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Edited by Robert L. Caserio

Excerpt

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ROBERT L. CASERIO

Introduction

The following chapters attempt a comprehensive overview of the twentieth-century English novel. Their attempt is unusual, because literary history customarily divides the last century into distinct halves. The first half of the customary division, ending with World War II, focuses on modernist authors and works and their contexts, and thereby consolidates modernism's great achievements in fiction. The second half hypothesizes a postmodern age, and treats fiction in light of hypotheses about what postmodernism is (one of the hypotheses is that postmodernism abandons thinking in terms of great artistic achievements). Sound, subtle and fruitful reasoning, by numerous distinguished commentators, justifies such an apportionment of literary history. But the separation also tends to compartmentalize knowledge, and to insure itself against challenge.

Although compartmentalizing need not refute continuities, it does not always stimulate awareness of them. This volume, bridging pre-1945 and post-1945 fiction, searches out more continuities between modernism and postmodernism than meet the eye. It explores dynamic similarities as well as contrasts among novels that span generational, cultural, and contextual differences. It is common for literary historians to consider post-*Windrush* novelists, who left behind their colonial origins in exchange for life in London, as doubly figures of exile: dislocated from their first home, yet unable to be at ease in their second home, hence perpetually diasporic. What is not common is for literary historians to consider ways in which such an exilic condition is prefigured in the modernist moment, and is attached to it – in terms of repetition and variation – via Henry James, Conrad, Joyce, and Lawrence's self-imposed exiles, or in terms of feminist or "minority" writers who feel internally if not externally exiled from gender roles or social orders that regulate their experience. Differences between modernist and post-*Windrush* phenomenologies of exile certainly are not to be underestimated, above all in regard to race and class differences; but contrasts are not the only story to be told about them. Whatever differentiates dislocations of

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persons and perspectives across the century, at the very least a common experience of political and economic imperialism, and a continuity of responses to it, binds widely varying novelists together. Equally binding across the century, and not to be underestimated, is novelists' common experience of the aesthetic form they undertake to practice.

To say that diverse novelists share common ground because they have experienced historical and national dislocation strikes a note of paradox or self-contradiction that is the order of things in the previous century. Two compelling paradoxes or self-contradictions loom over the arguments in this book. One is the paradox denominated by the term "English." The national territory signified by the term has become restricted, so as not to denominate and dominate "Scottish," "Irish," or "Welsh," even though the natural language signified by "English" is spoken and written in Scotland, Ireland, and Wales, and is spoken and written globally, thanks to the British Empire's Anglophone legacy. Does the "English" novel's increasingly indeterminate cultural and linguistic identity outrun literary history's comprehensive intentions?

The second problem is the novel's relation to two kinds of history: its own history as a continuous experiment in formal design; and history "proper," the experience and the discourse that historians probe and record, but that novelists do not invent. Essential to the second problem is English modernist fiction's version of what Pierre Bourdieu calls literary art's "conquest of autonomy": i.e., "elaboration of an intrinsically aesthetic mode of perception which situates the principle of 'creation' within the representation and not within the thing represented."¹ What happens to that conquest in the course of a century after modernism (or after a century of modernism), in which reference "to the thing represented" continues to appear in the novel, but then involves itself – paradoxically! – with a firmly established "intrinsically aesthetic mode"?

That there is no way we can now delimit "English" or "English" fiction seems a reasonable conclusion, attested by the tradition these pages survey. We are foredoomed to aim at comprehensiveness, without arriving there. Consider the status in the English novel's history of R. K. Narayan's work. Is the work of an Indian writer living in India yet writing in English and publishing in England to be counted in or out? The wayward identity of English makes a decision impossible, as Narayan clearly knew. Narayan's eponymous Indian narrator in *The English Teacher* (1945) is a poet who teaches English unhappily ("we were strangers to our own culture and camp followers of another . . . , feeding on leavings and garbage"),² but he and his wife thrive on English poetry, read it to each other, and attempt to write it. There is a startling address to "English" in a scene where the narrator tricks his wife into thinking he has just improvised his own poem, when in fact he

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has recited Wordsworth. His wife, discovering the original, wonders if he is not ashamed to copy. He defends himself: “Mine is entirely different. [Wordsworth] had written about someone entirely different from my subject [the Indian narrator’s Indian wife]” (p. 464). In this Borgesian moment, a copy of Wordsworth is not Wordsworth; and English is and is not English. “Copying” becomes in *The English Teacher* a thematics of split linguistic and cultural identity, a sign of a fissure and a doubling that, as I will presently note, also puts into question the discrete identities of reality and fantasy, which we might understand as separable modal languages that English novels also speak.

Narayan’s challenge to linguistic identity does not mark any turning point; it is an episode in the twentieth century’s long perplexing of all things “English.” An encounter between another Indian English novelist, Mulk Raj Anand, and Virginia Woolf provides an example from the modernist era. In the 1920s Anand found himself “allied with . . . inbetween [*sic*] things beyond big words,” and found a like spirit in Woolf’s “sense of wonder about life, which made her restless and unsure,” appealingly in contrast to the men around her. Anand thus finds that Woolf is, like himself, “inbetween” things, especially when she questions him about androgyny in the Hindu pantheon, in pursuit of her “‘feeling that we are male-female-male, perhaps more female than male. I am writing a novel, *Orlando*, to suggest this.’”³ Confirming Woolf’s feeling by reference to Shiva and to yoga, Anand suggests that *Orlando* might be an Indian novel that happens to be in English. Meanwhile, so to speak, at the other end of the century, John Berger’s trilogy about the disappearance of peasant life, *Into Their Labours* (1979–90) – not incidentally, the work of an expatriate writer – presents French Alpine figures. Inasmuch as Berger’s peasantry is a vanishing class, their utterances increasingly belong to a lost language, a “backward” tongue. Berger gives them voice; yet the tongue that must communicate their backwardness and loss is the global cosmopolitan English of Berger’s text.

From the start of the twentieth century, then, with the arrival in England of James’s American English and Conrad’s Polish-French-English, the English novel has spoken a language that is both one and the same, and yet beside itself. The chapters here by Jed Esty, Matthew Hart, Anne Fogarty, John Fordham, Timothy Weiss, Allan Hepburn, and Rebecca Walkowitz have much to say about how local and regional and national languages – of actual persons, of novels, of fictional modes – are ultimately not self-contained, become inextricable from dialogues with translocal, trans-class, transnational contexts. Their chapters suggest a new global tale in process, one that we are tracking in order to shape a new narrative of history, and a new literary historical narrative.

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Modernism continues to play a role in such tracking. The new tale might come to look more like *Finnegans Wake*'s entangled events and words than stories we are used to. Does not any representative sentence from Joyce suggest the present condition of "English," of nation, of history, of the history of the English novel? "I'm enormously full of that foreigner, I'll say I am!," says the *Wake*:

Got by the one goat, suckled by the same nanna, one twitch, one nature makes us oldworld kin. We're as thick and thin now as two tubular jawballs. I hate him about his patent henesy, plasfh it, yet am I amorist. I love him.⁴

That is the language of regional-global experience and interdependence, perhaps of class experience and interdependence too – a language at once secret and open, resistant and amative – to which our novels and histories might yet conform.

Joyce's last book is likely to mean more to the future of novels than *Ulysses* has meant to what now is their past century, especially if the language of *Finnegans Wake* strikes one as a template for a present realism about global life. To make such a claim means submitting Joyce's imaginative fantasy, inasmuch as it transcends documentary occasions, to what is judged to be historically objective and real. Doing so follows a "standard disciplinary pathway," as Richard Todd aptly puts it, whereby English fiction – and contemporary study of it – "can be largely explained by the . . . political tensions that literary criticism uncovers and elaborates with respect to individual works, tensions attendant on the rise of identity politics . . . or on the emergence of poscolonialism."⁵

Whenever such a pathway is exemplified with the probing flexibility of Kristin Bluemel's chapter here on feminist fiction, the standard is eminently self-justifying. Like all standards, however, the disciplinary norm runs risks. It can obscure the novel's role in the "conquest of autonomy." Rod Mengham and Andrzej Gasiorek's chapters suggest that the conquest is repeated, as well as revised or criticized, in English postmodern fiction. Complementing their considerations, another example of a reconquest of autonomy is postmodernist novelist Brigid Brophy's monumental study of modernist Ronald Firbank, *Prancing Novelist* (1973). The study challenges pre-1945, post-1945 and modernist-postmodernist divides. Brophy persuasively assigns Firbank's noncanonical status among modernists to critics' evasion of aesthetic experiment, even when the critics are scholars of modernism. Has the evasion occurred because Firbankian modernism, like much of the modernism of his contemporaries, shows itself as an aggression against naturalism or realism, in favor of an artifice that "isn't a social information service"?⁶ Defying assumptions that novelists must

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respond to political and identity tensions, which is what she means by “social information,” Brophy insists that “works of art have and need no justification but themselves” (p. 71).

Brophy’s defence of autonomy intends to ward off censorship, above all censorship of daydreams and fantasy, including erotic fantasy. Important as fantasy and daydreams are to the material of fiction, however, Brophy knows that they undergo a transformation at the novelist’s hands. “What differentiates a novel from both symptoms and daydreams is its formal organization . . . the design that organizes the material” (pp. 42, 45). A novel’s design is “governed by a more highly evolved function of the Ego than . . . simple fulfillment of direct Ego wishes.” And design is simultaneously an instrument of analytic thought and of pleasure. Analysis and pleasure derive in Firbank, as in all artists, from “set[ting] the author (and the reader) at a distance from his material, without making him emotionally remote from it” (p. 83). One means of achieving distance without remoteness is for the novelist to redirect a reader to the pleasure of design. Because a novel’s design is for Brophy an evolved element of its fantasy components, it is not “checked against the real, outside world” (p. 45); the evolved fantasy components are fiction’s autonomous core.

No doubt, in defence of fiction and Firbank, Brophy overstates her case. And after all, she goes on to elaborate her defence with a painstaking account of Firbank’s life and times, “checked against the real, outside world.” In doing so she copies a modernist paradox. The conquest of autonomy did not mean an end of fiction’s worldly interests; as with *Ulysses*, it often meant a new capture of reality, because it insured a newly designed distance from, a temporary suspense of, servitude to established ways of seeing. Conrad’s elaborate narrative designs, for example in his bestseller *Chance* (1912), with its multiply embedded stories and storytellers and its cultivation of an “inbetween” of realism and romance, seemed even to Henry James to overdo form’s potential for independence from content. Yet Conrad’s novel, thanks to its autonomy, significantly assaults patriarchy and capitalism; and if Conrad’s aesthetic program refuses formulaic responsibility to history or politics, it also insists on evoking “that feeling of unavoidable solidarity . . . which binds men to each other.”⁷ Where questions of political responsibility are concerned, it should be noted that Ford Madox Ford’s manifestos about the autonomous component in James and Conrad’s fiction did not mean that they were not interested in politics. It meant instead, Ford says, that James and Conrad were trying to clear the ground of outworn political “prescription,” trying to provide “the very matter upon which we shall build the theory of the new body politic.”⁸

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The modernist masters' realism was abetted as well as counterbalanced by the autonomy of their fictions. In this *Companion's* chapters about realism and the novel's attachment to history, Maria Di Battista, Paul Edwards, Marina MacKay, James Acheson and I keep in mind the modernist balancing act that motivates fiction's investments equally in its own designs and in history's designs (at the level of world-historical events and at the level of quotidian reality). Indeed, all the contributors keep that in mind. In regard to history's designs, however, because of limitations of space we have not been able to keep in balance with our other concerns address to the publishing, retailing, reviewing, and prize-giving that have constituted the political economy of art in the twentieth century. That economy has become a new field of distinguished scholarly inquiry.⁹ The field raises a concern that the novel's inheritance of any modernist-originated idea of fiction's autonomy is nothing more than illusion, "a perfectly magical guarantor of an imperfectly magical system" (*Economy*, p. 212). Despite the strength of the suggestion, which partly derives from Bourdieu, Bourdieu himself – in an uncanny convergence with Brophy's language about the pleasure of aesthetic design – declares:

the right we have to salvage, in face of all kinds of objectification [including Bourdieu's own research in the sociology and political economy of art] . . . literary pleasure . . . In the name of literary pleasure, [of what the French modernist poet Mallarmé calls] "ideal joy," sublime product of sublimation, . . . one is entitled to save the game of letters, and even . . . the literary game itself. (pp. 274–5)

In the name of literary pleasure, English fiction in the twentieth century might be seen to save the literary game – in its novelistic form – in several ways. The novel perhaps disseminates modernism's conquest of autonomy into postmodernist fiction's inalienable self-consciousness; and it perhaps especially reconstructs that conquest in – and as – two novelistic modes: satire and fantasy. As Reed Dasenbrock points out in his chapter on satire, satire depends upon a decisively oppositional detachment from the environing world. That towering novelist-satirist among English modernists Wyndham Lewis derided his literary peers because he found their vaunted artistic autonomy not the detached or disinterested thing he himself thought it should be. When Lewis wrote *The Roaring Queen* (1936), a novel hilariously attacking English literary prizes and cultural politics, his publisher suppressed it for its potentially libelous character, suppressing thereby its freedom as fictive design. The incident suggests, as Dasenbrock does with other examples, that satiric autonomy is hard to come by; but the post-modernist version arguably preserves modernist inspiration. The design of

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Martin Amis's *Money* (1984) distinctly echoes the design of Lewis's *The Apes of God* (1930).

It is in fantasy fiction, including science fiction, horror, and romance, with their immediate proximity to quotidian daydream and fantasy, that the novel's literary game, rooted in the conquest of autonomy and its accompanying literary pleasure, might especially save itself. Literary historians and critics of fiction have underestimated or underattended the modes surveyed in the concluding chapter here. One presumes that Wells's "scientific romances" have kept him an outsider to the modernist canon, as if fantasy were only incidental to the modernist novel's prevailing character; or as if Wells's ability to write equally in realist-historical and fantasy modes suggested an instability in novelistic form too intense for critical comprehension. Wells himself rejected "the novel" altogether, refusing to believe in its autonomy – even as the autonomy of fantasy gave him his enduring purchase on the form. Despite Wells's self-contradictory gesture, the intermingling of fantasy modes in every moment of the development of the twentieth-century English novel remains an abiding but under-explored fact. The fact is generally looked down on, partly because of the "standard disciplinary pathway" mentioned above. The standard pathway predisposes criticism to a continuing condescension to such things as romance in Conrad and Ford, fantasy in Lawrence, daydream or nightmare in *Finnegans Wake*, inasmuch as those terms name elements – autonomy-related elements – that criticism often believes their writers should be recovered *from*. But the wager of this *Companion's* concluding segment is that we have the best opportunity to recover a century of the novel's history if we see its realism and its fantasy, its high modernist classics and its low postmodernist science fiction, its early, middle, and late emanations, as all of a piece.

The wholeness, of course, will be no more whole than the split character of "English." The specific handful of fictions I have just traversed exhibit the split character that the literary game of autonomy perennially intrudes into critical notice. Narayan's novel at midpoint becomes a fantasy, inasmuch as the narrator's wife, who has died, returns to him repeatedly, thanks at first to a medium who copies down her words from beyond the grave, and then in her own person. Is the novel thereby a fantasy or a work of historical realism? By making it impossible for us to decide, Narayan asserts his fiction's autonomous resistance to our analytic domination. Berger's trilogy, likewise, moves from realistic to fantastic registers; its third volume takes place in a slum of metropolitan Troy, a mythical city into which the peasants are absorbed. In this "backward" equivalent of reality, which fantasy makes possible, Berger locates his art's political motive: the only point of repair against global capital, which has destroyed Continental peasantry, is an

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imaginative realm, where history's horrors can be in part redeemed by utopian dimensions of literary design. Significantly, Berger's Troy resembles M. John Harrison's fallen fantasy metropolis, Viriconium, and China Miéville's city of refugees, New Crobuzon.

Critics and literary historians who are skeptical about the novel's continuing conquest of autonomy might receive pleasurable instruction from one last introductory mention of fantasy. Hope Mirrlees's *Lud-in-the-Mist* (1926) tells a story about Dorimare, a middle-class egalitarian land whose revolutionary forebears threw off its former oppressors. They have been banished geographically, as well as temporally; their kingdom, located beyond the Debatable Hills, is Fairyland, a dominion fatal to penetrate. Unfortunately, Fairyland produces a fruit that is a vision-inducing drug, which is smuggled into Dorimare with nefarious effects. They are curiously similar, some citizens realize, to art's effects: "eating . . . fairy fruit had . . . always been connected with poetry and visions, which, springing as they do from an ever-present sense of mortality, might easily appear morbid to the sturdy common sense of a burgher-class in the making."¹⁰ The fruit is presumed delusional because it distances eaters from convictions of life and history's solid reality. Despite that solidity, Mirrlees's novel dramatizes, delicately as well as comically, a way to come to terms after all with "fairy fruit," which might be nothing more than fiction's way of remaking reality, so that the historical realm and the imaginative one amount to a condition in which "all our dreams got entangled" (p. 270). Fiction's autonomy makes the entanglement more possible rather than less.

The fairy fruit that is modernism, the lasting effect that it has on the literary game, circulates throughout the chapters that follow. The game itself, one ventures to say, takes place both in history and, as M. Keith Booker's chapter terms it, on history's "other side." That other side is one form of the alterity that Dorothy Hale's fresh view of modernism discloses in Chapter One. While Hale's "other" represents the not-one's self that Joycespeak is "amorist" of, it also might denominate "the other" that is prose fiction, in its independence from history and its service to history, in its submission of design to content and its subordination of content to literary pleasure.

NOTES

- 1 Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, trans. Susan Emanuel (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 132.
- 2 R. K. Narayan, *Swami and Friends, The Bachelor of Arts, The Dark Room, The English Teacher* (New York: Everyman's Library, 2006), p. 602.
- 3 Mulk Raj Anand, *Conversations in Bloomsbury* (New Delhi: Arnold-Heinemann, 1981), pp. 98, 102.

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- 4 James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1980), p. 463.
- 5 Richard Todd, "Literary Fiction and the Book Trade," in James F. English (ed.), *A Concise Companion to Contemporary British Fiction* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), pp. 19–20.
- 6 Brigid Brophy, *Prancing Novelist* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 48.
- 7 Joseph Conrad, "Preface" to *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* (London: Everyman's Library, 1974), p. xxvi.
- 8 Ford Madox Ford, *Joseph Conrad: A Personal Remembrance* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1924), p. 58; Ford Madox Hueffer, *Henry James* (New York: Boni, 1915), p. 48.
- 9 See James F. English, *The Economy of Prestige* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2005); Mark M. Morrisson, *The Public Face of Modernism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001); and Richard Todd, *Consuming Fictions: The Booker Prize and fiction in Britain today* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996).
- 10 Hope Mirrlees, *Lud-in-the-Mist* (Guernsey: Millennium, 2000), p. 12.

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I

DOROTHY J. HALE

The art of English fiction in the
twentieth century

“Fascinating and strangely unfamiliar,” Virginia Woolf declared Percy Lubbock’s new book to be in a 1922 *TLS* review essay.¹ Woolf was referring neither to the literary biographies for which Lubbock was known nor to the novel that he had yet to write but to *The Craft of Fiction*, his recently published study of the novel as a literary art. “To say that it is the best book on the subject is probably true,” Woolf judges, “but it is more to the point to say that it is the only one. He has attempted a task which has never been properly attempted, and has tentatively explored a field of inquiry which it is astonishing to find almost untilled” (p. 338). Modernism famously invents itself by imagining the new century as a rupture with the past, and in the first three decades of the twentieth century part of what it meant to fulfill the Poundian imperative to “make it new” was to keep track of the cultural “firsts” as they abounded. The compliment of origination and exceptionalism that Woolf pays Lubbock is one that in *The Craft of Fiction* and elsewhere Lubbock himself pays to Henry James, the “novelist who carried his research into the theory of the art further than any other – the only real *scholar* in the art.”² Lubbock has in mind the analysis conducted in eighteen prefaces that James wrote for the New York Edition of his best work, selected by (as Lubbock, with an even more extravagant display of indebtedness, proclaimed him) “the master” himself.³ The prefaces are presented by James as a loving retrospective, an intimate reencounter, with his favorite literary creations. But because for James the creative enterprise was inseparable from his strong sense of the novel as an aesthetic form, Lubbock found in the prefaces a powerful articulation not of one man’s “original quiddity” but of the literary properties common to all novels (p. 187).

The authentic newness of *The Craft of Fiction* lies in its belief that the art of the novel might be objectively located in its formal properties and objectively analyzed through empirical critical methods. This distinctively modern method, what Lubbock calls a “theory” of the novel, is influenced as much by contemporary science as classical poetics (pp. 9, 272). Before