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Stephen Kern

Excerpt

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## *Introduction*

The period 1900–40 produced revolutionary developments in science and the arts. The rediscovery of the work of Gregor Mendel in 1900 revolutionized knowledge of hereditary transmission in showing that characteristics of organisms do not blend in offspring but are transmitted in discrete units according to specific laws, which ultimately became the foundation for modern scientific genetics. In *The Interpretation of Dreams* of 1900 Sigmund Freud laid the foundation for his theory of the mind as a network of unconscious processes and the residue of childhood psychosexual experience. Also in 1900, the introduction of Planck's constant to explain the spectra of thermal bodies was the first blow in a series of advances that led to a fully elaborated quantum theory by 1927. Most unsettling was the theory's indeterminacy principle, which put knowledge of subatomic events on a probabilistic basis, thereby limiting the strictly deterministic causality that classical physicists had posited throughout the universe. Albert Einstein's special relativity theory of 1905 maintained that space and time are not absolute and distinct but relative to motion and transform into one another. In 1908 Arnold Schoenberg composed music with no tonal center, while in 1911 Wassily Kandinsky painted no recognizable objects. No single literary change was as revolutionary as these others. However, the sum of formal innovations in the novel was revolutionary in providing new ways of rendering how people experience personal development, courtship conventions, family relations, urban life, national identification, imperial conquest, capitalist enterprise, liberal institutions, religious faith, and artistic creativity.

*The Modernist Novel: A Critical Introduction* is a study of how these developments were captured in the novels of the period. To achieve that end it offers (1) a precise analysis of modernists' formal innovations defined in the light of contemporary narrative theory; (2) a comparison of modernists' formal innovations with the preceding realists' rendering of the same formal elements; (3) interpretations of how modernists used those innovations to capture the political, social, and economic history of the period; (4) a unifying argument

about that history as a subversion and reworking of ten master narratives (personal, courtship, family, urban, national, imperial, capitalist, liberal, religious, and artistic); and (5) a corollary argument about the role that the artistic narrative played as a relatively unchallenged source of meaning in life as the values embedded in the other master narratives came under assault. Together these offerings define literary modernism as a new way of construing the world and interpreting its history.

My focal topics are derived from a definition of a literary narrative as the presentation of a *character* or characters in a sequence of *events* in *space* and *time*, *framed* with a beginning and ending in a *text* that is related by a *narrator*. The words in italics are the major formal elements that make up my table of contents. The term “formal” refers to essential structural features of all narratives. For example, all narratives have characters and plots, and so these are formal elements. All narratives do not have stable or unstable characters, strong or weak plots, so those variants are non-essential modes of the formal elements of character and plot that change historically. I identify subelements for chapter subdivisions such as the stature of characters, the scale of events, the texture of space, and the pace of time. Among these and other subelements I identify the following specific variants in the modernist period: absent protagonists, fragmented characters, “trivial” events, probabilistic causality, weak plots, literary impressionism, stream of consciousness, repetition of traumas and epiphanies, *in medias res* beginnings, unresolved endings, abstract and surreal styles, singular focalization, embedded focalization, and unreliable narrators.

I focus on formal innovations because modernism is primarily a set of new ways of seeing and interpreting the world, and narrative forms are the literary manifestation of those ways. This focus requires an analysis of literary form in contrast to literary content. The form-content distinction is like a third rail of literary analysis: it drives the entire system, but to touch it directly is deadly. The more one attempts to clarify that distinction, the murkier it becomes. Applied to a bottle of wine, the form-content distinction is precise and concrete in that the wine can be physically separated from the bottle. Applied to objects in art, the distinction can still be clearly conceptualized, as one can think of a violin in a cubist painting separate from the formal techniques used to depict it. But applied to human experience in novels, the forms of experience cannot be clearly separated from their substance even conceptually. Nevertheless, I do address the problem by analyzing how specific formal techniques at key moments in the story were used to capture specific contents. In spite of the formidable theoretical challenges of the form-content distinction, my study is grounded in it.

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Such systematic pairing of form and content distinguishes my approach as compared with other studies that include substantive history along with formal innovation but treat the two elements separately.<sup>1</sup> I treat them together. Pericles Lewis's study emphasizes a "crisis of representation" in modernist formal innovation but surveys the substance of that crisis in separate sections on political and economic liberalism, imperialism and racism, working classes and gender roles, urbanism and World War I.<sup>2</sup> David Lodge offers an excellent list of formal innovations but without referring to historical content.

Modernist fiction is concerned with consciousness, and also with the subconscious and unconscious workings of the human mind. Hence the structure of external "objective" events . . . is almost completely dissolved, in order to make room for introspection, analysis, reflection and reverie. A modernist novel has no real "beginning," since it plunges us into a flowing stream of experience with which we gradually familiarize ourselves by a process of inference and association; and its ending is usually "open" or ambiguous, leaving the reader in doubt as to the final destiny of the characters. To compensate for the diminution of narrative structure and unity, alternative methods of aesthetic ordering become more prominent, such as allusion to or imitation of literary models or mythical archetypes, and the repetition-with-variation of motifs, images, symbols – a technique variously described as "rhythm," "Leitmotif," and "spatial form." Modernist fiction eschews the straight chronological ordering of its material and the use of a reliable omniscient and intrusive narrator. It employs, instead, either a single, limited point of view, or a method of multiple points of view, all more or less limited and fallible: and it tends towards a fluid or complex handling of time, involving much cross-reference backwards and forwards across the chronological span of the action.<sup>3</sup>

I shall show how these and other formal techniques capture specific historical developments in the modernists' world.

I highlight innovative formal techniques because they are the most significant aspects of the modernist novel. Charles Dickens wrote about life in the big city, but he did not do it the way Joyce did. Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) is historical in an obvious way in that it shows a distinctive historical moment, Dublin in 1904, but its more important historical aspects are its formal innovations. Navigating through Dublin in 1904, Dickens would have lost his way, but trying to read *Ulysses*, he would have thought he had lost his mind. *Modernism* is about a new way of interpreting the world more than the substance of that world, just as Pablo Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)* is more significant historically for its cubist techniques than for its interpretation of five prostitutes. I do not neglect history but

reconstruct its contours as they were engaged by modernist formal innovations.

Collectively those innovations constitute a revolutionary set of ways of interpreting the world as in the following examples. Proust's focus on the seemingly *trivial events* of involuntary memory in *Remembrance of Things Past* (1913–27) recalibrates the significance of subject matter, as it gives far more attention to the taste of tea and madeleines than to World War I. *Weaker plots* mirror the increasingly weaker organizing authority of especially the courtship, family, national, and religious master narratives. The relocation of action from out in the world to the interior of mental life by *stream-of-consciousness technique* and *literary impressionism* captures how the chaotic outer world of especially urban life and courtship scenarios was experienced from within. *Multiple narrators* in Faulkner dramatize the murkiness of any single family narrative as well as the Southern national narrative. In James's *The Ambassadors* (1903), *singular focalization* through the experience of the protagonist Lambert Strether mirrors his initial limited vision about life and the narrow-mindedness of the capitalist world that he was engaged to serve. The dozen techniques that Joyce employed in *Ulysses* to capture simultaneous events in Dublin rework the urban narrative by creating the new sense of *simultaneity* made possible by new transportation and communication technologies.

Most attempts to interpret this time of social, political, and ideological turmoil center on its negative aspects: chaos (Erich Auerbach), anarchy (David Kadlec), crisis (David Trotter, Pericles Lewis), disintegration (Georg Lukács), dehumanization (José Ortega y Gasset), decadence (David Weir), disorientation (Michael Valdez Moses), disenchantment (Max Weber), unknowing (Philip Weinstein), irrationality and absurdity (Lionel Trilling), despair (John A. Lester), bewilderment (Paul B. Armstrong), fragmentation (Marjorie Perloff, Sara Haslam), breakdown of form (James M. Mellard), and a meltdown of "all that is solid" (Marshall Berman).<sup>4</sup> While each of these characterizations, aside from that of Lukács, implies positive aspects from deeper understanding, the focal concepts are still negative.

The negative component of my argument about subversion of the master narratives took shape as a modification of Jean-François Lyotard's famous definition of postmodernism as "incredulity toward metanarratives." As a consequence, he argued, "the narrative function [was] losing . . . its great hero . . . its great voyages, its great goal."<sup>5</sup> Like Lyotard, I focus on the fate of narratives, but in contrast to him, I substitute *master narrative* for his *metanarrative* that suggests narratives about narrative, which is not my subject. I apply his argument to the earlier period of modernism and switch

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the decisive change from incredulity to subversion, because artists do not merely disbelieve; they also, and more importantly, believe and affirm. I make explicit the interaction of negative and positive elements by adding *reworking* to my definition of the fate of the master narratives. So the thesis of this book about the substantive history of this period is that it involved a subversion and reworking of the master narratives.

The unifying positive attitude among modernists took shape around a celebration of art. This shared value is not surprising in that leading literary modernists were artists, and many of their works focused on creativity as the most prized source of meaning in life. By his famous exhortation to “make it new” Ezra Pound implied that it did not matter what *it* was as long as it was new, but it did matter to modernists interested in depicting their world. Modernists looked to art for reassurance that life had meaning beyond their everyday concerns, especially as the values and institutions that supported those concerns came under attack.

If I could conjure up a source for this study it would be a journal that Joyce kept while writing *Ulysses* in which he recorded when and how he sought to capture the circumstances of Dublin in 1904 and found inadequate the narrative techniques of his realist predecessors such as Balzac and Dickens. It would also explain which techniques he developed to capture those circumstances and why. While modernists did not provide such a dream document, they did note an assortment of innovative intentions, especially James, Proust, Stein, Woolf, Lewis, Gide, Breton, Broch, and Musil. Absent such a document for Joyce or any modernist, I contrast the modernists’ techniques with those of their predecessors, the realists.

Woolf’s impassioned questions about popular realist novels of her time – “Is life like this? Must novels be like this?” – I hear behind all modernists’ efforts to capture what life is like and how novels ought to be written.<sup>6</sup> Modernists indeed sought to render the world as it really is, while realists saw themselves as modern in their time. So I use *realism* and *modernism* not to categorize what is real or modern, because those features can be attributed to both styles, but to refer to techniques distinctive to the periods that are known by those terms. The remainder of this study offers extended definitions of those terms, but a brief introductory definition is in order here. Realist literary techniques, from roughly 1840 to 1900, typically include (1) narration by an “omniscient” third-person narrator or a first-person narrator who knows everything he or she needs to know about the story, (2) a presumption of the adequacy of language to convey that knowledge, (3) characters with integrated personalities who act in coherent if not predictable ways in accord with those personalities, (4) events that take

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place in a uniform space in clearly identified chronology, (5) a strong plot of important events that are causally linked, begin at an originary moment in time, and move toward closure to produce an intelligible overall meaning. Modernists alter these techniques, as Woolf put it, to capture what life is like.

The differences between realism and naturalism, roughly 1870 to 1890, are important, but I treat both under the rubric of realism because my purpose is to track a broad historical change from the mid nineteenth to the early twentieth century. The difference between the realist Flaubert and the naturalist Émile Zola, especially in their use of plots, pales in a comparison of both with the modernist Proust, whose weak plot centers on discovering why the taste of tea and madeleines filled him with such intense momentary joy and how to make it endure. My argument about distinctive features of the modernist novel is based on a comparison of modernist literary techniques with literary techniques of the immediately preceding period of the realist novel, not with anticipations of modernism in earlier times such as the mock hero and multiple styles in Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quixote* (1605–15), the achronology and unresolved ending in Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1759–69), the endless deferrals of action and intense self-consciousness about narration in Denis Diderot's *Jacques the Fatalist* (1796), or the physically horrific protagonist and embedded narratives in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818). My focus mirrors that of the modernists themselves who were schooled on realism and reacted to it more energetically than to the entire preceding span of literary history.

For thirty years critics have worked to expand the modernist literary canon for theoretical, disciplinary, and political reasons. I believe that it is time to reaffirm the valued status and galvanizing function of the canon's special evidentiary role. As a historian whose field is balkanized by the vastly different sources that historians use from all over the globe and across long stretches of time, often from obscure archives of unpublished manuscripts, I am particularly appreciative of the field of literary criticism that does have a canon that enables critics to respond to analyses of the sources of one another's studies with exceptional focus and passion precisely because they have read them, taught them, and written about them over many years. And so my focus on enduringly valued novels counters the trend in modernist studies to expand the source base of modernism temporally, vertically, and spatially, as one recent survey notes.<sup>7</sup> While these expansions introduced important new titles, repositioned the status of renowned works, and inspired illuminating analytical techniques, they also disjoined and dispersed interpretations of modernism, including the modernist novel.

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Expanding the time frame of modernism back to the mid nineteenth century or before compromises its status as a historically distinct period. Expanding sources downward from high culture toward more popular and formally less challenging novels entails slighting works of exceptional quality and diffuses the common source base that gives the study of modernism focus and creates a vibrant community of interest. Expanding the spatial range of sources globally makes it difficult to identify a common culture based on shared experiences. Europeans and Americans at around the same time experienced urbanism, feminism, monopoly capitalism, a surge of secularism, and the two major diplomatic alliance systems that drew the nations of Western Europe and America into World War I. Before the war Westerners communicated with increasing speed by telegraph and telephone and traveled freely without passports to different countries by new automobiles and faster trains and later by airplanes. In the interwar years they dealt with fascism, Nazism, and communism. The major historical developments that link Westerners and the rest of the world – imperialism and decolonization – divide between the strikingly different experiences of colonizers and colonized. Western writers rapidly exchanged work published in new journals and translated into their respective languages so that they made up a mutual readership and addressed a common public. In Bloomsbury, Schwabing, Montmartre, and Greenwich Village they gathered to discuss their craft. Even in exile they remained in European and American cities – Joyce wrote *Ulysses* in Trieste, Zurich, and Paris and not in Tokyo, Cairo, and Bombay. The American exiles James, Stein, Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Dos Passos, and Barnes were drawn to Europe and not to Asia or South America. Early on most devotees of serious literature read Flaubert, and then James and Conrad, and by the mid 1920s many had read Joyce. Proust won the Goncourt Prize in 1919, and Mann won the Nobel Prize in 1929. Modernists' novels are set primarily in Europe and America and concern people from those areas, and while they had unique styles, they shared concerns about the Western world.<sup>8</sup>

I rely on canonical novels not to enshrine a pantheon of classics but because they generally made the most historically distinctive formal innovations, which is what made them classics in their time. The modernist canon is also more familiar to readers, which makes it possible to refer to well-known novels succinctly without the extensive introduction of character and plot necessary with less familiar novels. Thus I can assume that my readers may know something about the character of Leopold Bloom and the plot of *Heart of Darkness*. I draw on Joyce's *Ulysses* more than any other novel because it is a particularly rich source of modernist literary creativity.

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My sources are primarily modernist novels. By way of introduction to most sections, I draw on a few realist novels with extreme brevity to sharpen my arguments about historical change. Such an evidentiary imbalance invites a reading of the earlier period as a mere prelude to the modernist period and may imply progress. I work to avoid such a Whiggish interpretation even if some modernists did indulge in one. In 1921 Gide noted in his journal, "I shall not be satisfied unless I succeed in getting still farther from realism."<sup>9</sup> Proust recoiled from the deficiencies of the Goncourt brothers' realism and in *Remembrance of Things Past* rejected "the falseness of so-called realist art" (*RP*, III, 915). In 1919 Woolf targeted classical realism in the work of her contemporaries in proposing that "the sooner English fiction turns its back upon" the "materialist" novelists H. G. Wells, Arnold Bennett, and John Galsworthy, "the better for its soul."<sup>10</sup> Five years later she added more strongly that those writers "have made tools and established conventions which do their business. But those tools are not our tools, and that business is not our business. For us those conventions are ruin, those tools are death."<sup>11</sup> In contrast to such views, I trace not a story of progress in literary excellence but the logic of change between two periods as avant-garde novelists developed narrative tools to capture their age in ways that they believed earlier techniques were not as well suited to accomplish.

This study offers literary critics, historians, and narrative theorists a new look at modernism. To literary critics it offers a systematic survey of the formal innovations of the modernist novel element by element and historicizes those formal innovations in two ways: by comparing them with what their realist predecessors did and by showing substantively how those innovations were used to capture changing historical circumstances. It offers historians a definition of the master narratives, an interpretation of the history of the modern period as a subversion and reworking of those narratives, and a suggestion that the new ways of writing novels may also have spilled over into the writing of history. I accent form over content not because I believe that new ways of writing about World War I were more important than new facts about the war but because from a historiographical perspective, the distinctive feature of the history written at that time was its form more than its content. Finally, this study offers narrative theorists, whose scholarship is largely ahistorical, some explanation as to why formal elements may have changed as they did in this period in response to literary as well as historical developments. A few narrative theorists note how specific narrative techniques emerge at certain historical moments but rarely address why such techniques came into use at those times.<sup>12</sup> Modernists



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innovated formally for compelling reasons, namely to be original and creative and to capture the substantive circumstances of their age.

## THE MASTER NARRATIVES

Master narratives make sense of experience for large numbers of people. My definition of them follows that of Allan Megill, who defined them as an “authoritative account of some particular segment of history.”<sup>13</sup> They pull together major developments that were the foundation for historical understanding and a source of meaning leading up to and including the modernist period. I cast the substantive history of this period into master narratives because it was conceptualized as narratives, and such formulations facilitate showing how formal narrative techniques were used to capture its substance. In this half of the introduction I organize the ten master narratives according to two principles: for the first six, according to the increasing number of people involved (from individuals and couples to nations and empires), and for the final four, according to the increasingly spiritual nature of the activities involved (from making money and seeking justice to believing in God and creating art).

*The personal narrative* is the story of an individual life from birth to death. In the realist period that narrative was of someone who moves in uniform space and time acquiring knowledge and governed by an ethical imperative that individuals should treat others as ends, not as means.<sup>14</sup> That person’s separate mental faculties are components of an essentially unified subject.

The major legal achievements with respect to personal autonomy were the abolition of the slave trade from Africa in the early nineteenth century, the emancipation of the Russian serfs in 1861, the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution in the United States in 1868 that guaranteed equal protection to all people under the law, and electoral reforms throughout the nineteenth century all across Europe that allowed more people to participate as citizens in the affairs of state by voting in increasingly democratic elections. The legal system was strongly voluntarist as jurists located criminal responsibility squarely in the individual self. Realists celebrated individuals with resolute wills and strong character, and while they acknowledged that some people lacked these qualities, they did not question whether a self underlay them. Later in the century observers tended more and more to explain aspects of the personality from social causes, but still retained a notion of a unified and responsible self.

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*The courtship narrative* is the story of gender roles, sex, and love relations. In the nineteenth century, middle-class men and women developed sharply contrasting gender roles. Men learned to work in the world, earn money to support a wife and children, and assume leading roles in the community, church, business, army, or state. Women learned to attract a man and wait for him to court while learning to sew, cook, play piano, dance, read, and teach children – skills for marriage and motherhood. Commentators viewed male and female as opposites, physically and mentally. Men were physically strong, rational, active, cool-headed, and adventurous, while women were physically weak, intuitive, passive, impulsive, and flirtatious. Sexual activity was oppressed from the outside by public censorship and suppressed from the inside by prudery. Still, men were somehow to acquire sexual experience to guide wives. The man decided when, where, and whom to court, while chaste and chaperoned women awaited his attention and marriage proposal. Then for a brief moment power shifted and women could play the active role in deciding yes or no. Women were more committed to the morality of love based on honesty, fidelity, and commitment, while men made moral choices in the public sphere.

After around 1890 this narrative was subverted by movement toward gender depolarization from findings in genetics (sex is determined by only one out of twenty-three pairs of chromosomes, the rest being bisexual), endocrinology (both males and females produce all three sex hormones – androgen, estrogen, and progesterone), embryology (fetuses are bisexual in early stages, and maleness emerges out of femaleness in later stages), gynecology (hermaphroditism is evidence of latent bisexual tendencies in both sexes), sexology (intermediate sex types exist and are called “inverts” and “bisexuals”), evolutionary biology (a latent human bisexual disposition derives from bisexual animal progenitors), feminist theory (Victorian ideas about an absolute sexual dichotomy are wrong), and psychoanalysis (psychosexual development is bisexual in oral and anal stages). Gender depolarization is further reflected in the growing concern among social commentators and moralists about “masculinization” of women and “feminization” of men. This subversive realignment centered on more aggressive gender roles for women, who began to engage in sports, ride bicycles, raise hem lines, stop wearing corsets, start wearing make-up, cut their long hair, travel without chaperons, discuss sex, use contraception, choose to have premarital sex, explore lesbian love, wait longer to marry, attend universities, enter “men’s” professions (especially during World War I), join women’s movements, access artistic academies, do nude self-portraits, develop a self-consciously female writing style, and vote.<sup>15</sup>