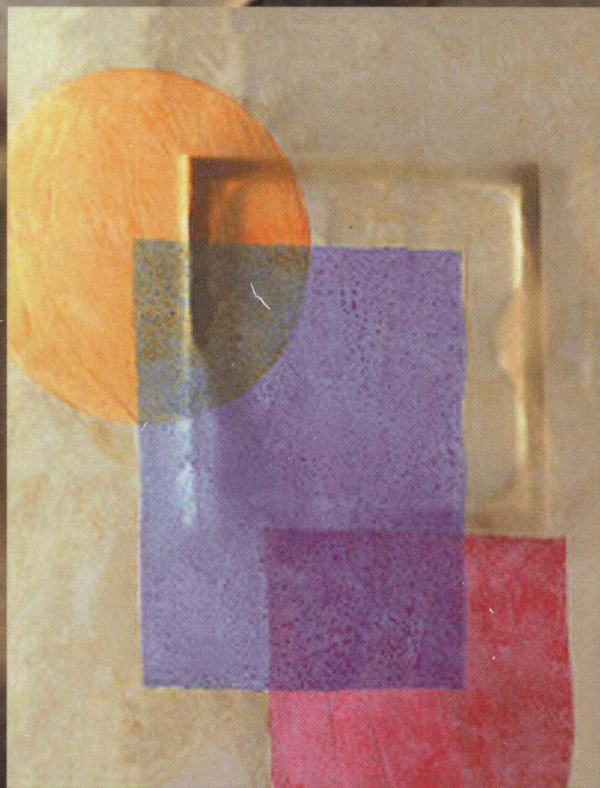


modernist fiction

AN INTRODUCTION



REVISED EDITION

RANDALL
STEVENSON

MODERNIST FICTION

Revised Edition

RANDALL STEVENSON

University of Edinburgh



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PREFACE

In a pioneering analysis of modernist fiction published in 1966, *The Turn of the Novel*, Alan Friedman remarks

The roots of the change in the novel lie tangled deep in the modern experience. Causes in fields other than literature there doubtless were – a confluence of psychological, philosophical, scientific, social, economic, and political causes, analogues, and explanations . . . I think it is probably too soon to evaluate that confluence properly. (pp. xii–xiii)

As Chapter 1 suggests, it may be more appropriate to consider some of the factors Friedman mentions as ‘analogues and explanations’ for the change in modernist literature, rather than directly *causes* of it. Nevertheless, three decades after his work was published, it is no longer premature to examine modernist fiction in terms of the ‘confluence’ he outlines. The present age is as distant from *Ulysses* (1922) as *Ulysses* itself was from the fiction of Charles Dickens. In looking back at modernism, it should now be possible to establish the perspective Friedman considered unavailable when he wrote – to place in the context of the twentieth century’s history writing which continues to seem its major achievement and a central influence on its literature.

Moreover, some of the tools of literary criticism – of narrative theory particularly – have developed considerably since Friedman wrote. The availability in translation of the ideas of the Soviet theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, and of the narrative analysis of Gérard Genette, assists assessment of how the style and structure of the novel changed early in the twentieth century. *Why* it did so – the other question of principal interest to the present study – is clarified by the criticism of the United States Marxist, Fredric Jameson, as well as by the wide-ranging cultural history Stephen Kern provides in *The Culture of Time and Space 1880–1918* (1983).

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While recent critics and theorists have much to offer analysis of modernism, so too do commentators writing from within the modernist period itself. A lengthening historical perspective may offer objectivity: on the other hand, distance may simply make some things harder to see clearly. Proximity contributes useful and occasionally surprising perspectives to the views of contemporary critics. One of the most surprising of them, R.A. Scott-James (further discussed in Chapter 1), emphasizes as follows the particular advantage of their work:

Is it not a mockery of modesty to assert that we have less right to judge our own contemporaries, being as we are bone of their bone and flesh of their flesh, than a diffident posterity? For the writers of our time are influenced by the prevalent thoughts and feelings which move us, so that though we know nothing of their value for posterity we have the best means of knowing their value for ourselves. (*Modernism and Romance*, p. xi)

As Scott-James remarks, contemporary critics are sometimes in a better position than later ones to recognize what is valuable, new, or unusual in the writing of their age, and to judge how far this is likely to have been affected by ‘prevalent thoughts and feelings’ which may later be forgotten, or difficult to identify with so much certainty. Throughout, this study often relies on contemporary commentary for this sort of suggestion. Chapter 3 turns in particular to Wyndham Lewis, whose huge volumes assessing the state of contemporary culture make him one of the most substantial, and neglected, of commentators on the 1920s.

Assessed in relation to critics of the time and since, and to a range of roots and analogues in contemporary experience, modernist fiction offers a field too wide to be examined in its entirety in a single volume. Though making an exception of Marcel Proust (for reasons explained in Chapter 1), this study confines itself to fiction written in English, and within this context looks only briefly, where appropriate, at modernist writing in the United States. Though it might seem simplest to state that the focus is therefore on ‘British fiction’, it would be misleading, even dishonest, to do so. The authors concerned – principally Henry James, Ford Madox Ford, Joseph Conrad, Dorothy Richardson, May Sinclair, D.H. Lawrence, James Joyce, Wyndham Lewis and Virginia Woolf – could be said to belong loosely to a British context, since they each

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began or spent part of their working lives within it. Yet by no means all of them could be said to be British by nationality. As Chapter 4 explains, complex conditions of national or cultural identity often formed part of the background – even a likely source – for the modernist disposition of their work.

Wherever possible, references to this work are to currently available paperback editions, which are listed in the Select Bibliography. This also contains details of other volumes referred to. Where necessary, further information about the source of quotations is given in footnotes: rarely containing more than publishing details, these need not distract readers from the text. Since a feature of modernist fiction, in the work of Ford Madox Ford and Dorothy Richardson particularly, is its frequent use of a set of dots to represent pauses in characters' thoughts, a convention is required to distinguish such pauses from ellipses indicating omissions in the course of a quotation. Throughout, three narrowly spaced dots (...) reproduce authors' own usage, while three widely spaced ones (. . .) indicate that words or sections have been omitted from a quotation.

Even confined loosely within the British context, modernist fiction and the modern experience provide an exciting but wide and challenging field of study, and I am very grateful for help received in writing about it. Tony Seward and Jackie Jones were patient, encouraging editors of the first edition, the latter instrumental in seeing it through to publication with Harvester Wheatsheaf. I'm also grateful to Christina Wipf Perry of Prentice Hall for suggesting and looking after this second, revised edition, which allows the expansion and updating of several sections of the argument, and the correction of some small errors and omissions which appeared in the first. Ideas and methods of analysis have often been borrowed from friends, or worked out in discussion with them: Brian McHale, Colin Nicholson, Susanne Greenhalgh, John Cartmell, Jane Goldman, John Orr and Roger Savage have all helped in this way. I have also learned a great deal about the material concerned when delivering lectures on it to the Scottish Universities' International Summer School, and in the course of discussion with many groups of students in Edinburgh University's Department of English Literature. My main debt is to those who read, talked over and added their ideas to various chapters in the process of their completion: to Ron Butlin, Sarah Carpenter, Vassiliki Kolocotroni and Olga Taxidou, many many thanks.

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MODERNISM AND MODERNITY

Just as authority has been undermined in religion and morals, so too in art. The old accepted standards cannot satisfy a changing age . . .

The old fixed canons of taste have lost their validity . . . the novelist ignores the earlier conventions of plot . . . vocabulary, literary structure, and orthodoxy of opinion . . .

When we come to some of the essentially modern novelists we feel that the psychological tendency has gone . . . as far indeed as it can go . . .

The spirit of psychological analysis . . . this is 'modernism' with a vengeance.

(pp. 22-3, 92, 109, 266)

R.A. Scott-James's views in his study *Modernism and Romance* are typical of comments on new, modern or 'modernist' tendencies in contemporary literature which were made in the 1920s. One of several studies of fiction published at that time, Elizabeth Drew's *The Modern Novel: Some Aspects of Contemporary Fiction* (1926), for example, likewise remarks that

the great majority of the present generation of novelists . . . have made psychology, conscious and deliberate psychology, their engrossing interest, and it is natural that such an interest should entail their finding the older technique too clumsy for their new purposes. (p. 248)

Many later critics have followed the kind of thinking outlined by Drew and Scott-James. What has come to be known as modernist

fiction – at its strongest in novels published in the 1920s by James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and D.H. Lawrence – is usually defined on the grounds of its rejection of techniques and conventions apparently inappropriate or ‘too clumsy’ for new interests at the time. A principal part of these new interests is usually held to have been in the ‘psychology’ – or heightened concern with individual, subjective consciousness – which Drew and Scott-James identify. The present study traces this interest, and examines the stream-of-consciousness and interior monologue styles developed to reflect it, throughout Chapter 2.

Given how representative of critical thinking in the 1920s and since Scott-James’s comments are, one of the most interesting things about them is that they were made as early as 1908, at a time when it is unusual to find the word ‘modernism’ applied to literature at all. For any study of writing in the early twentieth century, there is a good deal to be learned not only from Scott-James’s remarks themselves but from the surprisingly early date of their publication. First, his views emphasize that the disposition for change and transformation in the novel, so obvious to commentators by the 1920s, actually originated much earlier than Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922) and the other modernist fiction of that decade. The roots of transformation in modernist writing need to be considered as reaching back at least to the fiction of Henry James – one of the novelists Scott-James refers to when he talks of ‘the spirit of psychoanalysis’ (p. 109) – and other authors, Joseph Conrad in particular, working around the turn of the century.

Secondly, Scott-James helps define a division of opinion apparent early in the twentieth century, and widening in the years that followed, about the relative merits of tradition and transformation in the art and life of the times. Scott-James may have used the term ‘modernism’ early, but he does not use it approvingly. In the passage quoted above he talks darkly of “‘modernism’ with a vengeance”, and throughout his study the term is most often used in relation to transformations in his age which he considers neither welcome nor worthwhile. He remarks, for example, that

there are characteristics of modern life in general which can only be summed up, as Mr Thomas Hardy and others have summed them up, by the word *modernism*. The hybrid may not be very pleasant to delicate ears, but perhaps what it expresses is not a very pleasant thing. (p. ix)

Scott-James's views of the indelicacy of the term 'modernism', and of what it signifies, are corroborated by the *Oxford English Dictionary*. This shows that at least until the early twentieth century, 'modernism' was most often used to designate fashionable new-fangledness, the sort of innovation which betrayed the solidier values of tradition. Even the terms 'modern' and 'modernity' were certainly not consistently ones of approval.¹ By contrast, among the generation of writers and artists coming into prominence after Scott-James wrote, it was more and more often tradition rather than innovation which was viewed with suspicion. 'Modernism' and 'modernist' are therefore terms appropriately applied – even if they may sound 'hybrid' – to the work of writers sharing the belief that a modernizing of forms and the reshaping or abandonment of tradition were necessary conditions of their art. This belief distinguishes the group of novelists to be assessed in this study from the many others who went on writing, throughout the early decades of the twentieth century, more or less within styles and conventions established in the latter part of the nineteenth.

Arnold Bennett, John Galsworthy and H.G. Wells are the examples of this traditional sort of novelist whom Virginia Woolf singles out for criticism in essays which usefully clarify the new preferences of her time – 'Modern Fiction' (1919) and 'Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown' (1924). The 'modern' of her first essay's title is certainly not a term of disapproval, but one which helps define writing able to generate new styles to accommodate the priorities of a new age. For Woolf, the work of Bennett, Wells and Galsworthy – 'the most prominent and successful novelists in the year 1910', as she calls them – remained restricted by limited vision and outmoded fictional conventions. In her opinion, it was essential to recognize instead that 'the proper stuff of fiction is a little other than custom would have us believe it', and to follow the new example of 'young writers' such as James Joyce.² Even a few years after she wrote, it was clear that in some areas Woolf's wishes had been thoroughly fulfilled. By the mid-1920s, the example not only of Joyce but of novelists such as D.H. Lawrence, Dorothy Richardson, May Sinclair and Woolf herself, had made 'the stuff of fiction' substantially different from what it had been twenty or thirty years earlier, in ways impossible for commentators at the time to overlook. Thomas Hardy, for example, one of the last successful Victorian novelists, summed up the 'modernism' he saw

in contemporary fiction in 1926 by remarking – simply if rather wearily – ‘They’ve changed everything now . . . we used to think there was a beginning and a middle and an end’.³ By emphasizing amendment of conventional fiction’s chronological construction, Hardy incidentally indicates another area of modernist initiative in changing the form of the novel. This phase of innovation is further discussed in Chapter 3.

A third aspect of Scott-James’s significance, however, is the element of reservation or qualification his views introduce into some of the distinctions just outlined. Woolf and other modernists acted on their belief in the need for change, and looked back disparagingly on authors such as Arnold Bennett who seemed to them too content with convention. Yet Scott-James suggests that such a complacent generation may never have existed. Though he hardly approved of the consequences, he indicates that long before Joyce and Woolf began publishing, ‘the old fixed canons of taste’ had ‘lost their validity’ and that it was not unusual to find a novelist who ‘ignores the earlier conventions’. Perhaps the stylistic and structural innovation characteristic of modernism’s greatest achievements needs to be seen as less unique or daring than it has sometimes been considered. Virginia Woolf, after all, remarks at the start of ‘Modern Fiction’ that ‘it is difficult not to take it for granted that the modern practice of the art is somehow an improvement upon the old’, but she soon goes on to admit that

In the course of the centuries . . . We do not come to write better; all that we can be said to do is to keep moving, now a little in this direction, now in that. (p. 103)

As Woolf suggests, an urge to ‘keep moving’ is not unique to modernism: neither an urge for novelty nor a commitment to change are altogether new in literature. It may be that the differences between modernism and earlier writing are best considered relative rather than absolute, quantitative rather than altogether qualitative. This is a possibility to be kept in mind throughout analysis of modernism’s stylistic, structural and linguistic transformations in Chapters 2, 3 and 4. Departures from the serial, chronological construction of storytelling, for example – its usual beginning, middle and end – are by no means uniquely the invention of modernist fiction. Likewise, according to one contemporary critic, Wyndham Lewis in *Time and Western Man* (1927),

even the stream-of-consciousness technique – often held to be the principal innovation and distinguishing achievement of modernist fiction – had first been practised long before, by Charles Dickens in *Pickwick Papers* (1837). There is better evidence, as Chapter 2 explains, that it was first used extensively in French fiction in the late nineteenth century.

Nevertheless, even if the stream of consciousness was not the wholly original invention of Dorothy Richardson or James Joyce, it had not been employed previously in English writing on the scale, or with the flexibility, which those authors had established for it by the mid-1920s. The evidence of Scott-James helps to avoid crediting modernism with an absolute originality it did not possess, yet the range and scale of changes the movement introduced, and the regularity and radicalism with which these were put into practice, remain quite sufficient to set apart and make distinctive a period in the literary history of the twentieth century. If not always totally new in kind, modernist innovation *was* spectacularly, inescapably new in extent. Thomas Hardy was by no means the only critic who recognized a contemporary urge not just for change, but to ‘change everything’. Herbert Read, for example, remarks in *Art Now* (1933) that

there have of course been revolutions in the history of art before today. There is a revolution with every new generation, and periodically, every century or so, we get a wider or a deeper change of sensibility to which we give the name of a period . . . But I do think we can already discern a difference of kind in the contemporary revolution: it is not so much a revolution, which implies a turning-over, even a turning-back, but rather a break-up, a devolution, some would say a dissolution. Its character is catastrophic . . .

The aim of five centuries of European effort is openly abandoned. (pp. 58–9, 67)

As Read suggests, innovations in contemporary fiction were only one aspect of a radical change in the period’s sensibility as a whole, apparent in ways confined neither to the novel genre nor to writing in Britain. Fiction by Marcel Proust or André Gide in French, or by Thomas Mann or Franz Kafka in German, shares many characteristics of new forms appearing in the novel in English. T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (1922) marks an analogous revolution – or in F.R. Leavis’s term, ‘New Bearing’ – in English poetry. Ezra Pound’s determination to ‘make it new’ and his memorably simple demand ‘I want a new civilisation’⁴ are likewise

reflected in his own poetry – in the Imagist movement he helped to foster around 1910 and eventually, most substantially, in the *Cantos* he began to publish in 1917.

Read's 'revolution in the history of art', and modernist dispositions like Pound's for a 'new civilisation', are at least as apparent in fields beyond contemporary literature as they are within it, affecting almost every genre of artistic enterprise throughout Europe and eventually the United States. Equally radical changes were introduced to the structural constitution of contemporary music. The conventional structuring of tones in Western composition, the diatonic scale, was replaced in 1908 by Arnold Schoenberg with a free a-tonality – a kind of creative anarchy of semi-tones – which he organized around 1920 into a new serial arrangement of twelve tones, interrelated independently of traditional systems. As one later commentator expresses it, such innovations 'undertook a radical dismantling of the established syntax of Western music'⁵ – what Herbert Read would have called a 'break up . . . a dissolution' of conventions of construction developed over centuries of European artistic endeavour.

This kind of 'dissolution' is equally clear in contemporary European painting. As in modernist fiction, artists made changes not necessarily in their subject or theme, or in the nature of what was represented: but in the form and structure of the representation: the style and strategy of the art itself. Pablo Picasso's early Cubist painting *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J.)* (1906–7) still – more or less – represents human forms, though the means by which it does so are changed so radically that even this is not wholly convincing or clear. The unitary perspective of painting, the tradition of seeing things from a single point in space, is abandoned in Picasso's work in favour of an apparent multiplication of points of view which allows the presentation of opposite sides of a face together in the same picture. Fundamental changes of this kind in the conventions of art greatly astonished the British public when they appeared in the exhibition of Post-Impressionist painting organized by Roger Fry in London late in 1910. This is usually thought to account for Virginia Woolf's choice, in her essay 'Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown', of December 1910 as an especially revolutionary time for the contemporary sensibility; a moment when, she suggests, 'human character changed' (I, p. 320).

Whether Woolf actually had Fry's exhibition principally in mind when she wrote 'Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown' is a matter further

discussed in Chapter 2. At any rate, no matter how far she and other novelists were directly concerned with changes taking place in many other forms of contemporary European art, these do often provide illuminating analogues for innovations in their writing, as well as confirming the revolutionary nature of the period as a whole. Practically, however, there are difficulties in concentrating on modernist fiction while also keeping a spectrum of European arts in view. There are now, in any case, a number of critical studies which offer broad surveys of the diversity of change and the different forms modernist innovations took across the field of early twentieth-century art as a whole.⁶ This study briefly refers to other art-forms where appropriate, while including the work of Marcel Proust as a major example of literary developments occurring elsewhere. Proust's fiction is in any case well worth examining, as in a number of ways it can be connected particularly closely and usefully with the British context. Especially in the areas of structure, chronology, and concomitant change in views of time, the innovations of modernism can be more fully and easily illustrated from Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* (*A la recherche du temps perdu*, 1913–27) than with reference only to fiction in English. In these and other areas, his example appealed fairly directly to several English modernists themselves. Both Dorothy Richardson and Virginia Woolf record admiration for Proust. 'Oh if I could write like that', Woolf remarks, mentioning at certain stages an intention to try to do so – to adapt certain of Proust's styles for her own use.⁷

Such instances of admiration or possible influence among modernist writers, however, are significantly rare. Statements of antipathy or at best indifference are more regularly in evidence. Though Woolf admired Proust, she had much more equivocal feelings for Joyce. She praises him in 'Modern Fiction', but records in her diary finding *Ulysses* 'a mis-fire . . . diffuse . . . brackish . . . pretentious'. Joyce himself could see no particular merit in Proust's writing. D.H. Lawrence could see little merit in either Proust, Joyce, Dorothy Richardson or Woolf – who for her part remarks 'I can't help thinking that there's something wrong with Lawrence'.⁸ In *Time and Western Man* and *Men Without Art* (1934) Wyndham Lewis suggests that there was a good deal wrong with almost all modernist authors – with Woolf, Lawrence, Joyce and Proust, as well as Gertrude Stein, Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner from the United

States. His negative views of these figures, and of contemporary culture as a whole, are further discussed in Chapter 3.

Lawrence himself warned that novelists' comments on their work are never entirely to be trusted, and it is possible that the modernists may sometimes have borrowed more from each other than they were prepared to admit. Nevertheless, the statements quoted above do help to indicate that – unlike other contemporary movements such as Imagism, Futurism or Vorticism – modernism involved little direct association between the writers involved. It was never a movement fostered through personal contacts or collective agreement about aims, goals, ideas or styles. Modernism is a critical construct – a recognition, some years after writers completed the work involved, of substantial similarity or even a collective identity in the initiatives they took and the styles and concerns they made a priority. This, however, does not make less viable the idea of modernism or of its coherence as a movement. As the present study will show, developments individual authors made independently from each other are nevertheless clearly comparable, and often related to one another more or less logically and progressively, one change of style following incrementally from another throughout the early decades of the century. Yet modernist authors' relative independence from each other does raise one obvious question about their work. If mutual association or influence cannot much account for manifold similarities throughout this phase of contemporary writing, what can?

One answer, really as obvious as the question, has already been offered by Alan Friedman's remarks, quoted in the Preface. The originality of modernist fiction, for Friedman, is owed to the originality of 'the modern experience' itself, to 'causes' in its philosophy, psychology, science, society, economics and politics. Along with so much contemporary art, modernist fiction changed radically in structure and style because the world it envisaged changed radically at the time, as indeed did means of envisaging it. Analogous innovations in so many contemporary art forms may have arisen not from mutual influence – Joyce did not restructure his work only because contemporary painters had done so, nor vice versa – but from common apprehension of the shifting nature of life, and of methods of perceiving it, in the early twentieth century. In other words, if contemporary novelists 'changed everything' in their work, as Thomas Hardy suggests, it would be reasonable to

suppose that this was simply because they perceived everything around them as changed – even, in Woolf's view, human character itself.

Like many an obvious answer, this is one which needs to be considered further before it can be accepted as innocent of oversimplification. Nevertheless, there is much evidence which does support Friedman's conclusion, some of it also helping explain the present study's methods of analyzing the modernist period and its writing. Many contemporary commentators confirm the extent of new challenges to the period's life and thinking, indicating how inescapable the effects of the new industrialized, technologized modernity of life seemed at the time. Even by 1880, the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche was suggesting of 'Premises of the Machine Age' that 'The press, the machine, the railway, the telegraph are premises whose thousand-year conclusion no one has yet dared to draw'.⁹ Over the next thirty years, many further forms of new technology impacted upon and transformed everyday life. By the early twentieth century, even before the First World War, the 'thousand-year conclusions' Nietzsche saw in the machine age had been many times further multiplied. Excited by this new technology and the accelerating pace of life and change it created, the Italian Futurist F.T. Marinetti was talking by 1913 of

the complete renewal of human sensibility brought about by the great discoveries of science. Those people who today make use of the telegraph, the telephone, the phonograph, the train, the bicycle, the motorcycle, the automobile, the ocean liner, the dirigible, the aeroplane, the cinema, the great newspaper (synthesis of a day in the world's life) do not realize that the various means of communication, transportation and information have a decisive influence on the psyche.¹⁰

Such 'decisive influences on the psyche' and on 'renewal of human sensibility' also figure in philosophy and other forms of systematic thinking at the time. Elsewhere in his Futurist Manifestos, Marinetti talks of 'The earth shrunk by speed' and suggests 'Time and Space died yesterday . . . because we have created eternal, omnipresent speed'.¹¹ As he indicates, technological change inevitably also became conceptual and philosophic: new speeds, a new pace of life, contributed to new conceptions of the fundamental coordinates of experience, space and time. Though contemporary philosophy by no means entirely shared Futurism's enthusiasms, it

inevitably responded to the same set of conditions. Without accepting that time and space had died altogether, it did often suggest that they had ceased to exist in ways they had conventionally been understood, and that new forms and mutual relations had to be established for them. Several of the contemporary philosophers considered in Chapter 3 – particularly Henri Bergson, whose popularity spread from France to Britain in the early part of the century – engaged in new enquiries regarding the nature and relations of space and time. Spectacularly confirmed in 1919, the astonishing theories of Albert Einstein eventually made such enquiries a common concern for the age as a whole – a topic of daily interest and conversation, as well as frequent literary reference, throughout the 1920s. A contemporary critic writing about the novel in 1928, John Carruthers, records that ‘space-time’ had become a ‘modern philosophical term that means so much’ (p. 84). In her novel *Mary Olivier*, published in 1919, May Sinclair likewise suggests that time and space had somehow become general ‘forms of thought – ways of thinking’ (p. 227). Richard Aldington begins his First World War novel *Death of a Hero* (1929) by defining individual life itself as ‘a point of light which . . . describes a luminous geometrical figure in space-time’ (p. 11).

No novelist, thirty or even twenty years before, would have described life quite in those terms. As the examples of Aldington and the others quoted suggest, space and time occupied a peculiar position in the imagination of the 1920s, providing – often in the newly hyphenated form ‘space-time’ which Carruthers and Aldington use – a fashionable, trendy terminology particular to the decade. Its appeal also appears in the work of Joyce’s acquaintance Carola Giedion-Welcker, who remarked of *Ulysses* in 1928 that

the arguments between man and world, the spiritual core of all great novels, becomes in Joyce, a great poetic-philosophical revelation about the inner and outer world, about subject and object, about matter, space, and time. They are the problems of the present philosophical and physical theories.¹²

One of the most significant of narrative theorists, Mikhail Bakhtin, likewise responded to the dominance of such theories in the 1920s by referring to Einstein’s ideas and coining the term ‘*chronotope* (literally, “time-space”)’ (p. 84) as a central category employed in