

## Lecture 2

### The Modernist English Novel

#### The Modernist Novel

What kind of novel was 'Modernist'? The question is less easy to answer than is the case with Modernist poetry. As a literary form, the novel is very much younger than poetry, in its modern European form dating from only the beginning of the eighteenth century. Despite the impressive achievements of many European writers in the next century and a half, in the mid-nineteenth century the novel still lacked the cultural esteem traditionally granted to poetry. Extraordinary though it may seem today when the novel has dominated literary practice for so long, Matthew Arnold's seminal *Essays in Criticism* (1865) completely ignored the novel as a distinct literary form, drawing only on poetry as the appropriate subject for worthwhile literary culture. However, from about 1870 some novelists, notably Gustave Flaubert and Henry James, began to formulate ideas about 'the art of the novel', discussing them in essays and reviews, and illustrating them in their own fiction. The emergence of the 'Modernist' novel is not easily distinguished from this initial stage of debate about the intrinsic features of the novel as distinct from poetry and drama.

Summarising Flaubert's aims for the novel, Jonathan Culler (1974, pp. 14–16) lists three main issues:

- 1 that 'content' was less important than 'style';
- 2 that a novel should confront the reader as 'an aesthetic object rather than a communicative act';
- 3 that a novel should contain no identifiable authorial point of view or opinion about its subject, its characters and events: their interpretation was entirely a matter for the reader to work out.

James, though more directly concerned than Flaubert with moral issues, proposed comparable goals. Novels should aim at aesthetic unity. Thus the author, as an overt 'voice' in the novel, should not appear: readers would meet only the various points of view – the attitudes and the judgements – of the characters, and primarily through the 'central intelligence' of one main character; in furthering this aim, episodes should be *presented* in terms of 'scenes', rather than merely narrated. Such ideas and practices were extensively adopted by Modernist novelists.

What did this mean in practice? Flaubert, whom in 1902 James was to call 'the novelist's novelist' (quoted in Gard, 1987, p. 402), was celebrated for agonising over *le mot juste*, sometimes taking a day to compose a single satisfactory sentence. This concern for 'style' was widely shared by Modernist novelists: James himself, Conrad, Joyce,

Woolf and many others. By the term 'style', I do not at all mean what might be dismissively called 'fancy writing', verbal flourishing for its own sake. On the contrary: Flaubert's severe discipline was aimed at finding the exactly right word, and right set of words, for the given situation, location, social milieu, for description of the characters, and for what the characters said to each other (and to themselves), whether actually or in thought.

Such an aim required of novelists a command of language in one respect resembling that of playwrights, and in another that of poets. Characters had to be given their own 'voices', forms of particular speech that expressed their individuality within the wide range of situations the story

involved them in. At the same time, scene setting and description had to become more economical, more precise, and more complexly suggestive of appropriate moods. Such aims were not absolutely new – as any familiarity with (to choose at random) Austen's or Dickens's novels illustrates – but Modernist novelists pursued them with special intensity and dedication. For these reasons, the language of Modernist narrative came to matter as much as, perhaps more than, the narrative itself. Recalling the distinction between 'story' and 'discourse' discussed in Block 1, Section 1, we should note that the contribution to 'discourse' of the novel's *language* became the novelist's overriding concern. To put the point another way, while prose continues to be the Modernist novel's medium, it is a prose that deliberately incorporates features more usually associated with poetry, in the precision and evocative power of its

imagery, and in the deployment of a more or less explicit symbolism, both as carrier of the novel's deeper significance and one source of its aesthetic unity. Without claiming a direct influence of Imagism and Symbolism upon Modernist novelists, we can say that their increasing attention to language did encourage a varied and complex use of imagery and symbolism, and that in this respect the influence of Modernism on poetry and novels was not dissimilar.

To illustrate this, here is a paragraph from your set text, *Mrs Dalloway*. Peter Walsh is walking from Regent's Park, crossing Marylebone Road, just by Regent's Park Tube Station:

A sound interrupted him; a frail quivering sound, a voice bubbling up without direction, vigour, beginning or end, running weakly and shrilly and with an absence of all human meaning into

*ee um fah um so*  
*foo swee too eem oo –*

the voice of no age or sex, the voice of an ancient spring spouting from the earth; which issued, just opposite Regent's Park Tube Station, from a tall quivering shape, like a funnel, like a rusty pump, like a wind-beaten tree for ever barren of leaves which lets the wind run up and down its branches singing

*ee um fah um so*  
*foo swee too eem oo,*

and rocks and creaks and moans in the eternal breeze ...

As the ancient song bubbled up opposite Regent's Park Tube Station, still the earth seemed green and flowery; still, though it issued from so rude a mouth, a mere hole in the earth, muddy too, matted with root fibres and tangled grasses, still the old bubbling burbling song, soaking through the knotted roots of infinite ages, and skeletons and treasure, streamed away in rivulets over the pavement and all along the Marylebone Road, and down towards Euston, fertilising, leaving a damp stain.

(*Mrs Dalloway*, pp. 90–1)

What Peter Walsh hears is a street singer, an old woman singing a love song which, to her, invokes a memory of her lover many, many years ago. But these paragraphs first present her as without human form ('like a funnel, like a rusty pump, like a wind-beaten tree'), as an impersonal conduit for the song, which, hardly a song at all, is seen as a spring of water, bubbling up from a 'mere hole in the earth'. I will leave you to

The passage also illustrates the self-effacing role of the narrator in Modernist novels. It is clearly the narrator (and not Peter Walsh) who tells us about the street singer; yet we do not learn what to think about her, why she is introduced at this particular point in the novel, or her significance for its other episodes. Similarly, in the presentation of the whole novel, the narrator tells us where the characters are, what they look like, what time of day it is, what they are doing, what they say, think and feel about each other. But beyond that, as readers, we are on our own, in the manner recommended by Flaubert and James, a kind of narration you have already met in Woolf's 'Kew Gardens'. We can also connect this view of the narrator's role with the Modernist rejection of the overt moralising and philosophising characteristic of the narrators of many Victorian novels, Dickens and George Eliot in particular. In this respect, Modernist novelists were in sympathy with key points in Yeats's account of Symbolist poetry, outlined above.

Lastly, there was Flaubert's insistence, as summed up in Culler's sentence, that a novel should be 'an aesthetic object rather than a communicative act', a view for which (though with a good deal of qualification) James also argued. A defining feature of a good novel had to be aesthetic *unity*, in marked contrast with 'the novel as largely practised in English' which, he complained in *The Art of the Novel*, 'is the perfect paradise of the loose end' (1935, p. 114). This is more than a request for tidiness of construction. Rather, it is a logical application of Flaubert's preoccupation with *le mot juste* to the composition and arrangement of whole paragraphs and chapters. Getting rid of 'loose ends' meant that no episode, no chapter, no dialogue, no description, should appear in the novel merely for local effect, and so without relevance to the whole design. This demand for a unifying design had a

considerable impact on narrative structure, about which Modernist novelists are much more self-conscious than their Victorian predecessors, especially about how narratives conclude. Instead of the burgeoning complex of plots and sub-plots typical of Victorian novels, Modernist narrative is usually minimal; and, except as an irreducible structuring device, how the narrative ends matters less because it avoids any definite resolution of the various conflicts the novel has explored. The preferred Modernist conclusion is 'open': the novel's conflicts are revealed but not resolved. *Mrs Dalloway* is a case in point, as you will discover. Individual episodes in the novel take their meaning more from the manner, and at the moment of their presentation, than from some overarching pattern whose 'key' is only provided by the conclusion.

Underlying such resistance to narrative closure is an implicit attitude towards the dimension of time. In an influential discussion of narrative time, Frank Kermode distinguishes two ways of thinking about it by means of Greek terms, *chronos* and *kairos* (1967, pp. 46–8). *Chronos* is mere endless successiveness without direction or purpose; *kairos* means that given points of time are 'filled with significance, charged with a

meaning derived from [their] relation to the end'. If you think of time as directed towards some end and purpose, then the stages of that progress will be meaningful in relation to that end. To take familiar illustrations – 'ten more shopping days to Christmas', or 'my daughter's exams three months hence' – such passages of time would yield various moments of *kairos*. But if you think of time as *chronos*, then no individual episode can take its meaning from its relation to a conclusion or end, because there is none. The meaning of individual moments can only inhere in those moments, which become occasions of 'revelation', of a precious and unique insight. For Modernist novelists, time is rarely conceived as progressing stage by significant stage towards some finally meaningful end. Time is rather *chronos*, mere successiveness. Such an attitude clearly militates against a narrative structure in which ends and conclusions command the flow and direction of the novel. Again, *Mrs Dalloway* will illustrate this.

## Conclusion

In this section we have been dealing with generalities, certain dominant features of Modernist poetry and novels. In the sections that now follow, particularly those on your set texts (Woolf, Eliot, Yeats), such features will be illustrated in more detail. After you have become familiar with these texts, you should find it useful to return to this section and consider again the general character of Imagism and Symbolism, and of their effect on Modernist writing.