

Twentieth-Century Fiction I

September 12. “Modern.”

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Office hours

IB today 1–3 p.m., Murray 027

AG Monday 3–5 p.m., Murray 031

Review

Debates over “fiction” after 1880

- I. Henry James: standards for the art of fiction
 - a. The very idea
 - b. professionalism
 - c. novelist as painter (“really to represent life”)

Review

Debates over “fiction” after 1880

2. Oscar Wilde: against realism

a. life is boring

b. aestheticism (“the very condition of any art is style”)

c. “no history but its own”

Review

Debates over “fiction” after 1880

3. James and Wilde: autonomy

a. freedom

b. technique (selection)

c. “questions of morality are quite another affair”

The question

...S

What makes fiction “modern”?

Who gets to say?

Woolf

The Times

LITERARY SUPPLEMENT.

No. 899. (Eighteenth Year.)

LONDON, THURSDAY, APRIL 10, 1919.

[Registered as a Newspaper.] PRICE 2d.

George Allen & Unwin
Ltd.

OUT AND ABOUT

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"Mr. Graham Wallas has restored to life a figure of unique interest, and he has opened up a new mine of English history."—*Daily Chronicle*.

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THE GERMAN EMPIRE, 1857-1914, and the German Unity Move-

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The number of copies of <i>The Times Literary Supplement</i> sold last week was 32,610.	

MODERN NOVELS.

In making any survey, even the freest and loosest, of modern fiction it is difficult not to take it for granted that the modern practice of the art is somehow an improvement upon the old. With their simple tools and primitive materials, it might be said, Fielding did well and Jane Austen even better, but compare their opportunities with ours! Their masterpieces certainly have a strange air of simplicity. And yet the analogy between literature and the process, to choose an example, of making bicycles scarcely holds good beyond the first glance. It is doubtful whether in the course of the centuries, though we have learnt much about making machines, we have learnt anything about making literature. We do not even to write better; all that we can be said to do is to

for its soul. Of course, no single word reaches the centre of three separate targets. In the case of Mr. Wells it falls notably wide of the mark. And yet even in his case it indicates to our thinking the fatal alloy in his genius, the great clod of clay that has got itself mixed up with the purity of his inspiration. But Mr. Bennett is perhaps the worst culprit of the three, inasmuch as he is by far the best workman. He can make a book so well constructed and solid in its craftsmanship that it is difficult for the most exacting of critics to see through what chink or crevice decay can creep in. There is not so much as a draught between the frames of the windows, or a crack in the boards. And yet—if life should refuse to live there? That is a risk which the creator

this, the essential thing, has moved off, or on, and refuses to be contained any longer in such ill-fitting vestments as we provide. Nevertheless we go on perseveringly, conscientiously, constructing our thirty-two chapters after a design which more and more ceases to resemble the vision in our minds. So much of the enormous labour of proving the solidity, the likeness to life, of the story is not merely labour thrown away but labour misplaced to the extent of obscuring and blotting out the light of the conception. The mediocrity of most novels seems to arise from a conviction on the part of the writer that unless his plot provides scenes of tragedy, comedy, and excitement, an air of probability so impeccable that if all his figures were to come to life they would find themselves dressed down to the last button in the fashion of the hour, he has failed in his duty to the public. If this, roughly as we have stated it, represents his vision, his mediocrity may be said to be natural rather than imposed; but as often as not we may suspect some moment of hesitation in which the question suggests itself whether life is like this after all? Is it not possible that the accent falls a little differently, that the moment of importance came before or after, that, if one were free and could set down what one chose, there would be no plot, little probability, and a vague general confusion in which the clear-cut features of the tragic, the comic, the passionate, and the lyrical were dissolved beyond the possibility of separate recognition? The mind, exposed to the ordinary course of life, receives upon its surface a myriad impressions—trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms, composing in their sum what we might venture to call life itself; and to figure further as the semi-transparent envelope, or luminous halo, surrounding us

Woolf

1919. The strategy

Certain paths seem to lead to fertile land, others to the dust and the desert; and of this perhaps it may be worth while to attempt some account. (*Common Reader*, 146)

The proper stuff of fiction is a little other than custom would have us believe it. (150)

Life escapes; and perhaps without life nothing else is worth while. (149)

did not the reading of *Ulysses* suggest [i.e., if only it didn't suggest] how much of life is excluded or ignored... (152)

Woolf

The strategy

Any method is right, every method is right, that expresses what we wish to express. (152)

Everything is the proper stuff of fiction. (154)

These three writers are materialists. It is because they are concerned not with the spirit but with the body that they have disappointed us. (147)

Woolf

The prescription

For the moderns 'that', the point of interest, lies very likely in the dark places of psychology. (152)

Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad impressions—trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. (149–150)

Woolf

The prescription

If a writer were a free man and not a slave, if he could write what he chose... there would be no plot, no comedy, no tragedy, no love interest or catastrophe in the accepted style, and perhaps not a single button sewn on as the Bond Street tailors would have it. (150)

Mr Joyce is...concerned at all costs to reveal the flickerings of that innermost flame...and in order to preserve it he disregards with complete courage whatever seems to him adventitious. (151)

Nothing—no ‘method’, no experiment—is forbidden. (154)

Wilson

1931. The strategy

the culmination of a self-conscious and very important literary movement...a common school. (3)

Classicism → Romanticism → Naturalism → Symbolism → ...

Wilson

The strategy

Symbolism—that second swing of the pendulum away from a mechanistic view of nature and from a social conception of man. (17)

The literary history of our time is to a great extent that of the development of Symbolism and of its fusion or conflict with Naturalism. (21)

Wilson

The diagnosis

When the prodigious concerted efforts of the War had ended only in impoverishment and exhaustion for all the European peoples concerned...the Western mind became peculiarly hospitable to a literature indifferent to action and unconcerned with the group. (227)

It had required a determined independence and an overmastering absorption in literature to remain unshaken by the passions and fears of that time. (228)

Wilson

The prescription

The question begins to press us again as to whether it is possible to make a practical success of human society. (232)

not...an infinite specialization and divergence of the sciences and arts, but their finally falling all into one system. (235)

Bürger

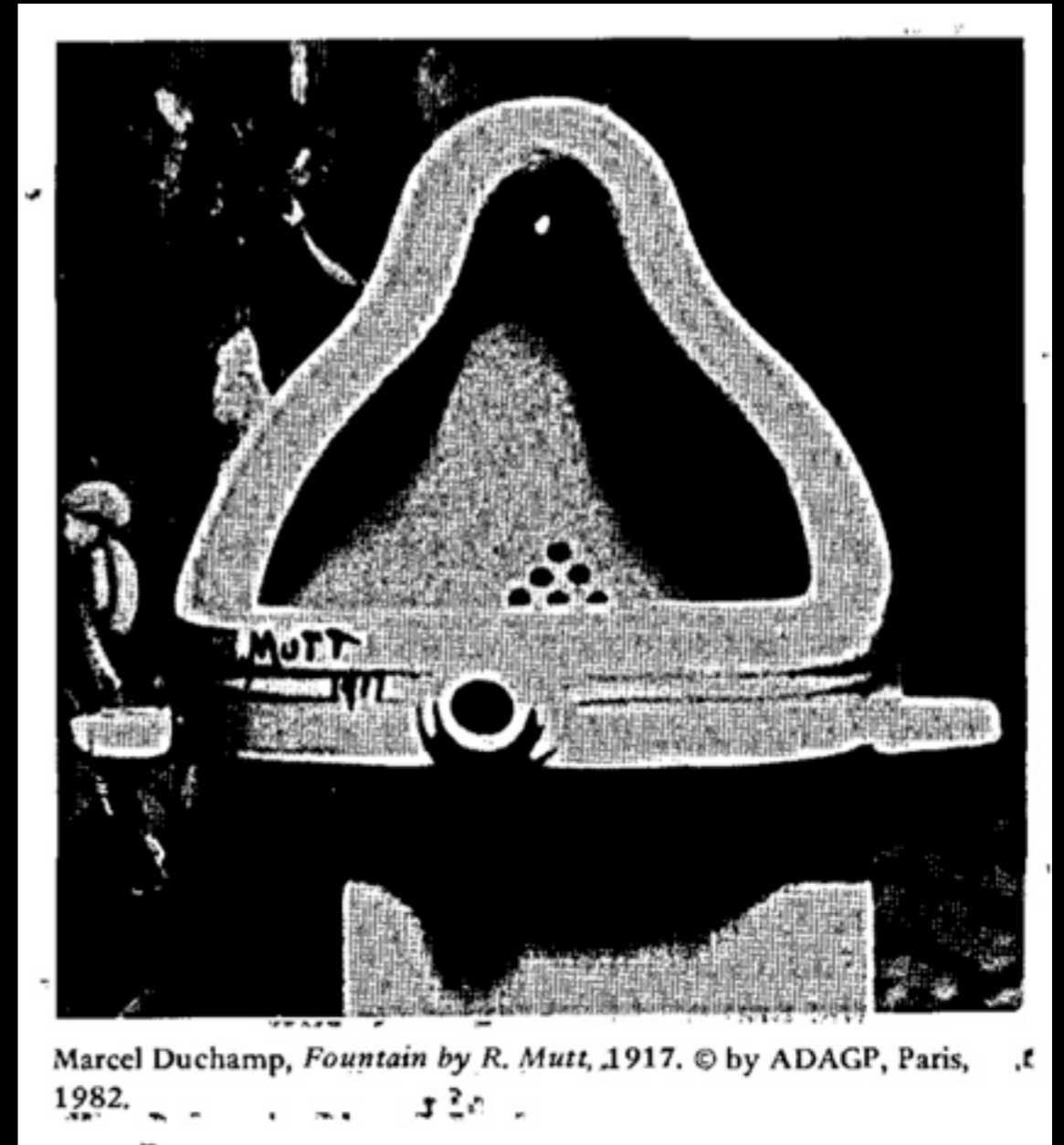
1974. The description

Although in different ways, both sacral and courtly art are integral to the life praxis of the recipient. As cult and representational objects, works of art are put to a specific use. This requirement no longer applies to the same extent to bourgeois art. (48)

Bürger

The description

The European avant-garde movements can be defined as an attack on the status of art in bourgeois society. What is negated is not an earlier form of art (a style) but art as an institution that is unassociated with the life praxis of men. (49)



Bürger

The prescription

They [avant-gardists] assent to the aestheticists' rejection of the world and its means-end rationality...[but they also] attempt to organize a new life praxis from a basis in art.

(49)

Bürger

The prescription

This [reintegration] has not occurred...[Instead we have] pulp fiction and commodity aesthetics...a literature whose primary aim it is to impose a particular kind of consumer behavior on the reader is in fact practical, though not in the sense the avant-gardistes intended. Here, literature ceases to be an instrument of emancipation and becomes one of subjection. (54)

Discussion

Using examples from each of the texts, show what Woolf, Wilson, and Bürger think a truly modern (or avant-garde) literature **should** be.

For next time

Henry James, “The Beast in the Jungle”

Commonplace by **Sunday at 5 p.m.**

Recommended: start *Heart of Darkness*
(readings get longer after next week)