

THEORISTS OF THE MODERNIST NOVEL

James Joyce, Dorothy Richardson,
Virginia Woolf

Deborah Parsons

 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
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THEORISTS OF THE MODERNIST NOVEL

In the early twentieth century the modernist novel exploded literary conventions and expectations, challenging representations of reality, consciousness and identity. These novels were not simply creative masterpieces but also crucial articulations of revolutionary developments in critical thought.

In this volume Deborah Parsons traces the developing modernist aesthetic in the thought and writings of James Joyce, Dorothy Richardson and Virginia Woolf. Considering cultural, social and personal influences upon the three writers and connections between their theories, Parsons pays particular attention to their work on:

- forms of realism
- the representation of character and consciousness
- gender and the novel
- concepts of time and history.

An understanding of these three thinkers is fundamental to a grasp of modernism, making this an indispensable guide for students of modernist thought. It is also essential reading for those who wish to understand debates about the genre of the novel or the nature of literary expression which were given a new impetus by Joyce, Richardson and Woolf's pioneering experiments within the genre of the novel.

Deborah Parsons is a senior lecturer and chair of postgraduate programmes at the University of Birmingham, UK. Her principal interests are in Modernism

SERIES EDITOR'S PREFACE

The books in this series offer introductions to major critical thinkers who have influenced literary studies and the humanities. The *Routledge Critical Thinkers* series provides the books you can turn to first when a new name or concept appears in your studies.

Each book will equip you to approach these thinkers' original texts by explaining their key ideas, putting them into context and, perhaps most importantly, showing you why they are considered to be significant. The emphasis is on concise, clearly written guides which do not presuppose specialist knowledge. Although the focus is on particular figures, the series stresses that no critical thinker ever existed in a vacuum but, instead, emerged from a broader intellectual, cultural and social history. Finally, these books will act as a bridge between you and their original texts: not replacing them but rather complementing what they wrote. In some cases, volumes consider small clusters of thinkers working in the same area, developing similar ideas or influencing each other.

These books are necessary for a number of reasons. In his 1997 autobiography, *Not Entitled*, the literary critic Frank Kermode wrote of a time in the 1960s:

On beautiful summer lawns, young people lay together all night, recovering from their daytime exertions and listening to a troupe of Balinese musicians. Under

their blankets or their sleeping bags, they would chat drowsily about the gurus of the time . . . What they repeated was largely hearsay; hence my lunchtime suggestion, quite impromptu, for a series of short, very cheap books offering authoritative but intelligible introductions to such figures.

There is still a need for 'authoritative and intelligible introductions'. But this series reflects a different world from the 1960s. New thinkers have emerged and the reputations of others have risen and fallen, as new research has developed. New methodologies and challenging ideas have spread through the arts and humanities. The study of literature is no longer – if it ever was – simply the study and evaluation of poems, novels and plays. It is also the study of the ideas, issues and difficulties which arise in any literary text and in its interpretation. Other arts and humanities subjects have changed in analogous ways.

With these changes, new problems have emerged. The ideas and issues behind these radical changes in the humanities are often presented without reference to wider contexts or as theories which you can simply 'add on' to the texts you read. Certainly, there's nothing wrong with picking out selected ideas or using what comes to hand – indeed, some thinkers have argued that this is, in fact, all we can do. However, it is sometimes forgotten that each new idea comes from the pattern and development of somebody's thought and it is important to study the range and context of their ideas. Against theories 'floating in space', the *Routledge Critical Thinkers* series places key thinkers and their ideas firmly back in their contexts.

More than this, these books reflect the need to go back to the thinkers' own texts and ideas. Every interpretation of an idea, even the most seemingly innocent one, offers its own 'spin', implicitly or explicitly. To read only books on a thinker, rather than texts by that thinker, is to deny yourself a chance of making up your own mind. Sometimes what makes a significant figure's work hard to approach is not so much its style or content as the feeling of not knowing where to start. The purpose of these books is to give you a 'way in' by offering an accessible overview of these thinkers' ideas and works and by guiding your further reading, starting with each thinker's own texts. To use a metaphor from the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951), these books are ladders,

to be thrown away after you have climbed to the next level. Not only, then, do they equip you to approach new ideas, but they also empower you, by leading you back to a theorist's own texts and encouraging you to develop your own informed opinions.

Finally, these books are necessary because, just as intellectual needs have changed, so the education systems around the world – the contexts in which introductory books are usually read – have changed radically, too. What was suitable for the minority higher education system of the 1960s is not suitable for the larger, wider, more diverse, high-technology education systems of the twenty-first century. These changes call not just for new, up-to-date, introductions but for new methods of presentation. The presentational aspects of *Routledge Critical Thinkers* have been developed with today's students in mind.

Each book in the series has a similar structure. They begin with a section offering an overview of the life and ideas of the featured thinkers and explaining why they are important. The central section of the books discusses the thinkers' key ideas, their context, evolution and reception: with the books that deal with more than one thinker, they also explain and explore the influence of each on each. The volumes conclude with a survey of the impact of the thinker or thinkers, outlining how their ideas have been taken up and developed by others. In addition, there is a detailed final section suggesting and describing books for further reading. This is not a 'tacked-on' section but an integral part of each volume. In the first part of this section you will find brief descriptions of the key works by the featured thinkers, then, following this, information on the most useful critical works and, in some cases, on relevant websites. This section will guide you in your reading, enabling you to follow your interests and develop your own projects. Throughout each book, references are given in what is known as the Harvard system (the author and the date of a work cited are given in the text and you can look up the full details in the bibliography at the back). This offers a lot of information in very little space. The books also explain technical terms and use boxes to describe events or ideas in more detail, away from the main emphasis of the discussion. Boxes are also used at times to highlight definitions of terms frequently used or coined by a thinker. In this way, the boxes serve as a kind of glossary, easily identified when flicking through the book.

The thinkers in the series are 'critical' for three reasons. First, they are examined in the light of subjects which involve criticism: principally literary studies or English and cultural studies, but also other disciplines which rely on the criticism of books, ideas, theories and unquestioned assumptions. Second, they are critical because studying their work will provide you with a 'tool kit' for your own informed critical reading and thought, which will make you critical. Third, these thinkers are critical because they are crucially important: they deal with ideas and questions which can overturn conventional understandings of the world, of texts, of everything we take for granted, leaving us with a deeper understanding of what we already knew and with new ideas.

No introduction can tell you everything. However, by offering a way into critical thinking, this series hopes to begin to engage you in an activity which is productive, constructive and potentially life-changing.

CONTENTS

Series editor's preface	vii
WHY JOYCE, WOOLF AND RICHARDSON?	1
KEY IDEAS	19
1 A New Realism	21
2 Character and Consciousness	55
3 Gender and the Novel	81
4 Time and History	109
AFTER JOYCE	133
Notes	137
FURTHER READING	139
Works cited	147
Index	159

WHY JOYCE, WOOLF AND RICHARDSON?

'[O]ne great part of every human existence is passed in a state which cannot be rendered sensible by the use of wideawake language, cutanddry grammar and goahead prose', James Joyce declared while writing *Finnegans Wake* (*LJ* III: 146). 'I remember . . . my astonishment when *Pointed Roofs* was greeted as a "Novel"', Dorothy Richardson said of the publication of the first instalment of her thirteen-volume life's work *Pilgrimage* (*LDR*: 496). 'I have an idea that I will invent a new name for my books to supplant "novel"', Virginia Woolf wrote in her diary in 1927, 'A new ? by Virginia Woolf. But what?' (*D* III: 34). In her nine novels, innumerable critical essays and reviews, and extensive autobiographical writings, Woolf persistently explored and experimented with the boundaries of literary convention in order to express more fully the qualities and intensity of conscious experience. If Joyce and Richardson were less prodigious in terms of the quantity of their fictional and critical writings, they made up for it with the vast length and uncompromising inventiveness of their key works. Yet what was it about the model of the novel as they inherited it that so dissatisfied them? And, as Woolf deliberated, what would they put in its place?

The early twentieth century marks a significant moment in the history of the English novel, its status and future becoming a matter of constant literary debate as both writers and reviewers questioned how the form

and subject-matter of modern fiction should respond to the shape and experience of modern life. To the contemporary reader the novel may seem one of the most resilient and mutable of literary forms, expansive (or vague) enough in definition to include a vast range of styles and sub-genres. In the early 1900s, however, it seemed to many young writers, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf and Dorothy Richardson among them, that the best-selling novels of the day had become stuck within fixed and limiting rules for the representation of character and reality. For a generation born into the last decades of the Victorian era, yet whose maturity coincided with technological innovation, scientific revolution and the destructive rupture of world war, the sense of living in a new age was acute, and what had become the conventional forms of fiction seemed inappropriate, even hostile, to the depiction of their contemporary moment.

'On all sides writers are attempting what they cannot achieve,' Woolf wrote in an essay titled 'Poetry, Fiction and the Future' (reprinted as 'The Narrow Bridge of Art'), 'forcing the form they use to contain a meaning which is strange to it' (*E* III: 429). That meaning was a picture of existence newly shaped by the revelations of Darwin, Freud and Einstein among others, and that in its disturbing implications prompted 'monstrous, hybrid, unmanageable emotions':

That the age of the earth is 3,000,000,000 years; that human life lasts but a second; that the capacity of the human mind is nevertheless boundless; that life is infinitely beautiful yet repulsive; that one's fellow creatures are adorable but disgusting; that science and religion have between them destroyed belief; that all bonds of union are broken, yet some control must exist – it is in this atmosphere of doubt and conflict that writers have now to create . . . (430)

Such bewildering ideas both stimulated and posed new problems for imaginative representation. Modern life could not be fully expressed in the form of lyric poetry, Woolf argues, which was unsuited to the rendering of everyday realities, nor that of the current novel, all too happy when portraying details and facts but awkward and self-conscious when attempting to convey a sense of the profundity of life and being. The novel of the future, she advocates, would need to combine the two, possessing

'something of the exaltation of poetry, but much of the ordinariness of prose' (435):

It will make little use of the marvellous fact-recording power, which is one of the attributes of fiction. It will tell us very little about the houses, incomes, occupations of its characters; it will have little kinship with the sociological novel or the novel of environment. With these limitations it will express the feelings and ideas of the characters closely and vividly, but from a different angle. . . . It will give the relations of man to Nature, to fate; his imagination; his dreams. But it will also give the sneer, the contrast, the question, the closeness and complexity of life. It will take the mould of that queer conglomeration of incongruous things – the modern mind. (435, 436)

At the same time, she demands, the new novel will 'be written standing back from life' (438), so that the writer can compose its common complexity into the rich import of art. Formally radical, subjectively real and aesthetically autonomous, expressive of a world in which the present seems dislocated from the past, experience is fragmented, multiple and limitless, and previous certainties about the physical world and our selfhood within it have been swept away; this was the art that Joyce, Woolf and Richardson sought to create. The result was the development of what has been variously described as the 'psychological', or 'stream-of-consciousness' or 'modernist' novel.

PIONEERS

While sharing an aim to convey aspects of human existence typically unrepresented by conventional prose, along with certain formal stylistic similarities in the ways that they did so, the material social and cultural contexts from which Joyce, Woolf and Richardson thought and wrote were very different: Joyce an Irishman self-exiled to Europe, single-mindedly pursuing his extraordinary craft while supported and feted by the most forward-thinking patrons of the cosmopolitan art world; Woolf the product of Victorian upper-middle-class liberalism, her work nurtured within the context of high-brow Bloomsbury aesthetics; Richardson a staunchly independent 'new woman', pioneering her revolutionary

'feminine' prose on far less than the five hundred pounds a year that Woolf would famously declare necessary for a woman to be able to write.

Joyce, Woolf and Richardson have all been well-served by biographers, and for the fullest accounts I point readers towards Richard Ellmann's *James Joyce* (1959; rev. 1982), Hermione Lee's *Virginia Woolf* (1996) and Gloria Glikin Fromm's *Dorothy Richardson: A Biography* (1977). The first two were both born in 1882 (coincidentally they also died in the same year, 1941), Joyce into a family of rapidly declining prosperity in Dublin during the political climate of the Parnell years, Woolf into the inspiring milieu yet restrictive social respectability of the Victorian upper-middle-class intelligentsia. Despite increasing poverty as a result of his father's improvidence, Joyce's education was undertaken at prestigious Jesuit establishments (Clongowes Wood College, a boarding school in County Kildare, and then Belvedere College in Dublin). By the time he was studying languages and philosophy at University College Dublin, however, he was desperate to escape what he regarded as Ireland's moribund parochialism and narrow Catholic nationalism. He went to Paris in 1903 to study medicine, but returned after only a few months to be with his dying mother. In 1904 he began work on some sketches of Dublin life (finally published as *Dubliners* in 1914), as well as an autobiographical novel *Stephen Hero*, but the city now seemed to the young Joyce more stagnant than ever before. In the middle of June he met Nora Barnacle and together they left Dublin for good, settling first in Trieste, where Joyce worked as a teacher of English, and later in Zurich and Paris.

Joyce always had difficulty in placing his work with mainstream publishers, who were hesitant about its lack of mass-appeal and arguably libellous and obscene content. By 1913, however, the manuscript of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* had come to the attention of the American poet and exuberant champion of modernism, Ezra Pound, who worked energetically to secure the patronage of Harriet Shaw Weaver and its serial publication in the avant-garde literary journal of which she was editor, *The Egoist*, in 1914 (it was published in book form by B. W. Huebsch in America in 1916). *A Portrait* was received by the majority of reviewers (favourably or unfavourably depending on their point of view) as literary realism taken to crude yet dazzlingly inventive extremes, but few recognised any hint of the meticulous and multi-layered composi-

tional order with which Joyce would endow that realism in his next work. The first thirteen of the eighteen chapters of *Ulysses* appeared in *The Little Review* between March 1918 and December 1920, before the publication of the 'Nausicaa' episode resulted in it being banned for obscenity in both the United States and UK (a decision not overturned until 1933).¹ Encouraged by Pound, Joyce now moved to Paris, where the American bookstore owner Sylvia Beach offered to publish the novel under the auspices of her shop Shakespeare and Company, with printing subsidised by advance subscriptions. It finally appeared in book form in 1922, the complexity of the novel's style and vision, supported by some skilful marketing and its cult aura as a 'banned' manuscript, turning Joyce into a literary celebrity and confirming his elevation in the eyes of reviewers from the gutter of vulgar naturalism to the heights of the literary avant-garde.

Joyce himself was characteristically less than modest about his achievement. '[T]he value of the book is in its new style' he wrote to the musician Arthur Laubenstein in 1923 (Ellmann, 1982: 568). The influence of the narrative and structural innovations of *Ulysses* on modern fiction is incontrovertible. The novelist Ford Madox Ford wrote on its publication: 'Certain books change the world. This, success or failure, *Ulysses* does: for no novelist with serious aims can henceforth set out upon a task of writing before he has at least formed his own private estimate as to the rightness or wrongness of the methods of the author of *Ulysses*' (Deming, 1970: 129). T. S. Eliot took a more apocalyptic line, announcing to Virginia Woolf that *Ulysses* 'had destroyed the whole of the 19th Century' (*D II*: 203). For her part Woolf thought the novel 'an illiterate, underbred book . . . the book of a self taught working man . . . egotistic, insistent, raw, striking, and ultimately nauseating' (189). There was yet as much implicit rivalry as explicit genteel distaste in her response. On Eliot's recommendation the Woolfs had considered publishing *Ulysses* in 1918 through their own small publishing house the Hogarth Press, but finally refused, ostensibly due to its length, although more probably because they had been unable to find a printer who would agree to work on a manuscript so liable to prosecution for obscenity. Of Eliot's erudite enthusiasm for the novel Woolf remarked somewhat ruefully in her diary, 'He said nothing – but I reflected how what I'm doing is probably being

better done by Mr Joyce' (69). His experimental approach she found exciting, and was arguably a significant influence on the structure and form of *Mrs Dalloway* (1925). She was also prepared to acknowledge his accepted genius on the authority of those such as Eliot whose opinions she respected. What she found wanting in Joyce's work, however (as she also did that of Richardson), was its rendering of the self-absorbed mind, which failed to capture what was in her view the permeability of consciousness and relativity of identity.

Woolf was the third of four children (Vanessa, Thoby, Virginia and Adrian) born to Leslie Stephen, founding editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography*, and his second wife Julia Duckworth. Due to her sex and class she was precluded from the Cambridge education of her brothers, depending instead on voracious reading of the contents of her father's library. At fifteen she suffered the first of several breakdowns, the result of emotional strain caused by the deaths of both her mother in 1895 and her half-sister in 1897, the consequent estrangement of her father, and the sexualised attentions of her half-brothers. The following years were punctuated by periods of ill-health, and dominated by frustration and rebellion against the exacting emotional demands of a man she would remember with ambivalence as 'the tyrant father'. When he died in 1904 the Stephens quickly moved from the family home in Kensington to bohemian independence in Bloomsbury. If as a child Woolf had been surrounded by eminent Victorians, as a young adult she now revelled in lively and forthright discussions on art and politics with her brother Thoby and his Cambridge friends (among them E. M. Forster, Lytton Strachey, John Maynard Keynes and Woolf's future husband Leonard Woolf). The so-called 'Bloomsbury Group' was heavily attacked in the politicised literary critical climate of the mid-twentieth century for what was regarded as its exclusive and elitist ideology. Woolf's reputation suffered in consequence, although she herself typically refused any suggestion of its influence on her writing. Yet for the support of her developing sense of identity as a writer in the years between her father's death and her marriage to Leonard Woolf in 1912, the uninhibited and critically constructive environment that the Bloomsbury circle provided cannot be underestimated. The value of early Bloomsbury for Woolf was perhaps ultimately twofold; psychologically, in the emotional support it provided

after the death of Thoby from typhoid in 1906, and creatively, in the emphasis on freedom of thought that was more prevalent in its discussions than any mutual aesthetic doctrine. The questions that she posed about the relationship between art and life in her regular reviews for the *Guardian* and *Times Literary Supplement* at this time were stimulated, if not answered, by the social, political and aesthetic debates of Bloomsbury.

Woolf was also by now struggling with the writing of her first novel, revising it repeatedly during several years of almost constant mental instability. *The Voyage Out* is a story of self-discovery, in which the sheltered Rachel Vinrace, journeying to South America with her father, aunt and uncle, is awakened to the possibilities of her imaginative and intellectual life and its suppression by the demands of a male-dominated world. Becoming engaged to an aspiring writer, she shortly afterwards catches a fever and dies, an ending that leaves tantalisingly hanging the question of whether, in death, the excitements and possibilities of Rachel's life have been cut short or its fears and limits transcended. It is partly the enigma that Rachel thus remains that Lytton Strachey recognised made the novel so 'very, very unvictorian' (Majumdar and McLaurin, 1975: 64). While she bears some comparison with the young Woolf in her frustrated yet eager embrace of perceptual experience, so too, however, does her fiancé Terence Hewet, the potential novelist, whose experimental vision suggests the possibilities of Woolf's own. When he comments, for example, that while male novelists constantly write about women, 'we still don't know in the least how they live, or what they feel, or what they do precisely' (VO: 245), he indicates a sensitivity to women's everyday lives and sense of self with which she would be constantly concerned, in both her fictional and non-fictional writing. His occasional belligerence indicates that he is not a straightforward vehicle for Woolf's views, but his comment to Rachel that 'There's something I can't get hold of in you' (245), and his desire to 'write a book about Silence, . . . the things people don't say' (249), are identifiable with her own fascination with the elusiveness of character and her attempt to find new forms for the novel that would allow for the expression of all that remained silenced within in its conventional limits.

The Voyage Out was finally published by Duckworth in 1915, along with another first novel by a woman writer, Dorothy Miller Richardson's