

THE TRANSFORMATION
*of
the
English
Novel*

1890 · 1930

DANIEL R. SCHWARZ

The Transformation of the English Novel, 1890–1930

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DISRAELI'S FICTION

CONRAD: 'ALMAYER'S FOLLY' TO 'UNDER WESTERN EYES'

CONRAD: THE LATER FICTION

THE HUMANISTIC HERITAGE: CRITICAL THEORIES OF THE

ENGLISH NOVEL FROM JAMES TO HILLIS MILLER

READING JOYCE'S *ULYSSES*

For My Sons, David and Jeffrey, and for My Brother, Robert

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Introduction

The Transformation of the English Novel, 1890–1930 is part of a larger critical project that I began with *The Humanistic Heritage: Critical Theories of the English Novel from James to Hillis Miller* (1986), in which I defined the theory and method of Anglo-American novel criticism. In my next book, *Reading Joyce's 'Ulysses'* (1987), I used the principles of what I call humanistic formalism to create a dialogue between traditional and more recent theory and, most importantly, between theory and Joyce's great epic novel. My purpose is to reinvigorate the humanistic study of fiction by creating a dialogue between traditional and recent theory as well as between theory and texts. I have been called a progressive traditionalist and a pluralist, both of which terms I welcome. For me theory is important only when it enables us to think conceptually about how works behave and cohere and what they mean and signify.

The Transformation of the English Novel, 1890–1930 is divided into two major parts. Originally published as essays from 1972 to 1983, Part One shows how historical and contextual material is essential for humanistic formalism. Thus the first chapter, entitled "I Was the World in Which I Walked": The Transformation of the English Novel', calls into question such New Critical shibboleths as 'exit author' and the 'biographical fallacy' and discusses how the author becomes a formal presence within the text. I argue that the novels of Hardy, Lawrence, Conrad, Joyce, Forster, and Woolf represent a radical break from the past and require different critical programmes for discussing them than their predecessors. The changes in the novel reflect the authors' realization that the relative stability of the Victorian era give way to the anxiety and dubiety of the modern era. In the remaining five chapters of Part One, I discuss Hardy, Forster, and Lawrence in terms which show how these authors' struggles with their personal crises and social concerns determine their narrative techniques and modes of representation.

Changes in the novel's form and modes of representation relate to changing historical circumstances. But changes in our perception of the form of the novel also relate to changes in the way we read. Written recently, Part Two speaks of the transformation in the way we read and think about authors, readers, characters, and

form in the light of recent theory. In two polemical chapters – ‘The Case for Humanistic Formalism’ and ‘Modes of Literary Inquiry: a Primer for Humanistic Formalism’ – I offer an alternative to the way that the deconstructive and Marxist ethos have sought to transform literary studies. I discuss the following basic questions: How can we talk about the author as a formal presence in the work? How can thinking about a group of novels enable us to reach an understanding of literary culture? How does one speak of a period? Can one think about the ‘development’ or ‘evolution’ of the British novel and, if so, in what terms? How can one speak of the novels of this period in terms of cultural and literary history? My goal is to provide a map for the study of the English novel from Hardy through Woolf, a map that integrates critical theory, historical background, and powerful, close reading. But I also wish to demonstrate the theoretical and practical validity of a criticism that focuses on human authors, imagined worlds, and readers who think and feel.

The final three chapters of Part Two focus on the transformation of the role of the reader. I demonstrate how a pluralistic reader who is familiar with the various approaches on the critical mindscape responds to complex novels by Conrad (*Lord Jim*), Woolf (*Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*), and Joyce (*Ulysses*). I imagine a reader whose knowledge of recent theory and awareness of traditional theory enables him to understand the theoretical implications of his reading experience. For reading the novel in a university setting has been transformed by new ways of reading and the surge of interest in ‘Theory’. Yet even while acknowledging that novels contain the seeds of linguistic and deconstructive readings that deflect the reader from his efforts to discover one alternate meaning or significance, I shall contend that the transformed reader – the reader alert to new modes of reading – finally depends on what Stevens calls ‘our rage for order’ to make coherent patterns. Moreover, I shall be implicitly arguing that ‘progressive’ traditional criticism, too, has fresh stories of reading to tell.

Literary works, particularly novels, depend on readers who care about human characters and who respond to the human narrative voice which lived in the imagined world created by the author. The modern British novelists depend upon a reader who must create some of the patterns that were once provided by the omniscient narrator. Like the author and the major characters, the reader must

undergo his own quest for meaning. As he or she experiences a complex novel's tentative form and its putative values, does not the reader negotiate an odyssean journey? For example, as I have argued in my *Reading Joyce's 'Ulysses'* (1987), the odyssean reader of Joyce's *Ulysses* is often tempted by the novel's stylistic experimentation to abandon the quest for meaning, but the focus of *Ulysses* usually returns to its interest in character and plot. I will use the figure of the odyssean reader to focus on the process of reading as a journey with many adventures, including ones that treacherously challenge our understanding. The odyssean reader not only has to work his way through the difficulties provided by texts, but also those provided by recent critical approaches to literature. The reader must avoid temptations that deflect him from focusing on representation without ignoring the claims of recent theory that language does not signify absolutely. Without overlooking form and style, he needs to be attentive to theme. He should not lose sight of the historical reality implied by the imagined world of the literary and historical conditions that produced a work. He must be willing to allow the novel to change its emphasis as he reads.

The complex process by which works create readers needs to be more accurately described. Our stories of reading must include a self-conscious awareness of what makes each of us unique readers bringing something of her or his own experience to a text. But it must also include an awareness of how the novel's structure of effects and its rhetoric – conscious and unconscious – shapes an ideal reader both now and when it was written. When authors respond to other works, we need to assume that the author had in mind a reader with an intertextual perspective. Even as we engage in sophisticated discussions of narrators and narratees and of implied authors and implied readers, we should recall that the one figure that authors rarely forget is the actual reader; usually, the author conceives the reader as an historically grounded figure who exists in the community at large. While he is imported into the imagined ontology of the novel as a figure who will listen with sympathy to the telling and might undergo change, his values represent that of a large putative audience. Put another way, the reader is a metaphor for one aspect of a larger community.

The word 'transformation' in my title also refers to my conceiving that the form of a novel is not a static third-dimensional object, but an evolving process in which novels undergo metamorphoses as they are experienced by readers. For form, like

language, is always constituted and constituting. While Victorian novels transform their shape and meaning as we read, the transformation of the modern novel is more radical, open, inconclusive, contradictory, and paradoxical. I conceive the process of reading as a temporal event in which things happen to the reader. I stress how readers of novels – especially modern novels – must respond to the way a novel's narrative process proposes, tests, modifies, transforms, and discards interpretations of characters and events. My frequent focus on beginnings and on endings shows how major modern British novels simultaneously formally *urge* and *claim* a transformation of values, even while these novels fail to resolve the issues raised in the episodes prior to the conclusion.

The novelists of this period oscillate between what I call sacred and profane readings of the world. By a sacred reading of the world, I mean one in which most perceptions fit into *a priori* categories. A sacred reading implies a reading that mimes the unity and totality that man in earlier eras attributed to God's creation. While in this sense Lawrence's *The Rainbow* and *Jude the Obscure* are sacred texts, so are, for the most part, *Lord Jim* and *A Passage to India*. By contrast, one kind of profane reading of the world stresses momentary immersion in life and the nominalistic, disparate details of experience. Such a reading stresses the gratuitous, serendipitous, incongruous nature of life. (Do not Lawrence in *Sons and Lovers* and Forster in *Where Angels Fear to Tread* and *A Room With A View* do this?) A very different kind of profane reading is interested in the free play of language as signifier rather than in its mimetic or signified potential. Joyce and, to a lesser extent, Woolf propose and test both kinds of profane reading before embracing their own version of sacred reading. The oscillation within complex novels between sacred and profane readings of the world urges similar responses in readers making their way through these novels.

Part One

1

'I Was the World in Which I Walked': the Transformation of the British Novel

I

In the Sculpture Garden of the Museum of Modern Art stands Rodin's large 1897 statue, *Monument to Balzac*. The imposing figure of Balzac is 10 feet tall, and it rests on a 5 foot-high slab. At first, the observer may wonder what this seemingly realistic piece is doing in the citadel of modernism. But gradually he realizes that the work is a crystallizing image of modernism, for it depicts the artist as outcast and hero. Towering above onlookers, Balzac is wearing the expression of scornful magisterial dignity. With back stiffly yet regally arched past a 90° angle, Balzac looks into the distance and the future as if oblivious and indifferent to the opinions of the Lilliputians observing him from below. The large moustache, massive brows, flowing hair, and enormous ears and nose all emphasize the immense physical stature of the figure. As observers we crane our necks to see the features of this commanding figure whose gigantic head is disproportionate to his body. His features are boldly outlined but not precisely modelled. His huge head dominates the massive form; the body enwrapped in a cloak is a taut cylinder; the only visible feature is the feet, which are in motion as if they were going to walk off the slab. Indeed, one foot actually overhangs the slab as if it were about to depart. In the geometric shape of an isosceles triangle, the intimidating figure asserts the dependence of content upon form.

In a number of ways this sculpture, I think, helps us to understand literary modernism. Rodin has presented the artist as an *Übermensch*, as a physical and moral giant who is indifferent to the opinions of his audience. He depicts Balzac the way Rodin

would have liked to see himself. 'I think of [Balzac's] intense labor,' he wrote, 'of the difficulty of his life, of his incessant battles and of his great courage. I would express all that.'¹ As Albert E. Elsen remarks, 'Rodin has transformed the embattled writer into a godlike visionary who belongs on a pedestal aloof from the crowd.'² Rodin's presence in the sculpture of Balzac speaks for art as self-expression and thus declares a new aesthetic that questions the impersonality and objectivity which Balzac sought in his role of moral and social historian of the human comedy. Rodin's Balzac is not someone who serves the community but someone who answers to the demands of his imagination and psyche; he does not imitate reality, but transforms what he sees into something original. He is more a visionary than a realist. His integrity derives from his genius and his independence. The sculpture shows, for the inseparable relationship between subject and object – the poised tension between content (Balzac) and form (the original stone) – that is central to modernism. Finally, Rodin understands that art requires an audience to complete the hermeneutical circle, for he declared that the suggestiveness of his *Balzac* required the viewer to use 'the imagination to recompose the work when it is seen from close up'.³

I would like to take the Rodin statue as a point of departure for speaking of the great change in major British fiction from the realistic to the expressionist novel, a change that begins roughly in 1895, the year of Hardy's last novel, *Jude the Obscure*,⁴ and reaches a climax with Woolf's major novels, *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) and *To the Lighthouse* (1927). That some or all of the great British modernists – Conrad, Joyce, Lawrence, Forster, and Woolf – withdraw from their work, eliminate the intrusive author, and move to objectivity and impersonality is still one of the shibboleths of literary history. In this chapter I shall argue that by making themselves their subject they have, in fact, created a more subjective, self-expressive novel than their predecessors, and that they *are* present in their works.

Influenced by English romanticism, developments in modern art, and a changing intellectual milieu that questioned the possibilities of universal values or objective truth, these novelists erased the boundaries between art and life. They no longer believed that they could or should recreate the real world in their art and they questioned the assumption that verisimilitude was the most important aesthetic value. They realized that each man

perceived a different reality and lived in what F.H. Bradley has called a 'closed circle'.⁵ Thus, while mid-Victorian novelists believed in the efficacy of their art, twentieth-century writers have often despaired at the possibility of communication. They wrote not only to urge their perspectives upon their audience but to create their own identities and values. On the one hand, the artist doubts that he can change the world but, on the other, he tries to convince himself and his audience that he can.

Twentieth-century British writers invent ways of seeing the human psyche in a more subtle and complex manner. While the Victorian novel focused upon man in his social aspect, Conrad, Lawrence, Joyce, and Woolf isolate their characters from the social community by focusing on the perceiving psyche. As J. Hillis Miller has noted, there is little self-consciousness in most Victorian novels: 'the protagonist comes to know himself and to fulfill himself by way of other people'.⁶ But the English novel from 1890 to 1930 made self-consciousness and self-awareness its subject, and the streams of consciousness within the soliloquy and interior monologue – both direct and indirect – became more prominent. Since characters are often versions of the author who either does not or cannot achieve the traditional distance between author and characters, the experience and self-consciousness of the characters reflect those of the authors.

In traditional novels we are more conscious of the characters, actions, themes, and rhetoric and less conscious of what I shall call the author's presence. Patricia Meyer Spacks notes: 'Writers before the nineteenth century ... often insisted by implication on their lack of psychology, defining themselves in relation to their audiences or in terms of a historical tradition rather than by personal reactions or feelings.'⁷ The conventions of editor or omniscient narrator deserve such a description. In *Moll Flanders* and *Clarissa* the presence of the author is often felt as an editor; in *Tom Jones* the author depicts himself as the reader's host. In Victorian fiction he becomes an omniscient voice. Yet because modern writers have written first for themselves, they have been more insistent on affirming their living presence in their works than on using rhetorical tools to shape their readers.

II

Twentieth-century novels are often songs of myself, and anxious

self-doubting ones at that. In varying degrees the later Hardy in *Jude*, Conrad, Forster, Woolf, and Joyce take their own imaginations as a major subject. In a sense their novels are about the process of transforming life into art. While reading *Emma* is the discovery of a finished three-dimensional imagined world, reading the major British novelists in the period 1890–1930 involves participating in their process of struggling to define their values and their concepts of the novel. It is the difference between a Constable or a Gainsborough and a Matisse or a Picasso. The novel depends on a continuing dialogue between the author's avowed subject and his efforts to discover the appropriate form and values for that subject. Writing of how the artist finally must discover the world in himself, Stevens defines in 'Tea at the Palaz of Hoon' (1921) the relationship between text and author that informs the writers under discussion:

I was the world in which I walked, and what I saw
Or heard or felt came not but from myself;
And there I found myself more truly and more strange.

The author's struggle with his subject becomes a major determinant of novel form. In the 1898–1900 Marlow tales, *The Rainbow* (1915), *Ulysses* (1922), and *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), each author writes to define himself or herself. The writer does not strive for the rhetorical finish of prior novels but, rather like Rodin in his sculpture, instead invites the reader to perceive a relationship between the creator and the artistic work, and to experience the dialogue between the creative process and the raw material. While the Victorian novelist believed that he had a coherent self and that his characters could achieve coherence, the modernist is conscious of disunity in his own life and the world in which lives. The novelist becomes a divided self. He is both the creator and seeker, the prophet who would convert others and the agonizing doubter who would convince himself while engaging in introspective self-examination. Even while the writer stands detached, creating characters, we experience his or her urgent effort to create a self. Thus the reader must maintain a double vision. He must apprehend the narrative and the process of creating that narrative. In such diverse works as the Marlow tales, *The Rainbow* and *To the Lighthouse* (1927), the process of writing, of defining the subject, of evaluating character, of searching for truth, becomes part of the