

## CHAPTER ONE

*The modern novelist as redeemer of the nation*

James Joyce's Stephen Dedalus, in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, ends his diary entry for April 26 with a declaration that could stand as a motto for many of the novelists of his day: "Welcome, O life! I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race."<sup>1</sup> The conjunction "and" in this little manifesto suggests the close but oblique relationship between the two goals the aspiring novelist has set for himself. The encounter with experience seems a deeply personal goal, while the forging of the conscience of the race has important political implications. Stephen links the personal and political goals by claiming that the forging will take place in the smithy of his soul. The problem that has faced many literary critics in interpreting Stephen's goal, as in understanding modernism more generally, has been that the quest for an authentic form of a pure, inner experience seems at variance with the desire to transform the race. If Stephen really wants to serve his race, then why does he leave Ireland and bury himself in books? Why not join the nationalist movement and fight for political independence? Or why not, at least, write a work that will rouse other Irishmen and women to political action?

Stephen's answer to these questions depends on a rather odd form of theology in which the idea of the "race" takes the place reserved in the Catholic tradition for the idea of God, the only "uncreated" being. The actual living members of the Irish nation become the Church of this new religion. Stephen himself plays the role of Christ in a new nationalist theology, redeeming his nation by reshaping the conscience of his race. This theology places an emphasis on the role of the race in shaping the individual's experience that Joyce's critics have often ignored. Stephen's use of the expression "uncreated" has often been taken to imply that Stephen plans to create a brand new racial conscience from nothing (to "forge" in the sense of "inventing"). Most critics assume that

Stephen wishes to break free from Irish tradition and to invent something entirely new, in a Godlike *creatio ex nihilo*. Seamus Deane, for example, writes of the passage: “Endlessly repeated experience is going to be made into something that has so far remained ‘uncreated,’ . . . [as Stephen produces] a writing that is not embedded in or reducible to the categories of previous Irish experience.”<sup>2</sup> The original and most common meaning of “uncreated” suggests precisely the opposite interpretation, however. In Christian dogma, “uncreated” refers to the Creator, who is “of a self-existent or eternal nature,” precedes Creation, and is the source of the entire created world.<sup>3</sup> By calling the racial conscience “uncreated,” Stephen suggests not that this collective soul remains to be invented, but rather that it is itself the source of all experience. In forging the uncreated conscience of his race, then, Stephen will not be inventing something entirely new, but re-enacting and thus reshaping an eternal substance that precedes and conditions all his personal experiences. Stephen’s experience, like the flames of the smithy, will give a new form to this substance, which he has inherited and which inhabits his soul. The racial conscience is the source of all Stephen’s experiences, but, as a great soul, Stephen in turn transforms the racial conscience. Thus the individual, unique encounter with reality that Stephen plans for himself in Paris has not only a personal but a racial, and national, significance. Contrary to much of the Joycean critical tradition, Stephen imagines not an absolutely original creation but a transformation of the ideal racial conscience he embodies through yet another encounter with the reality of experience.

The racial conscience is a sort of god that Stephen plans to serve through his writing and his personal experience. Stephen proposes to do rather more in his writing, however, than simply justify the ways of God to Irishmen. In Christianity, the only “uncreated” being is God. In Stephen’s theology, it is “the conscience of [the] race” that is uncreated, and Stephen himself is its prophet, or perhaps its redeemer. Just as Christ stands for all humanity in his death on the cross, Stephen plans to become a Christ-figure, redeeming his “Godforsaken” race by symbolically standing for the Irish nation as a whole (p. 37). This image of the modernist novelist as redeemer of the nation contributed to Joyce’s reworking of a literary archetype of nineteenth-century realism, the novel of disillusionment. The heroic narrator-protagonist became, in Joyce’s vision, the focus for a reawakening of national consciousness centered on the awareness that individuals are both subjects and objects of historical processes. The sovereign nation-state was, for Stephen

Dedalus as for many of his contemporaries, the social unit that could allow individuals who shared nothing but a common cultural heritage to grasp the fact of their conditioning by historical circumstances and to come to consciousness of their collective ability to shape their own destinies. This awakening of national consciousness from the nightmare of history was a primary concern of the novelists who undertook the literary experiments we have come to label “modernist.”

THE MODERNIST NOVEL AND THE CRISIS OF LIBERAL  
 NATIONALISM

In linking the novelist’s personal lived experience with the forging of a national consciousness, Stephen epitomizes an attitude that influenced the development of modernism in the European novel around the turn of the century. This study addresses the role of the modernists’ experiments with the form of the novel in their attempts to rethink the values and institutions associated with the sovereign nation-state. In various ways, the novelists considered here (Joyce, Conrad, Proust, and d’Annunzio) used their own experience as a model of the national situation. They shared Stephen Dedalus’s interest in a mystical relationship between the novelist-hero and his people (the novelist-hero in these cases is nearly always male; clearly, the discourse is “gendered”). The modernists represented this relationship through an account of the vagaries of the novelist-hero’s consciousness of the nation-race rather than through a chronicle of the external social and political events of their era. They frequently concerned themselves with what Louis Althusser would later identify as the subject’s “interpellation” by society and the state, that is, with the processes whereby an individual comes to inhabit a particular set of beliefs (an ideology) and to “live, move, and have [his] being” within that set of beliefs, as Althusser says, quoting St. Paul.<sup>4</sup> The aspect of this interpellation that seemed most fundamental to many of them was the individual’s belonging to a particular nationality. Today, we might refer to this shaping of the individual by the nation as an effect of “culture,” but each of the modernists considered here described nationality in terms of “race.” Like Stephen, these novelists tended to use the word “race” to refer to the complex amalgam of biological and cultural factors that made up their conception of the nation, although each used the term in a way conditioned by his particular political and intellectual heritage.

Many critics have interpreted the modernists’ concern with psychology, with the subjective experience of time, and with the form of the

novel itself as a sign of “introversion”<sup>5</sup> or of a lack of political commitment, corresponding to a rejection of the “external reality” that concerned nineteenth-century realist novelists. Yet, as Stephen’s diary entry suggests, the modernist novel does not reject external reality entirely; rather, it concerns itself with the relationship between the individual consciousness and the external reality that it confronts. Perceiving a gap between the meaningful inner life of the individual consciousness and an outer world that shapes that inner life but seems in itself devoid of spiritual meaning, the modernists sought a means to bridge that gap, to glean a meaning from that apparently senseless outer world. Famously, they found in art itself the means of transforming the contingencies of everyday life into a meaningful formal structure. Yet many novelists of the modernist period found another, less often noted means of mediating between the apparently hostile and meaningless social world and the meaningful but powerless consciousness of the individual novelist-hero. They found it in the idea of a national consciousness, which lent an apparently eternal, if not universal, significance to their isolated experiences and offered a matrix through which to interpret events that otherwise appeared to lack any internal logic.

Many of the characteristic formal concerns of the modernist novel first found expression in the works of novelists who reached maturity in the 1890s. The use of multiple and highly subjective narrators, attempts to transcribe the “stream of consciousness,” the non-linear representation of time, poetic prose, self-consciousness about the form of the novel, and reliance on myth, private symbolism, the leitmotiv, and literary allusion all arose from the reaction against realism and naturalism during the last decades of the nineteenth century. Each of the main formal elements of modernism had appeared separately by the time that the fictional Stephen proposed, around 1902, to forge in the smithy of his soul the uncreated conscience of his race. It was in the period leading up to the First World War that they began to coalesce in the forms that, after the war, would characterize “high” modernism. In the novel, these formal experiments were linked by a rethinking of the relationship between the objective, omniscient narrator and individual characters with limited, subjective perspectives.

The novel, as a genre, had always depended on – and played with – this relationship.<sup>6</sup> Stories had been told by unreliable first-person narrators since Defoe and Richardson. Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* called attention to the artificiality of realistic narrative conventions. What distinguished the first generation of modernists, however, was their

shared concern to work out, in novelistic form, the implications of perspectivism, the notion that no purely objective account of the external world is possible – that any such account would necessarily be the product of a particular consciousness and perspective. The solution of this philosophical problem was a primary concern of Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*, and the problem itself was already latent in Descartes’s *Meditations*. It was Nietzsche, however, who pushed the implications of perspectivism furthest, for example in his statement that “everything has become: there are *no eternal facts*, just as there are no absolute truths.”<sup>7</sup> The modernists differed from earlier novelists not in recognizing the fact that our perceptions of reality are always mediated by language and by consciousness – that recognition was at the root of the very form of the novel in general. Rather, the modernists were remarkable for investigating in a concerted way the possibility that the mediated nature of our consciousness might preclude our ever arriving, by rational means, at a consensus as to the nature of external reality. Modernist experiments implied that our perceptions of the outside world and of each other are so tainted by culturally specific or individually idiosyncratic values that there might be no way of arbitrating fairly between the competing claims of various individuals or groups – no eternal facts, no absolute truth, hence no absolute justice.

One typical response to the problems of perspectivism raised in Nietzsche’s thought was a turn to an organic conception of the nation as the source of all values. The old God was dead, but in the nation many intellectuals and popular movements found a new God. Ernest Gellner has observed: “Durkheim taught that in religious worship society adores its own camouflaged image. In a nationalist age, societies worship themselves brazenly and openly, spurning the camouflage.”<sup>8</sup> The last decades of the nineteenth century witnessed a dramatic increase in the influence of the organicist conception of the nation-state. Nationalism had, from the French revolution to 1848, largely been associated with political liberalism, with which it shared the principle of the self-determination of peoples. As Eric Hobsbawm has noted, however, a “sharp shift to the political right of nation and flag” occurred after 1870, partly as a result of attempts by authoritarian governments to make use of nationalist sentiment for their own ends and partly because the apparent triumph of liberal nationalism in Western Europe had failed to secure in a meaningful way the long-awaited goals of liberty, equality, and fraternity.<sup>9</sup> From the 1870s onward, the United Kingdom, France, and Italy were ruled by liberal political systems that included representative bodies such

as parliaments. In the period preceding the first world war, national liberation movements gained in strength throughout Europe and emerged in the rest of the world. Liberal nationalism seemed to triumph in 1919 in the Treaty of Versailles, by which the victorious powers redrew the map of Europe along national lines, enshrining the “principle of nationality” in international law.

Yet, during this same period, the principles of nationalism and liberalism were increasingly at odds. New, “organic” conceptions of the nation-state undermined the traditional politics of nineteenth-century liberal nationalism. The institutions of the liberal nation-state, newly established in much of Europe, were under attack from the authoritarian right. In Great Britain, the term “imperialism” was given its modern use to describe nationalist propaganda in support of overseas adventures. The imperialist conception of the national interest conflicted with that of traditional British liberalism, and the British Liberal Party split in two over the question of Home Rule for Ireland. In Ireland itself, after Parnell’s death in 1891, a new, “cultural” nationalist movement subscribed to a theory of the “Celtic Race” and excluded Protestants from its definition of the Irish nation.<sup>10</sup> In France, the nationalist side in the Dreyfus affair questioned the liberal principle that all citizens should be equal before the law. A racial conception of “Jewishness” contributed to a uniquely modern form of anti-semitism in which Jews were represented as incapable, for reasons of racial heredity, of being assimilated into the French nation. Right- and left-wing opposition in Italy led to a continual crisis of the liberal parliamentary system there from the late 1890s onward. Radicals and ultra-conservatives formed a strange alliance in 1910 in the “Nationalist” party, which would agitate in favor of intervention in the First World War and eventually ally itself with the Fascist party. Prefiguring Fascist ideology, the Italian Nationalists demanded expansionist foreign policies and a corporatist economic system.<sup>11</sup> In various ways, then, most of the countries of Western Europe experienced the growth of modern forms of nationalism as a threat to the established (and often very recently established) liberal political order.

These conflicts between liberalism and organic nationalism all pointed to the problem of whether the nation should be understood as a legal and political unit, defined by the voluntary membership in it of individual citizens, or as an ethnic and social unit, defined by the shared culture, history, and (perhaps) biological inheritance that was thrust upon individuals, not chosen by them. The newer, organicist forms of

nationalism depended on a definition of the nation as ethnically and linguistically homogeneous. Often drawing for their intellectual justification on forms of Darwinism, they claimed that the ethnic group, rather than the individual, was the basic unit of society. The individual was primarily an emanation of the national “character.” According to organicist theology, national destiny, rather than individual qualities or choices, determined the individual’s actions. The legal, formal equality of citizenship in the liberal state was insignificant next to what the organicists considered the real brotherhood arising from shared blood and a shared linguistic or cultural heritage. Organic nationalists found the existence of ethnic minorities within the borders of European states intolerable, since it meant that citizens of a given state might not share the same nationality, while people who shared a nationality might not have access to a common state. As Hannah Arendt has observed, in organic nationalism, the state was transformed “from an instrument of the law into an instrument of the nation.”<sup>12</sup> Instead of representing justice in the abstract, the state was to represent the interests of the nation understood as a homogeneous ethnic group.

These transformations in the political significance of the nation-state were a source of concern for many novelists around the turn of the century. Stephen Dedalus exemplifies their obsession with problems of national identity. One of the motives of modernist formal experiments was, as Michael Tratner has shown, to gain access to the collective myths through which individuals interpreted the world.<sup>13</sup> Tratner argues that the dawning of the age of mass politics and the perceived replacement of nineteenth-century individualism by twentieth-century collectivism inspired much modernist experimentation. A particular form of collective myth that strongly influenced the modernists was the desire to tap into a national unconscious. The modernists’ concern with the nature of consciousness in language, in particular, points to the sense that the nation shapes the individual through the national language. The modernists typically responded to the organic theory of the nation in two related ways. Sometimes, as in the case of d’Annunzio, they embraced it wholeheartedly and sought to serve it. More frequently, however, they treated the influence of “national character” on the individual as a fundamental existential fact and developed a heightened sense of irony that allowed them to investigate the shaping effects of nationality on the individual’s destiny. Thus, if an unmediated objectivity was impossible, they attempted to offer at least a sort of objectivity-through-subjectivity, a joyful or anguished acceptance of the limited perspective bestowed on

Cambridge University Press

0521661110 - *Modernism, Nationalism, and the Novel*

Pericles Lewis

Excerpt

[More information](#)

each individual by her or his belonging to a given culture, to a given nation. Stephen Dedalus accepts his condition joyfully, but his creator, James Joyce, expresses more anxiety about it. Conrad, drawing on the traditions of English utilitarian liberalism and Darwinism, expresses a nostalgia for an English character he imagines to be on the verge of extinction. Proust, drawing on the voluntarist conception of the nation-state derived from the French revolution, eagerly deconstructs the idea of a French “racial” identity, but still finds in the nation-state one key to the possibility of human freedom. In all of these cases, the conventional critical wisdom that associates modernism with individualism, cosmopolitanism, or a rejection of society seems inadequate. The modernists’ encounters with organic theories of the nation suggest, on the contrary, an abiding concern with the social and its impact on the individual, and a vision of the novelist’s role as central to the national life.

The modernists’ reworking of the techniques of the realist novel involved a rethinking of the political and epistemological theories on which realism had drawn. The techniques by which the nineteenth-century realist novel had represented the relationship between individuals and society reflected assumptions about human nature, knowledge, and history that realist novelists shared with contemporary liberal political theorists. As exemplified by such mid-nineteenth-century thinkers as Alexis de Tocqueville and John Stuart Mill, liberal theory held that individuals, by nature, pursue their own private interests, which the liberal tradition had defined primarily in economic terms. Left to pursue these interests without outside interference, individuals would find the most efficient means of achieving their ends, thus leading to increased productivity and the growth of civil society – the process of “civilization.” According to classical liberal theory, society progresses according to its own immanent laws, which are not immediately evident to individual social actors. The role of the state is to facilitate this progress by avoiding any undue interference in it while ensuring that no member of society infringes on the rights of another. The state may also encourage patriotic sentiments and forms of sociability, but ultimately it is the aggregate welfare of the individuals in society that measures the success of a liberal political system.

The conception of society in canonical realist novels, such as those of Balzac, resembles that of early nineteenth-century liberalism in several respects: autonomous individuals pursue their own interests, motivated by the desire for material gain and for social esteem; they share a common human nature, although the circumstances of their birth and



upbringing shape their characters in diverse ways; the shared social reality in which they interact is governed by immanent laws of its own that are not in themselves evident to the individuals who make up society. The formal techniques of the realist novel reflect this conception of society. Individual characters have only limited perspectives, and their perceptions of reality often reflect their selfish interests and their inability to see their own cases objectively; in the words of liberal theory, “no man is a fit Arbitrator in his own cause.”<sup>14</sup> The dialogic character of the novel, the fact that it represents the many perspectives taken to this shared reality by individuals from different backgrounds, resembles the liberal model of society in that it acknowledges the extent to which differing interests shape the various perceptions members of society have of the world and of each other. The functioning of the novelistic universe depends on the narrator’s role as a neutral arbiter. He stands aloof from the characters and disentangles their competing claims and perceptions. Like the state in liberal political thought, he acts as the guarantor of the shared, social reality. Just as the liberal state is the instrument of a neutral law and justice, so in the realist novel the narrator is the instrument of objectivity and truth in a world in which the competing claims of individuals threaten to undermine social harmony. Even when he speaks against the vices of “society,” the narrator is the voice of a shared reality within which the characters interact and to which they must adapt themselves. The realist novel, then, represents a parliamentary, rather than an absolutist, conception of reality and truth. The shared world of “society” exists independently of any single one of its members, but it also embodies the consensus among these members.

The crisis of liberal nationalism at the end of the nineteenth century revealed the extent to which liberal values and institutions depended on the shared assumptions of a national culture and in particular on the idea that the interests of the nation-state could be identified with the common good of all the individuals in a given society. The idea of the sovereign nation, whose individual members all shared common interests and cultural assumptions, underlay much of the actual working of liberal political systems. To the extent that some inhabitants of a given territory did not share, or were not seen to share, these common national interests and assumptions, liberalism increasingly came to seem incapable of reconciling their needs and interests with those of the national majority. This obstacle appeared even more insurmountable when such interests came to be associated with biological inheritance. A cultural minority, or a given class of citizens, might easily be assimilated into the national

mainstream, but it appeared to many political thinkers that a minority or a colonized people, when identified by putatively inherited racial characteristics, could never share the cultural and other assumptions of the nation as a whole. Thus the Irish, Africans, and Indians appeared to many English liberals incapable of national self-government, and many French thought the Jews incapable of full French citizenship.

The modernists' reworking of the techniques of realism responded to the contemporary crisis in the institutions associated with the nation-state and the liberal conception of society. According to organic nationalist theorists, the basic unit of society was not the individual but the ethnic group (variously labeled the "nation" or the "race"). Individuals, then, rather than being autonomous, rational agents who pursue their own interests, were projections of an underlying ethnic identity, unconsciously pursuing the interests of the group. Their membership in the national community molded their consciousness. The sense, in modernist novels, that consciousness is always overdetermined by what T. S. Eliot called "vast impersonal forces" reflects the growth of a conception of individuals as the playthings of such collective identities as national wills. This study complements earlier approaches to the rise of those "vast impersonal forces" by focusing on the centrality of the problem of the nation-state to the crisis of liberalism and by directly relating the modernists' formal experiments to their active political concerns. I hope that the comparative nature of this study will underline the common problems facing novelists in four very different Western European political contexts as well as the unique intellectual and political concerns each of these major contributors to literary modernism brought to his work. I focus in particular on the increasingly problematic role of the narrator in modernist novels, which exemplifies the changing conception of the nation-state around the turn of the century. The objective, omniscient narrator, correlate of the liberal state, disappears in modernism. What takes over the storytelling is either a projection of the consciousness of an individual protagonist (as in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, *A la recherche du temps perdu*, or *Heart of Darkness*) or a more generalized projection of a collective consciousness (as in *Ulysses* or the novels of Virginia Woolf; this technique is also foreshadowed in the last novels of Henry James). Either form of representation reflects a conception of objectivity as always shaped by the mediating forces of culture and consciousness. The narrator is no longer the instrument of justice, divine or earthly; he has become a sort of super-ego, a figment of the collective imagination.