

Chapter 1

British Narrative Fiction in Terms of “Period” and “Treatments”

Exploring “Periodization”

An exploration of the grounds for studying 1900–1950 as a definable literary era claims our initial attention. Although this book takes those years as its boundaries, neither history nor literary history starts or stops on a dime. Suppose, then, for argument’s sake, as a test case for the larger span of years, that we hypothesize 1895–1916 as a literary historical period.

Topical subject matter given to fiction by history is one basis of any periodization. We have good reason to claim that women’s real-life struggle for social and sexual freedom is a prominent issue throughout the years under consideration. Multiple novels reproduce the struggle. Grant Allen’s *The Woman Who Did* (1895), for example, tells the story of a clergyman’s daughter, Herminia, who sees marriage as an artificial construction of gendered differences whereby the husband owns his wife. So, when Herminia falls in love, with enormous self-possession she rejects marriage with her lover, and bears out of wedlock the child she has conceived by choice.

Herminia and her creator Grant Allen, it can be argued, open a “period” divide between their modern selves and “the Victorians” (even though Allen is a “Victorian”) when Herminia asserts that the early nineteenth-century novelist Mary Shelley and the Victorian novelist George Eliot were not forthright in their novels about the sexual freedom by which they lived. In a later novel, Elinor Glyn’s *Three Weeks* (1907), the beauty and ecstasy of sexual relations out of wedlock are expressed by the heroine (a Slavic princess), who seduces a willing young English aristocrat. The princess is another of George Eliot’s critics: “your George Eliot,” she tells her lover, “must be classed as immoral because, having chosen her mate [G. H. Lewes] without the law’s blessing, she yet wrote the highest sentiments of British respectability!”¹

A widespread alliance of male and female novelists on behalf of women and in opposition to “respectability” is evidence of the trustworthiness of the hypothetical periodization. The heroine of H. G. Wells’s *Ann Veronica* (1909) breaks off a conventional engagement to give herself to a biologist

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who is her university professor, who has had previous affairs, and who has yet to leave his wife or to declare his love. No matter: she tells the biologist flatly that she wants him, and they go off together on an Alpine holiday. In E. M. Forster’s *Howards End* (1910), Helen Schlegel, one of the novel’s two sister heroines, is a single mother, proudly refusing marriage to her child’s father. The heroine of D. H. Lawrence’s *The Rainbow* (1915), Ursula Brangwen, benefits from the spontaneous abortion of a child whose father is an English soldier she has loved, but whom she does not want to marry. Evasion of marriage and motherhood becomes a virtual ideal as well as a common topic in the years we are considering. *Ann Veronica* was considered outrageous. *The Rainbow* was prosecuted for obscenity. But censorship was foredoomed by the array of novels and novelists against it. As Ann Veronica’s biologist says, “Rules are for established things. . . . Men and women are not established things; they’re experiments, all of them.”²

The topic of women’s freedom inspires associated topics, each of which illustrates rebellion and inspires novels to become experiments in liberty from regulation. Adultery, in the fiction at the turn of the twentieth century, is treated as a matter to be faced with intelligence, and to be justified or not justified in terms of the individuals committing it. Henry James’s *The Golden Bowl* (1904) depicts the struggle of a young wife to regain her husband: he is having an affair with her stepmother, who also is her best friend. The wife’s aim to win her husband back is not presented in terms of what is moral or immoral, but rather in terms of the possibilities of her employing her intelligence to realize her desire. The only morality, James’s narrative attests, is the application of mindfulness to the difficulties and possibilities of life’s givens.

The ways in which common topics are seen, more than the topics themselves, offer another basis for periodization. The long history of fiction repeatedly presents transgressive women or adultery as topics of interest. Topics in themselves, therefore, might be unreliable period markers. In the “period” 1895–1916 there are other leading topics besides women’s liberty: class conflict; new industrial and media technologies; the moral authority of religion; the politics and economics of the British Empire. The perspectives in the light of which those topics and their meanings are presented, especially if those perspectives are uniformly shared, might amount to a more solid basis for determining a literary-historical era.

Solidity is a relative matter, however. Informal parlance about fiction makes *topic* and *theme* interchangeable. But a topic, or a subject of “topical” interest, is merely a noun or a noun phrase – *women*, or *sex*, or *marriage*, or *liberty*; a theme is a statement about a topic. Statements, when denominated as themes, imply a unifying aspect of a fictional narrative, an idea or “message” that sums

up a story or a novel. A reader might claim that the unifying idea of *The Woman Who Did* is that marriage all but enslaves women. But such a statement is just one of the “messages” in Allen’s text. Topics other than marriage jostle with a putative single theme, as do characters and events. Herminia hopes that her bastard daughter will become a feminist leader. Yet the daughter rejects her mother’s principles, and her mother, too. Instead of only proclaiming a vision of progressive development, *The Woman Who Did* suggests the vulnerability of revolutionary advances to decisive reversal.

At the very least, then, there is in Allen’s novel more than one “theme”: programmatic assertion of liberating progress; uncontrollable baffling of the same. We could draw on the novel to formulate additional “themes.” Their multiplicity indicates the difficulty of basing a “period” on widely shared perspectives about topics alone. Allen’s novel illustrates what might be a constitutive lack of unified perspective in any narrative fiction, let alone in an entire “period.” Other kinds of discourse are less likely than fiction to resist unified meaning.

The resistance opens a distance between a fiction’s historical referents – its borrowing from history or its mirroring of fact – and itself. The very fact that a writer chooses fiction rather than another mode of expression indicates the writer’s desire to be detached from a real environment, even if seeming to engage it. This distance helps to immerse us in the world of the fiction, at the real world’s expense: we must be careful of hastily making direct or easy connections between a novel and what it is “about” outside of the fiction. The topical and thematic interest gives way to ideas and imaginations that might be valuable because they are more compelling – at least during the time we are reading – than the real history in which they originate.

Violet Hunt’s *White Rose of Weary Leaf* (1908) presents in its heroine, Amy Steevens, a variant of Herminia; in fact, the second half of Hunt’s novel has for its epigraph a poem “written” by Grant Allen’s character (the real writer is Allen). Amy works as a secretary, and then as a housekeeper, for two aristocratic families, the heads of which successively fall in love with her. She refuses to reciprocate, not because she condemns adultery – she has the same view of it as Henry James – and not because she thinks marriage (“the absurd bond that Society exacts,” she calls it³) is sacred. Rather, her motive for resistance is her refusal to think that love, or sexual passion, or sexual liberty, should be an all-determining influence. Her second employer attracts her, nevertheless, and at a critical moment, he deceitfully manipulates her into sexual relations with him. Once undeceived, Amy feels no outrage: “Why should she have made difficulties, . . . who had chosen to maintain that the sexual relation was a mere matter of detail?” Magnification of the detail was

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merely unacceptable “abstract morality” (275). What is not a matter of detail for Amy is her sense that “poor human life, without truce or power of appeal” is guided by “some Superior Power” that is identical with “Caprice” (275). She stands up to Caprice: she insists that there will be no continuing sexual intimacy between herself and her employer. He will have to keep his emotions to himself, as Amy will keep them to herself. She keeps them so, even when she discovers that she is pregnant, and must move to London to face single motherhood.

A victim of Caprice’s superior power after all, Amy dies in childbirth. She has not mastered fate, even though she has achieved liberation from the moralities and conventions regulating sex. Herminia’s poem – Hunt’s epigraph! – prays to Caprice that Herminia can be numbered among those who have suffered mischance rather than have caused suffering. The poem is aptly adapted to the story, but the story seems ill adapted to the topic and the history of women’s liberation. If Hunt’s fiction is mirroring history, is it not, especially in the light of Amy’s death, voicing – thematizing – its opposition to women’s freedom, and to the contemporary struggle for it?

An adequate answer to the question cannot be affirmative, because it would ignore the fact that Amy’s feminist, anti-patriarchal ideas are never withdrawn by her or by Hunt’s narrator. What would be ignored, simultaneously, is that the other characters as well as Amy move beyond our convictions – and the facts – concerning progress in the real social practice of women’s liberation. It is as if the novel were referring to reality so as to substitute its story and ideas for the accepted public associations and commitments that the story includes. It is those historical commitments, in the light of the narrative fiction, that might appear limited. There is more to Hunt’s invented history of Amy – more uncertainty, even more resistance to narrative shaping – than can be comprehended by actual liberties.

White Rose of Weary Leaf is not unique – not even among stories written by allies of women’s suffrage – in its simultaneous appeal to topical interest and its suggestion of the inadequacy of that appeal. Elizabeth von Arnim’s *The Pastor’s Wife* (1914), published more than twenty years after Grant Allen’s novel, values a woman “who did *not*.” Von Arnim’s heroine, Ingeborg, is the repressed victim of her ghastly family, headed by an Anglican bishop, and of her ghastly husband, a German pastor. She is tempted by an English painter to run away with him, but she resists the adulterous occasion.

The effect of von Arnim’s narrative is to enlist the reader’s anger against male egoism’s obliteration of any such female life as the heroine’s. At the same time, the narrative implies a superficialness, even a cheapness, in infidelity or adultery or promiscuity as alternatives to matrimonial duty. In relation to the

values historically associated with progressivism, of which the women’s movement and Grant Allen are part, the implication is dissonant. Why should not Ingeborg throw in her lot with the painter? Duty, as the novel dramatizes it, is nothing but a mask for patriarchal sadism. But just as von Arnim’s narrator makes the reader feel rebellious against marriage and Duty, so it also makes the reader feel that Ingeborg rightly rejects her opportunity for passion. The seized opportunity would betray an “awful candour of soul”⁴ that the painter recognizes in Ingeborg, and that dwarfs desire. Moreover, the specificity of the character of Ingeborg as von Arnim invents it requires complex description. Ingeborg is a “curious admixture . . . of childishness and spasmodic maturity . . . at one moment . . . entirely impulsive and irresponsible, and a moment before . . . quite intelligent and reasonable, and a moment afterwards . . . splendid in courage and recklessness” (308). The complexity becomes more the object of the narrative than the story’s comparatively simplifying historical references to gender inequity.

What fiction gives to historical “themes” with one hand, it takes away with the other. The latter gesture is hard for readers to come to terms with when real lives and real misery are historically at stake. Appearing side by side with fiction’s pictures of women’s oppressed state are novels and stories about the deprivation that informs the reality of working-class life. There is good reason to argue that the suffering of labor is a “theme” that contributes to, perhaps even determines, the periodization we are considering. Indeed, Thomas Hardy’s *Jude the Obscure* (1895) and George Gissing’s novels (from the 1880s to 1905) feature hopeless entrapments that oppress the working class.

This grimness undoubtedly strikes a reader as insupportable: something must be done (or ought to have been done!) to change the history that the fiction evokes. That, however, will be difficult to judge by the “message” of such fictional representations as Arthur Morrison’s *Tales of Mean Streets* (1894), about the poor in London’s East End. Morrison pictures the brutal intensification of patriarchy – hence, labor’s self-betrayal – in society’s lower depths. Apparently a lower-class unemployed man can, with impunity, exemplify the sadism of marital Duty: in “Lizerunt,” an alcoholic assaults his mother and his pregnant wife for not bringing in money (or for saving it), and forces his wife into prostitution. In “Without Visible Means,” striking London dock workers set off on foot to northern ports, hoping to find employment there. One of the least of them, suffering from tuberculosis, is robbed and abandoned by his fellows. In Morrison’s fiction the working class’s ruthless exploitation of its own members replicates the exploitation from above. There is no escape upward. Neddy in “Three Rounds,” unable to find a job, competes in boxing matches to little profit. When he wins one, the

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pain of being beaten makes him forget victory; and the victory simply moves him on to the next beating.

If Morrison’s fiction transcribes historical reality more than it cultivates invention, the prospects for any social change – let alone revolutionary change – seem nil. Nevertheless, fiction’s ability to exploit its own inventiveness by the way it treats topics introduces constructive freedom into a world whose hard facts argue for freedom’s absence. Morrison’s later fiction about the East End calls attention to the importance of his fiction’s way of seeing its objects, even more than its interest as real history. In *The Hole in the Wall* (1902), a working-class artist, commissioned to construct a pictorial sign-board for “The Hole in the Wall” (the dive after which the novel is named), takes his time with his depiction because artistic representation, he says, is “simple enough” only when “you’re thinkin’ o’ subjick instead o’ treatment.”⁵ In the art of fiction, treatment takes precedence over “subjick” even when the subject is life.

Treatment suggests a basis for periodization other than topic or theme. If we find, in 1895–1916 and beyond, either a uniform way of seeing and forming the objects of narrative fiction or a common emphasis on the overall importance of “treatment,” then we might more surely justify the period hypothesis we have been pursuing.

The working-class novel that most forcibly “treats” the working class’s historical betrayal (by capitalism, and by itself) and, simultaneously, its utopian socialist possibility is Robert Tressell’s *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* (1914). Almost a day-by-day account of a construction crew’s building of a manufacturer’s luxury home, the novel concerns a laborer, Owen, who is a sign-painter, a socialist, and an artist. His artistic ability is shown in his design for the home’s drawing room, which the manufacturer commissions him (on the cheap) to make. That work epitomizes for Owen the beauty of labor – good work for its own sake rather than for profit’s sake. Unfortunately, the question of profit is always crowding in.

The workers are Tressell’s “subjick.” His invention of Owen’s task is his “treatment” of his subject, so that Owen’s beautiful design can be seen as an epitome of socialist and artistic values that are not exchangeable for exploitative capitalist ones. Readers working through the text are made to view the “subjick” anew, but Owen’s fellows cannot grasp an alternative perspective about themselves. Owen and another worker, Barrington, are mocked for urging conversion to socialism. Owen, fatally tubercular, goes to his grave overwhelmed by perplexity. His fellow workers do not want to oppose the economic causes of their poverty even when they know them. Nevertheless, on his deathbed, Owen still hopes.

His ally in hope is Barrington. In the novel’s last pages, Barrington, an unshakable socialist, discloses that he has been a down-and-outer only by disguise: in fact a rich man’s son, he has pretended to belong to the working class so that he can find out how it lives. Owen accepts the disclosure without comment, curiously blank in the face of Barrington’s fiction. Does Tressell “treat” his narrative’s status as fiction by shrugging off, Owen-like, the part that disguises reality? Does he want readers to attend to the fiction as nothing but a convenient cover for a socialist textbook? Affirmative answers are creditable, but they would be wrongly limiting. Barrington has been constrained to approach the reality of class by way of a fictional detour; that detour was his road to truth. Without immersion in fiction, Barrington would not have arrived at his goal.

“Treatment” might also be called “form” or “craft” or “technique.” The narrative artist is a technologist of sorts when it comes to handling subject matter. The claim of fiction to represent an alternative reality – indeed to be an alternative reality, one on which an alternative knowledge of fact and history might even depend (as Barrington depends on a fictive identity) – takes a compelling turn in novels and stories about technology in our “period.” Rudyard Kipling’s treatments of subjects such as trains, ships, and airplanes; global communications; civil engineering; and radio exemplify fiction itself as a technology, an ally of ever-advancing revolutions in economics and labor. In Kipling’s “The Ship That Found Herself” (1895), the protagonist is a new cargo-steamer, “the outcome of forty years of experiments and improvements in framework and machinery.”⁶ Its maiden voyage tests the improvements. Once the ship is launched, there are no people in the story. Instead, the components of the ship talk to each other when in response to a powerful storm they try to live up to their functions. They must balance their separate rigidities with “give.” The rivets are especially shaken. Other mechanical voices exhort them to share the strain of the seas, because only collective effort will get the ship past its virgin test. Once it does, the ship has found herself: an integrated identity has emerged. Technology achieves in its nonhuman constituents the solidarity that Owen despairs of.

Of course, the materialist-oriented realism of Kipling’s story about a solitary collective labor is all fantasy. The parts of a machine do not discuss their will to cohere or to respond to strain, unless we allow a fictive projection to persuade us of that. The projection is not a match with material fact, but rather an ideal of integration. Real engineers who design real machines might be motivated by such an ideal – a perfect mechanical fusion of stability and flexibility, of self-containment and responsiveness to everything outside. But the ideal, even if it inspires industry, escapes history. A fiction, in contrast, can

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be the vehicle of the ideal, and embody it. Indeed, in “The Ship That Found Herself,” Kipling seems to treat the ship as a metaphor for his story. The story has become the subject. A narrative fiction’s words are its machines and rivets, disseminated and structured as events, characters, and ways of seeing. To discover what the fiction is “about,” we must attend to the writer’s handling of its component structures, each of which is a voice, and each of which speaks to, and rivets, other parts of the text. In various phases of rigidity and “give,” the separate elements can come together into a unity only at the end.

Yet the integrity of the text is also the sign of a division. The unifying of elements takes place at best only inside the text, under the guiding craft of the writer. The unity between fictional vehicle and nonfictional meaning, and between fiction and historical material fact, is more apparent than real. Moreover, inasmuch as the story loans itself to extended simile – the ship is treated as a person, even though it is inanimate; the ship is treated as a likeness of a fiction’s inward construction – the narrative is divided between its immediate “message” and its separable meaning (the meaning is an interior cargo!). The ship in Kipling’s story finds itself, but the reader finds that the ship’s meanings are not self-identical, and instead solicit translation into other terms, including those of the form of the story.

To get out of history and into the fictional transport promises an alternative view of life, a creative detachment. A great body of fiction has for centuries “treated” its subjects in a mode called “realism.” This mode invites analysis of fiction as if it were both a match for history and inseparably attached to it. An equally great body of fiction has, for even more centuries, treated its subjects in a mode known as “romance.” Romance is detached from everything ordinary, limited, and limiting. Its characters verge on or are ideals – of evil as well as good. Such fiction includes supernatural agents, magic and magical powers, animals and inanimate things that talk, sites without location on any real map, interplanetary travel, and entire alternative worlds. Horror stories and gothic tales are spin-offs of romance. Which moral or ethical standards regulate or judge those alternative worlds is up to the writer of the romance to invent. Almost invariably romance fiction makes central to its interest a quest story: a protagonist’s search, through thick and thin, for a wondrous object or person.

Despite the differences in the realist and romance modes of treatment, it might be argued that, in many writers’ practice between 1895 and 1916, the contrast between the modes breaks down. Undermining realism by subverting the divide between it and romance, these writers emphasize fiction’s ability to forge its representations rebelliously in regard to previous artistic convention.

As a result, fiction’s power to form or reform historical topics and themes becomes itself a conscious, newly prominent topical interest of novelists. The terms “form” and “treatment,” as I have been using them are intended to be synonymous. Despite the diversity of the fictions by Hunt, von Arnim, Morrison, Tressell, and Kipling, we have noted in them an emphasis on treatment that amounts to an underlying convergence.

The convergence suggests the aptness of applying a period term to it. “Modernism” is the now customary name for an era of artistic expression that enhances the profile of treatment, and that is accompanied by nontraditional experiments with the form of fiction, with uses of language, or with both. In the years we are considering, the revelation of realism as no less an invention than romance becomes a “modernist” keynote. It is one example, and one result – only one – of a generalized new consciousness about the nature of fiction and, as it were, the technology of making it. The period label signifies an investment by writers in laying bare and making explicit in their work the “machinery” whereby novels and stories only apparently represent the real world.

To be sure, the novelty of “modernism” in verbal art is complemented by real historical changes – the women’s movement, the socialist movement – that also reject the past. The word *modernism* was earlier used in Thomas Hardy’s *A Laodicean* (1881) to characterize the novel’s economically and emotionally liberated heroine, its world’s advanced technologies (telegraphy; photography, including a rudimentary photo shop), its innovative architecture, and its new neutrality in regard to moral values – in short, for novelty as a historical fact, no less than as an aesthetic mode. In Victorian usage, the term also means a revolt against religious authority. (That revolt prominently appears in novels discussed in this chapter’s next section.) As we move into and past the 1890s, modernism accretes associations with additional rebellions. By 1929, its place as a recognizable and secure period marker is exemplified in Laura Riding and Robert Graves’s *A Survey of Modernist Poetry*, a retrospect of innovative verse in previous decades.

The present pages establish the marker again, and underwrite it. In doing so, they suggest history as fiction’s mainspring. Nevertheless, the twinning of factual and fictional innovation does not conclusively assure a cause-and-effect relation between what happens historically and what results in fiction. Modernist fiction is not automatically motivated or determined by facts outside of it. We might be wary of mechanical explanations – such as determinism – because science in the very period we are considering undermines causal thinking. The era’s discovery of radio waves disrupted our reliance on intelligible causation. Radio made matter seem disembodied,

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liberated from our usual ways of manipulating things. A new mystery, conjuring sounds or words out of the air, seemed now to govern the sources of events. In “Wireless,” a Kipling story from 1905, an amateur experiment with radio signals is jammed by an unexpected transmission: John Keats, the poet who died in 1821, is broadcasting from an eternity of Herzian waves one of his famous odes. Dissolving differences between past and present, between far and near, between death and life, the crossed wires of the technological experiment imply that prior modes of thought cannot explain modern – or modernist – physics. Moreover, old technologies of communication (poetry, writing, history) are not the recognizable entities we thought them.

Inasmuch as new science frees the world from causal determinism, science and fiction suggest that they are a match. History, too, in the light of a liberty from the limits of determinism, can be seen as another romance, rather than as a matter of fixed facts. Consequently, it would seem, fiction cannot claim a radical freedom of invention as its own special nature. Nevertheless, that fiction’s inventiveness can be at one with the new reality of the world is not a problem but a hope. The time- and fact-transcending dimension of “Wireless” portends the actuality of the impossible. It is a portent that comprehends utopia. H. G. Wells’s *A Modern Utopia*, also from 1905, communicates with a double of the world we know, but one where gender, class, and race struggles are resolved. The resolution is here and now, even as it is distant, thanks to fiction’s uncanny wavelengths.

Still and all, the “awful candor” of fiction keeps it at a distance from history even when the latter, or science, seems to be going fiction’s way. Wells’s *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896) represents a scientist who believes that evolution can be manipulated by surgical technology. Making use of dismemberments and grafts, Dr. Moreau splices together individuals of different nonhuman animal species in the service of producing novel humanoids. If he can make the spliced beasts into near-humans, then an accelerated evolution for human animals – toward enlarged rationality, and freedom from subjection to pleasure and pain – can be realized by the next phase of research. The narrator of the story, who has by chance landed on Dr. Moreau’s island, is appalled by what he discovers: the spliced creatures are living botches. Yet when the narrator returns to life in London, he is convinced that his fellows are no different from the creatures of Dr. Moreau’s mangling. Humanity seems the product of a mad inventor who experiments blindly for experiment’s sake, despite the cost in pain and terror for his subjects. Reality and romance are horribly one. An experimenter who splices unlike things to invent a new life form or a new reality in this way might be seen to exemplify God – or a writer of fiction, especially a modernist one.