

Kathleen Wheeler



**'Modernist'
Women
Writers
and Narrative Art**

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NEW YORK UNIVERSITY PRESS
Washington Square, New York

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First published in the U.S.A. in 1994 by
NEW YORK UNIVERSITY PRESS
Washington Square
New York, N.Y. 10003

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Wheeler, Kathleen M.

"Modernist" women writers and narrative art / Kathleen Wheeler.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-8147-9275-8 — ISBN 0-8147-9276-6 (pbk.)

1. American fiction—Women authors—History and criticism.

2. English fiction—Women authors—History and criticism.

3. Modernism (Literature) 4. Women and literature. 5. Narration
(Rhetoric) I. Title.

PS374.W6W44 1994

813.009'9287—dc20

93-45749

CIP

Printed in Great Britain

Preface

In a collection of essays, Eudora Welty remarked that fiction is often 'brought off (when it does not fail) on the sharp edge of experiment'. She added that 'mystery waits for people wherever they go, whatever extreme they run to', and that even in realistic fictions, the reality is mystery. In the following sentence she clarified her insight when she explained that 'the mystery lies in the use of language to express human life'. The transformation of words into fiction is said to be a leap in the dark which brings writers and readers into 'the presence, the power, of the imagination'. Welty maintained that without its interpretation, without its artist, human life or experience – the 'so-called raw material' of fiction – is 'the worst kind of emptiness; it is obliteration, black or prismatic ... meaningless'. Before there can be meaning to human experience and life, there has to occur some 'personal act of vision' which is continuously 'projected as the novelist writes and the reader reads'. She then concluded:

If this makes fiction sound full of mystery, I think it's fuller than I know how to say.... In writing, do we try to solve this mystery? No, I think ... we rediscover the mystery. We even, I might say, take advantage of it.

As we know, a body of criticism stands ready to provide its solution, which is a kind of translation of fiction into another language ... the critical phrase 'in other words' is one to destroy rather than make for a real – that is, imaginative – understanding of the author.

In this study of seven women fiction writers, an effort has been made to avoid translating their fiction into another, less imaginative language. The mystery of the transformation of human life into words remains, as we explore the territory of fiction and seek to experience it more deeply through increased, more intimate acquaintance with the fiction, rather than through reductive generalisations or discursive accounts. In a sense, most criticism seeks to avoid such reductiveness, but by paying close, scrupulous attention to that 'sharp edge of experiment' which the texts exemplify, and

attention to the 'personal acts of vision' they express, we hope to gain a better sense of the 'degrees and degrees and degrees of communication ... possible between novelists and ... readers'. An effort is made to respect and understand these elements of mystery, of vision, and of art as experiments in original, individual personal acts of imagination, which seek to interpret human life and make it meaningful. The artistic products of that power of imagination (which is 'above all the power to reveal, with nothing barred') reveal themselves to readers who seek 'no explanation outside fiction for what its writer is learning to do'. These statements, far from rejecting criticism *per se*, encourage a more imaginative response from readers, as Welty's prolific criticism shows. What is at stake is a respect for literary experiment and for the mystery of putting life into words, a respect which if cultivated, leads critics into creative articulation of experiences of reading which are their own 'raw material'.

K.M.W.

Acknowledgements

My sincerest thanks go to Anne Rendell, whose initiative and determination got this book into legible form. I am also grateful to my editor Margaret Cannon whose interest in and enthusiasm for the project rescued it from oblivion. Many students, both graduate and undergraduate, contributed unawares to the book, both with specific ideas and approaches, and with their fascination for the modernist period as evinced in supervisions, seminars and lectures. To Gillian Rogers, the Librarian of the English Faculty, Cambridge, I owe much gratitude, not only for an unusually well-stocked library of women's texts, but also for helpful advice over the years about general matters to do with the book. To the Librarians of the University Library I am also grateful for help whenever needed. To the Master and Fellows of Darwin College thanks are due of a general kind for the congenial surroundings in which the writing of this book occurred.

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1

Introduction: The Dragon of St Cyril

In *Mystery and Manners*, a book of essays on the writing of fiction, Flannery O'Connor referred to the responsibility she felt as a writer to her readership, when she remarked: 'I hate to think of the day when the Southern writer will satisfy the tired reader.' She further explained that stories of any depth tell the tale, in an endless variety of disguises, of the mysterious passage past the dragon of St Cyril of Jerusalem, continuing: 'it requires considerable courage at any time, in any country, not to turn away from the storyteller.'¹ A few decades earlier, the American philosopher John Dewey had made a not unrelated observation, first paraphrasing a remark of John Keats: 'no "reasoning", as reasoning, that is, as excluding imagination and sense, can reach truth.... Reason must fall back on imagination – upon the embodiment of ideas in an emotionally charged sense.' Dewey then concluded:

Ultimately there are but two philosophies. One of them accepts life and experience in all its uncertainty, mystery, doubt, and half-knowledge, and turns that experience upon itself to deepen and intensify its own qualities – to imagination and art.²

The intensifying and deepening of experience – even if the empirical qualities of that experience are 'uncertainty, mystery, doubt and half-knowledge' – occurs, Dewey said, by means of 'imagination and art'. They make possible intelligent reflection about the experience which leads to enrichment and to a kind of wisdom ('understanding' or 'knowledge' would not be quite the right word). Reason, then, is placed firmly under the control of imagination. O'Connor's more imaginative, metaphorical description (quoted above) communicates Dewey's idea forcefully, as she invoked images of 'mysterious passages' past dragons and spoke of the courage required by readers and listeners to face up to the

irresolvable mysteries that the story-teller reveals. The strong emphasis of both these writers on the need to respect mystery, the role they and such earlier writers as John Keats gave to imagination and art as preservers and enriching forces of that mystery, and the reference to a mysterious passage, act as apt indications of a fruitful spirit in which to approach the writers discussed and referred to here.

The image of the 'mysterious passage' has strong reverberations of meaning for many of these writers, in its multiple significance as journey, as maturation, as initiation, and as a complex anatomical image. Travelling and journeys are evidently still an effective and exhilarating metaphor for imagination and aesthetic experience, as well as 'soul-making' or self-development. This is especially the case for writers like Jane Bowles, Stevie Smith, Katherine Mansfield, Jean Rhys, Willa Cather, and Edith Wharton; the latter noted joyously in 1917 that no guidebook for her destination, Morocco, was obtainable anywhere.³ These women's fictions are magic carpets which testify not only to the author's imaginative journey into the exotic and unknown territories of innovative art. These novels are also vehicles for readers on which to pass into the uncharted and unexplored realms of imaginative mental life. Writers such as Smith, Bowles, not to mention Margaret Atwood, Rachel Ingalls, Doris Lessing, and Djuna Barnes, have exploited the journey metaphor in all its richness.⁴ They and others have emphasised specifically its power as an image for expressing exploration into the realms of the unconscious and the unknown, whether in life or art. Travel is also a metaphor for the passage from childhood to adulthood, from life to death, and from sanity to madness. The metaphor of the journey also expresses the process of the discovery of love and sexuality, their relation to art and culture, energy in general, and its role in violence and in loving relationships. Closely related to these interests are concerns which Bowles, Smith and Charlotte Perkins Gilman, among others, specifically scrutinised in their novels, namely the relation of logic and reason to imagination, the illogical, and insanity. Other writers, such as Virginia Woolf, Katherine Mansfield, Hilda Doolittle, and Stevie Smith, explored the nature of the self, emphasising the multiple, ever-changing selves which inhabit the mind. Many of their novels portray the difficulty of creating an individuality genuinely distinct from the stereotyped social roles imposed from an early age. Other writers, such as Jean Rhys, Virginia Woolf, and Jane Bowles stressed the

importance of individuality as something to be striven for and to be created through imaginative living and artistry. Thus, the journey or passage metaphor takes on further connotations as an image for an existential striving to raise oneself above lifeless role-playing. Genuine individuality is established through creative acts of the imagination and the will.

The problem of how to strive for and achieve individuality as a person was reflected in the struggle to develop an originality as an artist-writer. Many writers used the metaphor of the passage (or of travel beyond the familiar everyday world into exotic realms) as a description of the process by which an author could search for and find a voice and style of her own. That is, the familiar world became a metaphor for familiar literary conventions, themes, narrative strategies, and language, while the passing beyond these to an unknown world meant breaking the boundaries of literary convention, in order to have new experiences and to find new and stimulating forms of expression. Shelley had argued in *A Defence of Poetry* (1819) that imaginative writers have the invaluable function in culture of revitalising old metaphors and of creating new ones. Language (and literary conventions), he explained, degenerates through custom and familiarity, losing its power to stimulate the reader's or writer's imagination:

and then if no new poets should arise to create afresh the associations which have been thus disorganized language will be dead to all the nobler purposes of human intercourse.⁵

Few twentieth-century writers experimented more imaginatively with fiction than the women discussed here, and while they made many similar experiments in disrupting literary fashions and traditional conventions, each of them achieved a striking individuality. They made use of narrative and other conventions for purposes of parody; that is, they ironised the hidden assumptions underlying literary conventions, such as 'objectivity' or neutrality of point of view, transparency of language, hierarchies of privilege, and the hegemony of reason and logic. These women writers also exploited traditions of the baroque and gothic, the grotesque and picaresque, folk-tales and fairy-tales, legends, and medieval and gothic romance. They also adapted traditional imagery and metaphor (like the journey metaphor), traditional narrative techniques or structural devices, and other familiar conventions for new ends or

in innovative ways in order to refashion experience itself. They could thereby make literature more expressive of their own unique experience, both as women and as artists. Into their experiments with narrative themes, forms and style, such writers as Woolf, Barnes, H. D., Rhys, Bowles, Smith, Dorothy Richardson, May Sinclair, and Gertrude Stein wove passionately articulate critiques of prevailing ideologies, whether social and political patriarchy, medical mistreatment of women, economic exploitation, racism, homophobia, or literary ideologies, such as realism. No convention of society or of fiction was left unexamined. Stock-in-trade devices involving stereotyped imagery, worn-out 'dead' metaphors, character types, notions of the role of plot, dialogue, and description, styles of language, and formal structures or modes of organisation, were boldly exploited for new ends. Language and form were pulled, stretched, distorted, parodied, and disrupted in innumerable ways into innovative and witty transformations, which embodied new conceptions of life and art while questioning prevailing values.

The narratives of these women writers pushed the limits of twentieth century fiction deep into new territory, influencing many later writers. Another way of describing the effects of such writers' experiments in fiction is to say that each of them, in her own unique way, multiplied still further the possibilities for viewing ourselves and our worlds. Such new points of view lead to new worlds of perception and experience. Some used familiar modernist 'disruption' techniques and their counterparts, namely constructive innovation; others used realist gestures and then built into the sub-text a 'deconstruction' of that very realism (a more recent example being Doris Lessing's *Golden Notebook*).⁶ These newly created worlds of perception and experience extend our consciousness as the landscape of experience changes; depending on the point of view from which we look at life, society, and the individual, new possibilities for how we live emerge. Hence, our most basic values and beliefs are shown to be subject to examination and change. Indeed, not only our most cherished values may have to change; the very facts of experience change too, under imaginative scrutiny. The novels and short stories of these women portray many of our ideals, our aspirations, and the things we seek to preserve, as destructive fantasies, hypocrisies, cruelty, and exploitation at the worst, and harmful sentimentality and folly at the best. Both values and facts are transformed by these novelists through artistic

innovations which frequently mirror, or are analogies for, the thematics of the texts. Fine, precise congruence between form and content is thereby achieved, a congruence in the sense that forms of art, language, and thematics coincide, reinforcing each other as well as the belief that there is always more than one valuable way of seeing the world, of thinking, feeling, or living.⁷ Exploration of the points of view which madness and dreams offer, or the points of view of freaks, outcasts, children, women, certain 'unacceptable' men, and other types of 'outsiders', like tarts and criminals, lead these writers to a rejection of the adequacy of so-called normal attitudes, beliefs, and behaviour. Such exposures of convention in life and in literature become the main themes and structuring principles of these novels, whether overtly or whether subtly built into an ironic sub-text.

One of the most striking characteristics of these modernist and 'pre-modernist' texts is the extent to which the authors' fictional exploits anticipate and enact present-day theories of art and literature, by means of techniques of metadiscourse, self-conscious writing, and self-consuming artefacts. Related matters such as the centrality of rhetorical devices, levels of self-commentary by means of ironic sub-texts, extended metaphorical levels of meaning, and complex imagery referring both to the reading and the writing of the text abound in the fictions of the women writers studied here, not to mention many of their contemporaries. For example, overt modernists like Stevie Smith, Jane Bowles, Jean Rhys, Katherine Anne Porter, and Katherine Mansfield use familiar modernist techniques for such ironic, metaphoric, mirroring designs. Yet, as is shown below, Edith Wharton, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Willa Cather, and Kate Chopin also wove ironic, systematically detailed and precisely constructed 'looking-glass' levels into an only superficially realist or 'straight' narrative form. These writers' novels and stories make it evident that much fiction has a sophisticated, distinct layer of critical commentary built into its fabric. Such criticism woven into the fictional design of texts acts to criticise the implicit 'ideology' of the surface thematics. That is, the sub-text reverses the values and facts the overt thematics appeared to support and condone. A level of criticism also functions as a self-conscious commentary on textuality – on the status of the text as fiction, its relation to 'reality' – to the author, the world, and especially to the reader in the act of the reading, interpreting, and making sense of the text. In such a level of self-criticism, the nature of an artist's relation to her

literary predecessors is also variously explored: *Wide Sargasso Sea* is only the most parodic, overt example, while Kate Chopin less overtly – but no less ironically – ‘deconstructed’ the main planks of realism, and Willa Cather explicitly and avowedly threw out its props and furniture. Charlotte Perkins Gilman personified the realist in her male characters and showed the madness to which such men could drive an original mind. Edith Wharton, on the other hand, like Jane Austen before her, tamed realism to suit her own ironic predilections. She disrespectfully dismissed what did not please her, by means of queenly reversals of life-art relations and ironic, detached ‘hidden’ narrators who adopt ‘knitting’, for example, as a parody of realist literary proprieties.⁸

In ‘disestablishing’ their supposed relation to their literary precursors, whether through indirect allusion or overt reference, these women emphasised the way novels can be designed to adopt, adapt, tease, mock, ironise, and reject traditional literary devices and conventions. An awareness of such a level of criticism in fiction, regarding both thematics and formal elements, leads to the question of the relation of fiction to criticism, or fiction to any other non-fictional form of writing. Both implicitly and explicitly, such writing suggests that the relation between fictional and non-fictional writing is more complex than a simple ‘difference’ understood as a dichotomy. Other related questions arise about the nature of the relationship between art and reality, fiction and reality, and language and reality. Any reader familiar with Gertrude Stein, Woolf, Bowles, Smith, or Rhys, not to mention more recent authors such as Angela Carter, Marguerite Young, Leonora Carrington, Doris Lessing, and Louise Erdrich, will realise immediately that for these artists, such apparent dichotomies as language-world, art-reality, and fiction-history are functional and relative.⁹ That is, these dualities are examples of conventional modes of reflecting about experience; the relationship of such dualities becomes problematic only if we mistake the dualities as a fundamental character of experience, and not the product of reflection and socialised learning. One of the dichotomies these writers are most concerned to expose as functional and relative, rather than as a ‘given’ of basic experience, is that supposed duality between articulation and experience, between linguistic expression and feeling.

For many of these writers, there is no such thing as self-conscious, human experience antecedent to the articulation of it, however underdeveloped and blunt that articulation may be. As is

clear from the complex ironies of their textual fabrics, language is the means of organising chaos into a conscious awareness which is the only awareness worthy of the name, experience. As John Dewey, Derrida, or Heidegger would argue, experience is not even 'had' until it is articulated, however crudely. As that articulation is cultivated and sharpened, experience becomes more sophisticated, more qualitatively meaningful, and even more 'real'. To put it in another Deweyan way, mind emerges, as does self-conscious experience, concurrently with emerging language use.¹⁰ Each one of the women authors discussed here, from Chopin and Wharton to Bowles and Smith, depicts in new and imaginative ways the saturation of experience by language, and the linguistic character of all experience. Relatedly, one of the most common general themes (often reflected in the formal structures) of these and others such as Stein, Woolf, Dorothy Richardson, May Sinclair, H. D., Djuna Barnes, not to mention Ellen Glasgow and Rebecca West, was to expose duality itself,¹¹ and its resulting hierarchies, as defunct, as a delusion resulting from mistaking a product of reflection for the nature of reality. Through fiction, these women writers broke through the boundaries such dualities set up, not only to rewrite the dual elements as functions of each other and interdependent, but also to expose them as mere conventions, not truths once and for all. We, as readers, are shown that, valuable as dualistic conventions may be, they need constantly to be disrupted if the imagination required to see new possibilities is to be kept alive.

Moreover, such conventional dualities are nearly always imbued with unequal, hierarchical values. Rhys and Wharton in particular expose these inequalities as ideologies devised to maintain privilege and prejudice. Imaginative reversals are invoked to debunk the 'reality' of such inequable valuations; the resulting two sides of the duality are shown to be conceptually and empirically interdependent for existence and for meaning. Indeed, not only are they interdependent 'in reality', and not opposed to each other (except ideologically), their very existence is shown to be a product of reflection, a way of looking at the world, not a fact of reality. Finally, these women's texts show that meaning or value is itself conventional and subject to change. For example, not only is gender shown to be a social construct; sexual, biological difference itself is equally a way of structuring experience. Every human being differs from every other human being; but as Jean Rhys, for example, insisted, we can focus in on any difference we like. Yet if we turn that chosen difference into a

category for placing people into pecking orders of value, we dehumanise ourselves and them. To focus on certain differences, and not others, and to raise them to the level of some supreme importance, some 'biological fact', is to interpret the world ideologically. For Rhys we are all first and foremost human beings, to be treated as individuals, not to be categorised, classed, and labelled with price tags of our worth. Katherine Mansfield also knifed through the facade of the pretensions and hypocrisies which allege categories to be realities and not ideologies. Other writers such as Djuna Barnes, Radclyffe Hall, Jane Bowles, Gertrude Stein, and H. D., to take only a few obvious examples, debunked the notion that while gender may admittedly be a social category (to determine specified social roles which have little, strangely enough, to do with our genitalia), sexuality at least is a fact. Like gender, these texts confirm that biology is interpretation too, and is in as much need of examination of its premises and presuppositions as science is of its methods and aims.

Whether we read Gilman or Bowles, Cather or Smith, Wharton or Mansfield, the levels of multiple critical commentary, embedded like a beautiful design in each text, alert the reader both to the general, theoretical issues touched upon above, and to the more immediate, phenomenological moments of reading itself. Questions about the nature of reading, interpretation, and the 'extraction' of meaning from texts, questions about the reader's role – as passive receiver of someone else's artistry, ideas, and acts or as active participant in the aesthetic experience of art – questions about the nature and role of imagination, reason, desire, will, expectations, opinions, and so on, all such questions are not merely implied by these texts. These matters are 'figured' into the designs, the formal structures, and the thematics of the texts. Sometimes they are displayed by means of familiar symbolic emblems, as with Willa Cather. Other times, they are 'knitted' (as in Edith Wharton's 'Roman Fever') into the text by semantic levels of analogy. Such analogy is drawn to the reader's attention by repeated, recognisable gestures of imagery, pun, or self-referentiality (through, for example, self-conscious narrative frameworks). Jean Rhys achieved a (typically) fine congruence when she repeatedly mentioned the racial issue of white-black and depicted racism in nearly every character except 'the tarts' – especially excepting Anna. Then, through repeated insertions into the textual subject-matter of comments about reading, books, and words (in *Voyage in the Dark* and *After Leaving Mr MacKenzie*), Rhys punned on the words 'black

and white', implying not only racism, but also words typed in black on a white page.¹² Such witty, authorised gestures for constructing mirroring situations in which the reader is 'caught in the act' of reading permeate nearly every text discussed here. To use a conventional metaphor from the rag-bag of critical discourse, such novels and stories are distorting mirrors ('looking-glasses' as Rhys, Porter, and others like to call them) in which we readers get the chance to view ourselves from many perspectives and in a whole variety of different mirrors. Rhys and Mansfield exposed our prejudices, Chopin and Cather our destructive fantasies, Gilman and Wharton our inadequate understanding of the reaction of a 'sane' individual to an 'insane society'. Bowles showed us our unfounded preconceptions about morality, sex, homophobia, and religious strictures; Porter laughed at our self-importance and Stevie Smith at our *naïveté*.

Innovations in style, imagery, characterisation, structural unity, narrative strategy, and thematics are often overlooked if we read lazily, without the scrupulous attention to detail that each one of these exquisitely unique texts deserves. Their potential to provide aesthetic experiences of beauty and insight – of what it feels like to be an imaginative reader – is lost unless we as readers cultivate an almost mystical respect for these texts as individuals. Their unique character and originality set them off from every other text, no matter how much they share in articulating the issues discussed above. These texts can be treated as possessing a particularity much like that of any human individual. Hence, they should never be treated mechanically, as objects, but as living things which, together with imaginative critical response, will reveal their inner structures. The aesthetic experience they engender, moreover, is their meaning as works of art, and aesthetic experience occurs in the interacting of a text with a writer or a reader. The reader is, through beautifully designed settings in the narrative, aroused to demanding complex levels of response, to an awareness of second- and third-order significances and meanings. Of course, the novels and stories are, at a thematic level, fascinating and provocative critiques of society and individuals; though even on this level they may turn out to have complexities which force us to reject or reverse our initial interpretations. These texts are intensely meaningful as works of art when their formal, artistic qualities create a congruence with the thematics. They create such a congruence, which is almost a definition of art, by being both overt and covert

meditations on the ways fiction is produced by an individual, yet in a tradition. They meditate upon the relation of a work of fiction to the world or the reality it is supposed to 'reflect', a relation which is far from a simple representation or allegory.

Such metadiscourse, such second- and third-order levels of self-reference, are not purely formal. For these modernists, such literary and artistic formalities are themselves substantive. Without them, the so-called content or thematics would have no shape and hence no being. Moreover, these formal qualities, distinguishable only, not divisible from the thematics, are designed by such writers as Chopin, Rhys, Wharton, Bowles, Cather, and Smith, to show how central art and imaginative activity are to our ordinary, everyday lives. These levels of textual meaning reveal that the alleged dichotomy between creativity or imaginativeness and 'mere' perception or ordinary everyday life is itself only relative. Ordinary life and basic, 'mere' perception are themselves rich with imaginative character, if only we would activate our imagination. They seem different because custom and familiarity blind us to the art of living, the beauty of the world around us, and the imaginative character of simple perception. According to these modernists, the latter is at the basis of artistic creativity, that power of stripping away the veil of familiarity which hides the beauty, and the ugliness, of the ordinary world, and of ordinary perception itself.

All the writers discussed here offer opportunities for imaginative response of a sophisticated kind, opportunities for an unusual degree of self-awareness concerning the possible ways in which reading can presume upon, distort, and even imprison, as well as liberate, a text. Contrary to the covertly conservative presuppositions of much of what is misnamed 'New Historicism', each of the levels of meaning touched upon above (and discussed more fully in the following chapters) are significant and valuable. The women writers discussed here, as well as many of their contemporaries, clearly refuted by example the simplistic notion that literature is somehow secondary and supplemental to a prior reality, to history, to context. They rejected the notion that literature is a mimetic or even critical representation of these prior givens. William James brilliantly exploded this delusion by discovering an implicit human spectator unconsciously assumed in all such 'theories' which posit duality as the essential character of experience.¹³ Literature may be 'like' history or life, and even a representation of it. Yet life and history are no less 'like' literature, that is, meaningful and intelligible