts him out onto the road, in search of refuge on the farm where his mother grew up. But the search comes to nothing – and all along the way, police and doctors and abusers of all kinds prevent Michael from a very plain goal: all he wants is to cultivate a small subsistence garden, and live on what meager resources the land itself provides. In the brief moments in which Michael is able to do so, Coetzee dramatizes the purest human contentment:

> he was learning to love idleness . . . as a yielding up of himself to time . . . He could lie all afternoon with his eyes open, starting at the corrugations in the roof-iron and the tracings of rust; his mind would not wander, he would see nothing but the iron, the lines would not transform themselves into pattern or fantasy; he was himself, lying in his own house, the rust was merely rust, all that was moving was time, bearing him onward in its flow.

That this simple, free being is impossible makes *The Life and Times of Michael K.* an ironically harrowing allegory of South African life: all Michael wants is to be left alone, and yet he is never free from the "help" others force upon him. And the allegory gets unique complexity, and a revolutionary effect, from a powerful set of modern qualities. First of all, alienation: Michael K.'s inability to find home anywhere draws heavily on the homelessness of a century of modern protagonists. Second, perspective: uncomplicated and purely innocent, Michael can make no sense of the world in which he finds himself –

a failure that becomes a very successful way to stress that world's absurdity.

The allegory produced gives us the plight of modern humanity, but perhaps also the more politically specific plight of modern South Africa. What Michael would be alone – allegorically, what South Africa would be if fully free – is something we struggle hard to know. There is a doctor in the novel who tries to understand Michael's motivations, and tries to get him to eat enough to survive; when the doctor can't, and as he wonders why Michael would refuse help, we are forced to conceptualize a South Africa that would subsist on its own, free of false complication, authentic in purely its own way. To the extent that we can do so, and thereby achieve heightened political consciousness, Coetzee has managed a remarkable combination of modernist, existential, and postcolonial priorities. He has formed a novel capable of such extremes of aesthetic invention and political commitment that we can hardly doubt that, in its contemporary instances, the modern novel has gathered its strengths for a vital future.

The Future of the Modern Novel

But even if we say that postmodern and postcolonial challenges have enriched the modern novel, demanding new political engagement and formal complexities, and even if we say there are yet modern novelists writing today, finding ways for us to make ourselves more at home in modernity or to take aesthetic refuge from it, we might still need to ask: can the modern novel now be *modern enough*? For those postmodern and postcolonial challenges – those things that made the world so much more chaotic and diverse, thereby stretching the modern novel's representational capacities to new limits – have lately gone much further. Technological change and geopolitical conflict have become complicated in ways the first modern writers probably could never have predicted. We have entered a state that some call *globality*. Within it, does the modern novel have a future? Can it really continue to develop credible new forms of perception, thought, and social awareness – and can it really still make up a credible response to modernity? Or has modernity now truly left it behind, having become too total for any purely literary form to match or resist it, and having

chosen more technologically advanced forms of information to be its representatives?

Let us define globality in two basic ways – as a strange new *geopolitical unification*, and as the ascendancy of a total or global kind of *information age*.

International power, which once centralized itself in the hands of particular powerful nations that had hands in the workings of less powerful governments worldwide, has now dispersed itself all around the world. The world now is defined by "supraterritorial, technologically-led worldwide economic and cultural integration."[4] And power is no longer national, but multinational, in the hands of elites like global corporations and international finance organizations. This is the negative way to see the new world order in which boundaries no longer apply – in which the globe has been unified, but in a kind of *neo-imperialism*, and not therefore made a place in which all are equal and all is peace. Indeed for some theorists "*globalization* conjures up . . . a spectacle of instantaneous electronic financial transfers, the depradations of free-market capitalism, the homogenization of culture, and the expansion of Western, by which is usually meant American, political hegemony . . . widening economic inequality, worsening ecological degradation, intensified ethnic rivalry, spreading militarism, escalating religious nationalism, and other ills."[5] The more positive way to describe this state of geopolitical globality is to say that cultures have now completely mixed: in any major city of the world, populations are now diverse, and people have access to "world cultures" all around the globe. Globality brings a "complex, overlapping disjunctive order that cannot any longer be understood in terms of existing center–periphery models," and therefore promises positive change.[6]

How might we expect the modern novel to respond to this ambiguous new geopolitical unity? Would we expect it to use its powers to model diversity, perspective, and fragmentation to challenge the "totality" whereby global elites come to dominate the world? Would we expect it to use those powers to feature the aesthetic benefits of globality's cultural mixings – to produce veritable carnivals of heteroglossia, in which we might see world voices mingling into marvelous new languages for the imagination and for justice? Or would we predict that vast new global politics would have to outstrip the relatively moderate capacities of the modern novel – and that the full plenitude of

world voices would be too much for its narrative modes to handle? Has world culture, in other words, entered into a situation in which the modern novel (as a form for dealing with modernity, with significant effects on the individual and cultural imagination) will have become obsolete?

And if the new world order is not enough to make it so, wouldn't global technologies? Linked to the postnational make-up of the world is the way information circulates across it. If borders seem less distinct now, and old divisions less important, it is largely because information technologies have bound the world together into new communities. New media technologies – capable of breathtaking "immediacies" and unimaginably flexible forms of storytelling – disseminate creative productions around the world in vast quantities and at breakneck speeds. For this reason, "discussions of globalization and culture rarely deal with literature, but focus instead on those mediums that transmit culture electronically, which are imagined as having an especially powerful and even determinate impact on social and individual identities." And for this reason, it seems perhaps "pointless to worry about literature" – pointless to wonder about the power and impact of a form like the modern novel, which would be nothing by comparison.[7] For many of the things modernist novelists had wanted to do or to change are perhaps done and changed far more readily and effectively in these much more dynamic forms; and any effect the modern novelist may have wanted to have is far outdone by the impact of charismatic new visual and computer technologies. We might say that "human character has changed" again, for now "the interface relocates the human, in fact *redefines* the human as part of a cybernetic system of information circulation and management."[8]

Technology has drawn human character into new realms of innovation and change; the "new world order" has drawn politics into new realms of hybridity, community, and conflict. We find ourselves in the new situation of globality. And here we have to wonder: can the modern novel extend its reaches yet again to connect with new worlds of change? Can it incorporate modern technologies, evaluate and interpret them, absorb what lessons they teach about the nature of human thought, perception, and action? Can it make sense of changing social and political life, when they now expand to encompass and reorient so many new cultural possibilities and "ills"? Will globality make the modern novel a more interesting, dynamic, and powerful

form of writing, or will it leave the modern novel behind? Will the novel yet be able to face modernity in ways that will galvanize its forms and guarantee its necessity?

There are some reasons to think so – and some examples of modern novels that have made globality both the opportunity for new developments and the object of newly effective criticism. First let us consider the reasons why the modern novel might yet be itself a relevant technology, and then turn to those books in which we see it remaking its power to remain one.

In an article on globalization and the future of English literature, Paul Jay outlines a new plan for literary study. Given the changes entailed in globalization, Jay argues, we need to focus on the way literature may or may not involve itself in the developments of a new kind of consciousness; we need to wonder how fiction might help in creating the kinds of minds and personalities able to thrive in new global contexts:

> Global mass culture creates a postnational context for reimagining, organizing, and disseminating subjectivity through all the devices formally associated with literary (or cinematic) narrative. National scripts regularly give way to globally disseminated media scripts that engage the imagination complexly. This process suggests that we need to turn our attention away from a simple preoccupation with how national literatures function in relation to historically homogeneous cultures and toward an examination of how postnational literatures are instrumental in the formation of subjectivity in deterritorialized and diasporic contexts.[9]

Jay's theory here – that globality changes the way literature shapes how people imagine their identities, responsibilities, and powers – suggests that the modern novel might yet play a role in the way individuals and cultures make their larger imaginative frameworks. Even if the novel was first made for "historically homogeneous cultures," it can go "postnational," and, moreover, it can shape postnational consciousness; it can form the way people think and feel about lives spread beyond territories and gone "diasporic" or worldwide.

We get a remarkable example of just such a "postnational subjectivity," and a surprising example of how cultures might now mix in individual novels, in the work of one peculiarly global writer: Kazuo

Ishiguro. Both Japanese and British, Ishiguro has a keen sense of the things his two cultures share, and he makes the combination the basis for a unique critical sensibility. In *The Remains of the Day* (1989), Ishiguro writes about an English butler, a man who recalls his years of faithful service to an important English aristocrat. The aristocrat had tried to influence English policy in the years before World War II – not positively, it turns out, for he had tried to get the English government to appease the Nazis. Nevertheless, Ishiguro's protagonist had served him well, always putting his professional duties before personal ones, and never questioning his master's authority. But now, years later, he begins to see that all this was a mistake. Once he admits that his master had been wrong, he also has to admit the error of blindly faithful duty, and to see that he has really wasted his own life by giving it over so absolutely to service to another: "You see, *I trusted*. I trusted in his lordship's wisdom. All those years I served him, I trusted I was doing something worthwhile. I can't even say I made my own mistakes. Really – one has to ask oneself – what dignity is there in that?" This ending is tragic, and additionally powerful for the way it seems to be about many things at once. One man's tragic failure is one theme; but then also the failure of an English way of life is another; and, surprisingly, the similar but distant failure of a Japanese style of duty. Ishiguro seems to be writing not only about a tragic English temperament, but about a tragic Japanese one – out of a sense that the English and the Japanese have in common an excess of blind obligation, one that can lead to personal and to general disaster. Something about the way Ishiguro can combine two cultural critiques into one suggests a "global" difference; he seems to write with a world audience in mind, and with a sense that he can draw at once on different cultures and subsume them into the making of a fictional theme.

Here, then, we have a "deterritorialized" outlook, a hybrid subjectivity, and perhaps proof that the techniques of the modern novel are well suited to global complexities. And to complexities of the deepest kind – not just those of simply factual cultural diversity, but those of a deeper, stranger kind of mingling, this mixing of cultural temperaments deep within a theory of moral duty. If modernity now means combinations of cultural styles, perhaps the modern novel yet has within it powers of subjective perspective, skepticism, and "dialogism" that can show us exactly how the global subjectivity of a writer like Ishiguro might be formed.

On the technological end of things, the challenge is different. For even if the modern novel still has these powers to explore, explain, and shape consciousness, even if nothing else has come to the fore that might match it in this regard, its technological powers now seem strictly limited in comparison with those of new media forms. For example, the media form known as *hypertext*: as a style of storytelling hypertext seems to be everything the modern novel has been and much more. If the modern novel has been flexible, fragmentary, open, diverse, and in general a mode of questioning, hypertext is these things, too, and much more so. In hypertext we very well may have a form that has superseded the modern novel, by doing what it does, only better.

Hypertext is what has become of narrative fiction in the cyberspace, in the storyspace of the computer. In that medium, fiction is made up not of pages, but of *lexias*. And these units are not things that follow, as pages did, one after the other; lexias are of course threaded together in any number of ways, by the dynamic links among them. How their story goes depends upon the desire of the reader. Once begun, the hypertext story can link in many different directions, producing any number of different plots. The reader becomes the story's author, and the multiform plots he or she produces can exist all at once, or take shape in different readings at different times. Whereas once fiction was something made actively by a writer and then consumed passively by a reader, now it is something much more extensively interactive. Whereas once fiction was a limited selection of information, now it is encyclopedic – for there are in fact no effective limits on the amount of information that can extend and enrich the hypertext fiction's various plots. There are these advantages, and then other things hypertext has over the modern novel specifically: notoriously immersive, it can make readers feel a vital part of an immediate environment; notoriously kaleidoscopic, it can do full justice to a pluralistic universe; and, finally, so definitively digressive and lacking in closure (since a hypertext story can change from reading to reading), hypertext completely reflects the true openness and contingency of real life.

Michael Joyce's *Afternoon* (1987) was one of the first full hypertext fictions, and it remains an excellent example of the strengths of the form. Navigation through the story begins with the information that the narrator may have seen his former wife and his son dead by the

side of the road. Was it them? Has he been, in some way, responsible for their deaths? Are they even dead? All this remains to be discovered, but it can be discovered in different ways, or not discovered at all, depending upon the way the reader navigates his or her way through the lexias of the text. It is possible to take a short route through and learn nothing; it is possible to probe more thoroughly, and to follow the story through to some kind of completion, but even then there are lexias not visited, and closure only comes to the degree that you feel satisfied by what you have learned. If you are not satisfied you can of course try the story again. In any case, however, built into the storyspace are devices that shape your progress. For example, you cannot quickly learn things that the narrator himself would be afraid to find out. The program prevents it, blocking you from progress in certain directions until you have somehow earned the power to proceed. This and other such tendencies are what made *Afternoon* vital to the progress of hypertext. What might otherwise be a random game, a gratuitous clicking-around among different parts of a text that might never hang together and never give real narrative satisfaction, here becomes a fully literary experience. The openness of hypertext is combined with a compelling structure, and so we get all the advantages of the medium without the merely technological tricks that might make it just a game.

In *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*, Janet Murray explains these advantages, and concludes that hypertext partakes of "the most powerful representational medium yet invented," and that it is therefore likely to leave others behind. She quotes D. H. Lawrence's praise for the novel, and then says that amid new global realities, hypertext and other cyberspace narratives are necessary to do what the novel did for Lawrence:

> D. H. Lawrence argued that "the novel is the highest example of subtle inter-relatedness that man has discovered. Everything is true in its own time, place, circumstances, and untrue out of its own time, place and circumstance." The novel can put things in their place, can let us figure out what is right and wrong by offering us specific context for human behaviors. But in a global society we have outgrown our ability to contextualize. We are tormented by our sense of multiple conflicting frameworks for every action. We need a kaleidoscopic medium to sort things out.[10]

Once upon a time, the modern novel could hope to reflect "multiple conflicting frameworks" and help us to understand and manage them. But now, in globality, that multiplicity has grown so much more tormenting that we need a new medium in order to understand and manage it. Has the modern novel therefore had its day?

Will hypertext fictions ultimately replace the novel? Will we become so used to their openness, interactivity, dynamicism, their multiform plots and their encyclopedic range of reference, that novels, more conventionally composed of more closed sentences and uniform plots, will seem retrograde? Has hypertext outmoded the modern novel?

Or will hypertext fictions always be *too* open to satisfy the needs that modern novels fulfill? The great flexibility of the form might make it a different form altogether. Recall that modern novels have long been about striking a balance between the flux of the world and the solace of forms – what Henry James called "notation" and "reference," what Frank Kermode called "contingency" and "concordance" (p. 21). Never fully contingent even when very fragmented and dispersed, modern novels have always tried to mime disorder but not so much that it becomes formless – and to test forms that might be orderly and yet not so orderly that they falsify the "contingency" of modern life. If hypertext is fully "contingent" – all subject to chance, fluidity, play – then perhaps it does not abduct fiction into the world of the digital future, but instead makes an extreme but marginal game out of what fiction will continue to do within the pages (paper or otherwise) of the modern novel. And perhaps it will therefore be an influence rather than a replacement.

Or, perhaps, a warning. For hypertext is a special kind of chaos: one secretly subject to the will of the machine. Its promiscuous possibilities happen within cybernetic systems. Should we worry about this combination? Some novelists seem to think so, and they have therefore made this combination the crux of the global novel. For in every way, globality seems to involve just such a combination, freeing people, things, and information to move about with unprecedented speed and in unprecedented mixtures, but then making that happen within systems that seem, more than ever, controlling. To face this new modernity – this planned play, this systematic promiscuity, which takes place both among cultures and within the digital media – the modern novel has taken on a new form. The new form gives us, on the one side, a sheer diversity of objects, events, and people, mingling them

with careless abandon; on the other side, however, is a nearly parodic sense of the planned, the inevitable, the cybernetic.

Two of the most acclaimed novels of the end of the twentieth century are defined by this combination: David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1996) and Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000). These are both global novels – in their encyclopedic scope, their worldwide diversity, their technological edge, and their eagerness to take it all in.

The title of Wallace's book suggests a postmodern parody: *Infinite Jest* would seem to prepare us for that kind of dispersive playfulness, and indeed Wallace began writing under the influence of writers like Don DeLillo and John Barth (who, as we have seen, found ways to make postmodernism a vitalizing force for fiction). But Wallace takes us beyond the endless jokes of postmodernism and into the realm of the global by returning to the everyday and yet doing so on a massive, futuristic scale. *Infinite Jest* is set in a near-future moment in which disaster has made a wasteland of much of America and mass culture has taken over everything. Even the names of years are now given to corporate sponsors; the novel's present moment is "the year of the depend adult undergarment." And there is in circulation a video that incapacitates anyone who watches it – bringing the narcotic effects of television to a new extreme. Here we have the ingredients for a postmodern satire of consumer culture, or a post-apocalyptic dystopia, and these we get, to a degree. And yet more than these we get torrents of erudition, and sentences too richly ingenious to reflect a world drained of meaning; we also get a degree of realism that seems odd, given the book's fantastic tendencies. The combination calls to mind what Philip Roth had said about the new reality of American fiction back in 1961. Roth had claimed that American realities had become bizarre enough to make fiction experimental without additional formal effort. Wallace might have argued the same – now about the global system within which America has played so dominant a role. For that global system floods fiction with information, and Wallace here channels it into endless sentences, pages of footnotes, limitless obscure pharmaceutical and technical terminology – into a text that is at once explosive, realistic, and sharply designed. That combination, finally, is what seems to make the global difference, and to place Wallace's novel at the dawn of this new age.

If *Infinite Jest* globalizes the parodies of DeLillo and Barth, *White Teeth* does the same with the postcolonial postmodernism of Salman

Rushdie. Like Rushdie, Smith has chosen to make the absurdities of cultural diversity a comic way to explore and explode myths of identity. And like him she chooses to do so mainly at the level of linguistic excess – letting manic loquacity mimic the necessary insanity of the cultural identities of the moment. But Smith's world is more diverse, and less likely to fall apart. It is more diverse because it gives us hybridities and then third terms – confrontations of the Indian and the English but then the further complication of yet other cultures and mixtures. *White Teeth* is mainly the story of two families, those of Archie Jones (who is English) and Samad Iqbal (originally from Bangladesh). Archie is married to a Jamaican woman, and Samad perpetually worries about the bad English cultural influence on his children, and in the complexities that result from these attractions and repulsions Smith gives us globality in microcosm. The novel's scenes perpetually reflect – and yet also question – this tendency:

> It is only this late in the day that you can walk into a playground and find Isaac Leung by the fish pond, Danny Rahman in the football cage, Quang O'Rourke bouncing a basketball, and Irie Jones humming a tune. Children with first and last names on a direct collision course. Names that secrete within them mass exodus, cramped boats and planes, cold arrivals, medical checks. . . . Yet, despite all the mixing up, despite the fact that we have finally slipped into each other's lives with reasonable comfort . . . it is still hard to admit that there is no one more English than the Indian, no one more Indian than the English.

The "mixing up" here is typical of the novel and its globality, but typical also is the sense of what happens "despite" the mixing up: the strange cultural affiliations globality cannot undo. Conscious of these, Smith shows us how the modern novel might give us a valuable critical purchase on globality. Moreover, she takes on the technological side of globality, mocking the way it would "eliminate the random" from life. She makes fun of one character's plans to make the perfect mouse: "The FutureMouse© holds out the tantalizing promise of a new phase in human history where we are not victims of the random but instead directors and arbitrators of our own fate." In this extensive parody of genetic engineering, Smith indirectly mocks the routinization at work in global technologies (and in hypertext), and thereby carves out a place for the modern novel. For as she implies, it

must still be a form for vital *human* questioning, even once (and especially when) technological modes of information become the dominant thing.

Encyclopedic, exuberant, infinitely creative, and sharply real, *Infinite Jest* and *White Teeth* certainly seem to keep the modern novel alive. To some, however, they have been cause to worry about the future of the novel. One critic sees in their encyclopedic exuberance a bad kind of "hysterical realism" – something that might be a symptom of fiction's last desperate bid for attention.[11] Other novelists preferring something more traditional call for a return to some more spare, simple, straightforward style of writing: the "New Puritans," not unlike the "Movement" of an earlier decade, speak against the aspirations of the modern novel, and advocate a return to simpler methods.[12] And one contemporary of Wallace and Smith sees their fictional worlds as places so dispersed, processed, and fragmented that they make the novel wholly irrelevant. Jonathan Franzen, author of *The Corrections* (2001), worries that new technologies and cultural situations have rendered the novel unable to help now in our imaginative shapings of selfhood and society. What he therefore prefers, as *The Corrections* indicates, is a more "tragic realism," one that faces our new societies in a different, less exuberant way. His vision of the future of the novel places it back in a more traditional role, and in a more traditional form – not to flee from the future, or to give up on the creative imagination, but just to give up on "modern" pretensions. Or some of them, anyway – the more "redemptive" pretensions: "Expecting a novel to bear the weight of our whole disturbed society – to help solve our contemporary problems – seems to me a particularly American delusion. To write sentences of such authenticity that refuge can be taken in them. Isn't this enough? Isn't it a lot?" Franzen here presents a different challenge to the modern novel. Whereas globality might spoil its powers truly to matter, he wonders if those powers are even worth having – if it might not always have been better for the novel just to give us refuge in authentic sentences about matters of lesser weight.[13]

And yet Franzen also implies that the hopes of the modern novel are still valid. He speaks of the way fiction helps us in our life-saving "pursuit of substance in a time of ever-increasing evanescence"; and he admits that "even for people who don't believe in anything they can't see with their own two eyes, the formal aesthetic rendering of

the human plight can be (though I'm afraid we novelists are rightly mocked for overusing the word) redemptive."[14] Here we are back where we began, in a sense – back to the balance Henry James long ago hoped the novel could strike, and to the kind of redemptive patterning Frank Kermode called essential to the life of the narrative fiction.

So perhaps the best way to answer the question about the future of the modern novel is not to say whether the novels of the future are likely to be modern ones, but instead to stress the need, even in the "global" future, of what modern novels have always tried to offer. What have been the essential characteristics of the modern novel, and how might they be necessary to our future?

Modernity confronted the modern novelist, as it confronts us today, with a flood of facts, with an excess of sights and sounds and information. Facing this flood, the modern novelist stressed the need for fiction to become more selective, to boil things down to more essential impressions, epiphanies, and dynamics. When Virginia Woolf looked at the excess of factual details in the conventional novels of her time and called upon her fellow novelists to pare things down to essentials, she did so in the hope that fiction might cut through the excess of modern experience and get at what really mattered. Such a hope must only be more powerful today, when the information inundating us has grown to a far more massive flood. The ecology of modern fiction, its techniques for winnowing modernity down, its powers of concretion and concision, may very well be vital in the future. As may be its feeling: D. H. Lawrence knew that modernity meant alienation of abstract intellect from the life of the body, and what worried him has surely become more of a problem, in the information age. What Lawrence expected from the novel – that it would return the mind to involvement in real physical being, through its plots and figures for sensuous life – is something we might also still need from the form.

If our future is to be all about information, and we are to live ever more *mediated* lives, then it would be good to keep in mind what the modern novel has discovered over the course of the century of its existence: that immediate reality, or a full sense of connection to present life, is a valuable and yet completely elusive thing. As we have seen, the first modernist writers tried for immediacy, out of a sense that fiction could become most vital and most artful if it could make people feel connected to the present life of the moment. And as we have also

seen, such efforts tended mainly to end in a sense of failure – in a sense that language and experience must always be matters of mediation. This sense subsequently became a source of great interest and ingenuity in the postmodernist style of modern fiction, from which we might carry away important lessons about our future lives amid new media technologies. Like the narrator of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, we might become importantly conscious of the way any reality is what our forms of thought (our media technologies) allow us to see and to believe.

And then there are the inner realities, as well: perhaps the main talent of the modern novel, and the main thing we might want to preserve, is its power to question the margins and contents of the self. Just what makes an individual, if anything does at all, has been modern fiction's main preoccupation. What distinguishes the self from the world, enabling a person to deviate from the norm or enjoy personal agency; what defines the particular perspective of a particular kind of person; how consciousness cobbles together its contents: these are some of the key questions through which modern fiction has helped us to determine the very nature of selfhood. If selfhood is now to disperse across the globe – as cultures migrate, as people intermix, as media and information technologies turn the mind into a web – we might do well to keep trying to explore and describe selfhood in the ways of modern fiction. What *Midnight's Children* does to the self of its protagonist, we might try in the future to do to our selves: try to give them a form, through the shaping and breaking powers of modern fiction, and see how the result reflects the needs of our times and our lives.

Any number of other techniques and concerns could come up here, and the point is not to name them all, but rather to stress some of the ways that contemporary society can help us see what is yet important about the modern novel. Its future depends less on the future writing of new modern novels than it does on our perpetual appreciation of what it has permanently contributed to the modern cultural imagination. What it has mainly contributed, we might say, is the awareness that modernity confronts us – will now always confront us – with perpetual change and rupture, and that the survival of culture nonetheless depends upon the extent to which the imagination and its powers of representation can match change with a creativity of forms.