What Was Modernism?

Part 2: Modernist Fiction

Lecture 5: The Turn of the Novel

1) From Realism to Modernism

2) The Turn of the Novel

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1) From Realism to Modernism

George Eliot, *Adam Bede* (1859)

Book I, Chapter I: The Workshop

With a single drop of ink for a mirror, the Egyptian sorcerer undertakes to reveal to any chance comer far-reaching visions of the past. This is what I undertake to do for you, reader. With this drop of ink at the end of my pen, I will show you the roomy workshop of Mr. Jonathan Burge, carpenter and builder, in the village of Hayslope, as it appeared on the eighteenth of June, in the year of our Lord 1799.
The afternoon sun was warm on the five workmen there, busy upon doors and window-frames and wainscoting. A scent of pine-wood from a tentlike pile of planks outside the open door mingled itself with the scent of the elder-bushes which were spreading their summer snow close to the open window opposite; the slanting sunbeams shone through the transparent shavings that flew before the steady plane, and lit up the fine grain of the oak panelling which stood propped against the wall. On a heap of those soft shavings a rough, grey shepherd dog had made himself a pleasant bed, and was lying with his nose between his fore-paws, occasionally wrinkling his brows to cast a glance at the tallest of the five workmen, who was carving a shield in the centre of a wooden mantelpiece. It was to this workman that the strong barytone belonged which was heard above the sound of plane and hammer singing– […]

Such a voice could only come from a broad chest, and the broad chest belonged to a large-boned, muscular man nearly six feet high, with a back so flat and a head so well poised that when he drew himself up to take a more distant survey of his work, he had the air of a soldier standing at ease. The sleeve rolled up above the elbow showed an arm that was likely to win the prize for feats of strength; yet the long supple hand, with its broad finger-tips, looked ready for works of skill. In his tall stalwartness Adam Bede was a Saxon, and justified his name; but the jet-black hair, made the more noticeable by its contrast with the light paper cap, and the keen glance of the dark eyes that shone from under strongly marked, prominent and mobile eyebrows, indicated a mixture of Celtic blood. The face was large and roughly hewn, and when in repose had no other beauty than such as belongs to an expression of good-humoured honest intelligence.

It is clear at a glance that the next workman is Adam's brother. He is nearly as tall; he has the same type of features, the same hue of hair and complexion; but the strength of the family likeness seems only to render more conspicuous the remarkable difference of expression both in form and face. Seth's broad shoulders have a slight stoop; his eyes are grey; his eyebrows have less prominence and more repose than his brother's; and his glance, instead of being keen, is confiding and benign. He has thrown off his paper cap, and you see that his hair is not thick and straight, like Adam's, but thin and wavy, allowing you to discern the exact contour of a coronal arch that predominates very decidedly over the brow.

The idle tramps always felt sure they could get a copper from Seth; they scarcely ever spoke to Adam.

The concert of the tools and Adam's voice was at last broken by Seth, who, lifting the door at which he had been working intently, placed it against the wall, and said, "There! I've finished my door to-day, anyhow."

The workmen all looked up; Jim Salt, a burly, red-haired man known as Sandy Jim, paused from his planing, and Adam said to Seth, with a sharp glance of surprise, "What! Dost think thee'st finished the door?"

"Aye, sure," said Seth, with answering surprise; "what's awanting to't?"

A loud roar of laughter from the other three workmen made Seth look round confusedly. Adam did not join in the laughter, but there was a slight smile on his face as he said, in a gentler tone than before, "Why, thee'st forgot the panels." […]

Discourse in *Adam Bede*

- **voice/narration:**

  ouvert heterodiegetic narrator, withdrawing for long passages but employing the whole range of functions (presentation, direct and general commentary, reflexivity); the narrative moves casually between narrator's discourse (summary, access to characters' consciousnesses) and scenic presentation; later free indirect discourse is added to represent the main characters' perspectives more completely

- **focalisation:**

  flexible movement between narrator's and characters' perspectives (Genette: zero focalisation)
  → omniscience, omnipresence
  → authorial narration

Plot in *Adam Bede*

- chronologically presented except for events not mentioned, which are then presented retrospectively in characters' speech
- loosely ('realistically') structured, but hints at 'deeper' coherence (prophetical statements by characters; oppositional constellation of central characters Adam vs. Arthur and Dinah vs. Hetty, around which the other characters are 'realistically' associated through family and village ties; coincidence: the magistrate in ch. XLV turns out to have been the stranger in ch. II)
- closed ending (marriage) vs. open reality
- reality is meaningful because sympathy, goodwill, tolerance etc. exist

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There is no doubt that the mid-Victorian novel rested on a massive confidence as to what the nature of Reality actually was [...] The most fundamental common element in the work of the mid-Victorian novelist [...] is probably the idea that human life, whatever the particular conditions, may ultimately be seen as unified and coherent.

Ioan Williams, *The Realist Novel in England: A Study in Development.* London/Basingstoke 1974: x/xiii.

[R]ealism is itself intimately and authoritatively connected to the modernist position [...] [N]ineteenth century writers were already self-conscious about the nature of their medium.

George Levine, *The Realistic Imagination: English Fiction from Frankenstein to Lady Chatterley.* Chicago/London 1981: 3/4.

Adam Bede

Book II, Chapter XVII: In which the Story Pauses a Little

"THIS Rector of Broxton is little better than a pagan!" I hear one of my readers exclaim. "How much more edifying it would have been if you had made him give Arthur some truly spiritual advice! You might have put into his mouth the most beautiful things--quite as good as reading a sermon."

Certainly I could, if I held it the highest vocation of the novelist to represent things as they never have been and never will be. Then, of course, I might refashion life and character entirely after my own liking; I might select the most unexceptionable type of clergyman and put my own admirable opinions into his mouth on all occasions. But it happens, on the contrary, that my strongest effort is to avoid any such arbitrary picture, and to give a faithful account of men and things as they have mirrored themselves in my mind. The mirror is doubtless defective, the outlines will sometimes be disturbed, the reflection faint or confused; but I feel as much bound to tell you as precisely as I can what that reflection is, as if I were in the witness-box, narrating my experience on oath. […]

It is so very rarely that facts hit that nice medium required by our own enlightened opinions and refined taste. […] These fellow-mortals, every one, must be accepted as they are: you can neither straighten their noses, nor brighten their wit, nor rectify their dispositions; and it is these people--amongst whom your life is passed--that it is needful you should tolerate, pity, and love: it is these more or less ugly, stupid, inconsistent people whose movements of goodness you should be able to admire--for whom you should cherish all possible hopes, all possible patience. And I would not, even if I had the choice, be the clever novelist who could create a world so much better than this, in which we get up in the morning to do our daily work, that you would be likely to turn a harder, colder eye on the dusty streets and the common green fields— on the real breathing men and women, who can be chilled by your indifference or injured by your prejudice; who can be cheered and helped onward by your fellow-feeling, your forbearance, your outspoken, brave justice.

So I am content to tell my simple story, without trying to make things seem better than they were; dreading nothing, indeed, but falsity, which, in spite of one's best efforts, there is reason to dread. Falsehood is so easy, truth so difficult. The pencil is conscious of a delightful facility in drawing a griffin--the longer the claws, and the larger the wings, the better; but that marvellous facility which we mistook for genius is apt to forsake us when we want to draw a real unexaggerated lion. Examine your words well, and you will find that even when you have no motive to be false, it is a very hard thing to say the exact truth, even about your own immediate feelings--much harder than to say something fine about them which is NOT the exact truth. […]

All honour and reverence to the divine beauty of form! Let us cultivate it to the utmost in men, women, and children--in our gardens and in our houses. But let us love that other beauty too, which lies in no secret of proportion, but in the secret of deep human sympathy. Paint us an angel, if you can […] but do not impose on us any aesthetic rules which shall banish from the region of Art those old women scraping carrots with their work-worn hands, those heavy clowns taking holiday in a dingy pot-house, those rounded backs and stupid weather-beaten faces that have bent over the spade and done the rough work of the world--those homes with their tin pans,

their brown pitchers, their rough curs, and their clusters of onions. In this world there are so many of these common coarse people, who have no picturesque sentimental wretchedness! It is so needful we should remember their existence, else we may happen to leave them quite out of our religion and philosophy and frame lofty theories which only fit a world of extremes. Therefore, let Art always remind us of them; therefore let us always have men ready to give the loving pains of a life to the faithful representing of commonplace things--men who see beauty in these commonplace things, and delight in showing how kindly the light of heaven falls on them. There are few prophets in the world; few sublimely beautiful women; few heroes. I can't afford to give all my love and reverence to such rarities: I want a great deal of those feelings for my every-day fellow-men, especially for the few in the foreground of the great multitude, whose faces I know, whose hands I touch for whom I have to make way with kindly courtesy. […] It is more needful that I should have a fibre of sympathy connecting me with that vulgar citizen who weighs out my sugar in a vilely assorted cravat and waistcoat, than with the handsomest rascal in red scarf and green feathers […] whom I shall never know except by hearsay, or at the sublimest abstract of all clerical graces that was ever conceived by an able novelist.

Joseph Conrad, ‘Preface’ to *The Nigger of the Narcissus* (1897):

A work that aspires, however humbly, to the condition of art should carry its justification in every line. And art itself may be defined as a single-minded attempt to render the highest kind of justice to the visible universe, by bringing to light the truth, manifold and one, underlying its every aspect. It is an attempt to find in its forms, in its colours, in its light, in its shadows, in the aspects of matter and in the facts of life what of each is fundamental, what is enduring and essential – their one illuminating and convincing quality – the truth of their very existence. […]
Confronted by the same enigmatical spectacle [as the thinker and the scientist] the artist descends within himself [and not into ideas or facts], and in that lonely region of stress and strife, if he be deserving and fortunate, he finds the terms of his appeal. […] He speaks to […] the subtle but invincible conviction of solidarity that knits together the loneliness of innumerable hearts, to the solidarity in dreams, in joy, in sorrow, in aspirations, in illusions, in hope, in fear, which binds men to each other, which binds together all humanity […]
Fiction […] must be, like painting, like music, like all art, the appeal of one temperament to all the other innumerable temperaments whose subtle and resistless power endows passing events with their true meaning […] All art, therefore, appeals primarily to the senses. […] My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel – it is, before all, to make you *see*. That, and no more, and it is everything. […]

Realism, Romanticism, Naturalism, even the unofficial sentimentalism […] all these gods must, after a short period of fellowship, abandon [the artist] […] to the stammerings of his conscience and to the outspoken consciousness of the difficulties of his art. In that uneasy solitude the supreme cry of Art for Art itself loses the exciting ring of its apparent immorality. […]
And thus, doubtful of strength to travel so far, we talk a little about the aim – the aim of art, which, like life itself, is inspiring, difficult, obscured by mists. It is not in the clear logic of a triumphant conclusion; it is not in the unveiling of those heartless secrets which are called the Laws of Nature. It is not less great, but only more difficult.
To arrest, for the space of a breath, the hands busy about the work of the earth, and compel men entranced by the sight of distant goals to glance for a moment at the surrounding vision of form and colour, of sunshine and shadows; to make them pause for a look, for a sigh, for a smile – such is the aim, difficult and evanescent, and reserved only for a few to achieve. But sometimes, by the deserving and the fortunate, even that task is accomplished. And when it is accomplished – behold! – all the truth of life is there: a moment of vision, a sigh, a smile – and the return to eternal rest.

Ford Madox Ford, *The Good Soldier* (1915)

Part I, Chapter I

This is the saddest story I have ever heard.

We had known the Ashburnhams for nine seasons of the town of Nauheim with an extreme intimacy – or rather, with an acquaintanceship as loose and easy and yet as close as a good glove's with your hand. My wife and I knew Captain and Mrs. Ashburnham as well as it was possible to know anybody and yet, in another sense, we knew nothing at all about them. This is, I believe, a state of things only possible with English people of whom till today, when I sit down to puzzle out what I know of this sad affair, I knew nothing whatever. Six months ago I had never been to England and, certainly, I had never sounded the depth of an English heart. I had known the shallows. […]
You may well ask why I write. And yet my reasons are quite many. For it is not unusual in human beings who have witnessed the sack of a city or the falling to pieces of a people, to desire to set down what they have witnessed for the benefit of unknown heirs or of generations infinitely remote; or, if you please, just to get the sight out of their heads. […] I swear to you that the breaking-up of our little four-square coterie was such another unthinkable event. Supposing that you should come upon us, let us say at Homburg, taking tea of an afternoon and watching the miniature golf, you would have said that, as human affairs go we were an extraordinarily safe castle. We were, if you will, one of those tall ships with the white sails, upon a blue sea, one of those things that seem the proudest and the safest of all the beautiful and safe things that God has permitted the mind of men to frame. Where better could one take refuge? Where better?

Permanence? Stability! I can't believe it's gone. I can't believe that that long tranquil life, which was just stepping a minuet, vanished in four crashing days at the end of nine years and six weeks. Upon my word, yes, our intimacy was like a minuet, simply because on every possible occasion and in every possible circumstance we knew where to go, where to sit, which table we unanimously should choose; and we could rise and go, all four together, without a signal from any one of us, always to the music of the Kur orchestra, always in the temperate sunshine, or if it rained, in discreet shelters. No indeed, it can't be gone. […]
No, by God it is false! It wasn't a minuet that we stepped; it was a prison – a prison full of screaming hysterics, tied down so that it might not outsound the rolling of our carriage wheels as we went along the shaded avenues of the Taunus Wald.
And yet, I swear by the sacred name of my creator that it was true. It was true sunshine; the true music; the true splash of the fountains from the mouth of stone dolphins. For, if for me we were four people with the same tastes, with the same desired, acting – or no, not acting – sitting here and there unanimously, isn't that the truth? If for nine years I have possessed a goodly apple that is rotten at the core and discover its rottenness only in nine years and six months less four days, isn't it true to say that for nine years I possessed a goodly apple? […]
I know nothing – nothing of the world – of the hearts of men. I only know that I am alone – horribly alone.

The Evolution of Realism

a) “Objective” Reality?

- “objectivity”, science, naturalism
- the marginality of naturalism in England
- Thomas Hardy as an example for the preservation of literary meaning on a naturalistic basis

b) The Subjective Perception of Reality

- the discontinuity of consciousness and reality
- Henry James’s anatomy of subjective identities cut loose from social context/community (e.g. Isabel Archer in *The Portrait of a Lady* 1880/81)
- the subjectivization of narrative acts (e.g. Joseph Conrad, *The Nigger of the Narcissus* 1897, *The Heart of Darkness* 1902)
- limitations of narrative authority are compensated by artistic self-confidence

c) The Literary Representation of Reality

- synthesis as an effect of literary conventions (f.i.d. > fig. narr. sit.)
- problems of accessibility/difficulty
- literature as one specialized discourse among others, but still claiming general significance

Franz K. Stanzel, *Theorie des Erzählens* (1979)

1st person	vs.	3rd person
internal perspective	vs.	external perspective
teller	vs.	reflector

1st person narr. sit.	**authorial narr. sit.**	
narrating I	overt narrator	
experiencing I	covert narrator	telling
interior monologue	**figural narr. sit.**	showing

➥stream of consciousness-techniques↩

The Development of Modern Fiction

in terms of
telling vs. showing
(diegesis vs. mimesis)

18th/19th Century:	m ⇔ d	realism
early 20th Century:	m (d)	modernism
late 20th Century:	(m) d	postmodernism

Cf. David Lodge, "Mimesis and Diegesis in Modern Fiction." In: David Lodge, *After Bakhtin. Essays on Fiction and Criticism.* London: Routledge, 1990: 25-44.

2) The Turn of the Novel

(cf. Reinfandt 2017, 1-20)

There is one point at which the moral sense and the artistic sense lie very near together; that is in the light of the very obvious truth that the deepest quality of a work of art will always be the quality of the mind of the producer.

Henry James, "The Art of Fiction" (1884, 1888)

It has arrived, in truth, the novel, late at self-consciousness: but it has done its utmost ever since to make up for lost opportunities.

Henry James, "The Future of the Novel" (1899)

The shift to which I refer was gradual, but it took place […] with the greatest velocity at the turn of this century [i.e. from the 19th to the 20th century] […] It was not merely plot, or characterization, or technique, or point of view, or thought, or symbolic organization that changed; it was not a matter of irreconcilable meanings, conflicting themes, or difficult problems. The change in the novel took place at a more fundamental level than these […] The process which underlay the novel was itself disrupted and reorganized. The new flux of experience insisted on a new vision of existence; it stressed an ethical vision of continual expansion and virtually unrelieved openness in the experience of life.

Alan Friedman, *The Turn of the Novel* (1966)

The modern change that came to fiction was not always so revolutionary, and was much more complicated […] There were key social reasons: the growth of urban populations, the acceleration of technological change, the coming of improved education and literacy, the shifting relation of the classes, the expansion of leisure, the gradual increase in personal wealth. There were crucial intellectual reasons: the decline of a religious teleology and of the confident, theocentric, progressive Victorian world view, the rise of science and secular philosophies like sociology and psychology, the coming of a more material vision of life.
There were important psychological reasons, as changing notions of the nature of the individual, social life, sex and gender relations, and rising awareness of the distinctive, increasingly mobile and fast-changing nature of experience in a modernizing age gave a new, more fluid view of consciousness and identity. There were important changes in the role of literature itself: the dying of the Victorian 'three-decker' novel, designed for libraries and associated with moral uplift, the rise of the literary marketplace and the development of the book as an item of purchase, the restratification of the cultural hierarchies in an age of increasing democracy […] [H]owever we explain the change, the effects are apparent. The established form of the novel – fictional prose narrative – was acquiring a different kind of writer, a different kind of subject, a different kind of writing process, a different kind of reader, a different social and economic foundation. It was altering in length, appearance, price, and in social moral and commercial purpose. It was multiplying, dividing its audience, reaching into new kinds of expression […]: new rights to social and sexual frankness, new complexities of discourse and form. Over the course of the twentieth century […] this transformation would continue. Changing, subdividing, […] the novel would assume many roles. It would become a relaxing toy of leisure and fantasy, *and* a complex mechanism for imaginative and artistic discovery. It would serve as naïve popular entertainment, and would transmit radical, often outrageous or surprising, visions and opinions. Above all it would become a central literary prototype, taking an importance it had never had as *the* literary medium of the age, dislodging poetry, to some degree even sidelining drama – until, later in the century, its dominance was in turn challenged by new technological media that promised or threatened to replace book-based culture with something more immediate, visual and serial. […]
But the break was never really to become complete. Many of the Victorian conventions and myths continued to haunt the radical surprise of the modern novel, and Victorian fiction – with its omniscient and godlike voice, its weighty realism, its chronological plotting, its presiding moral confidence, its role as the bourgeois epic – leaves its lasting imprint on British fiction to this moment. […] The modern novel came, but the Victorian novel did not entirely go away; and that is one of the essential secrets of the modern novel.

(Bradbury 1994, 3-5)

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