

## Early Twentieth-Century Fiction [e20fic21.blogs.rutgers.edu](http://e20fic21.blogs.rutgers.edu)

Prof. Andrew Goldstone ([andrew.goldstone@rutgers.edu](mailto:andrew.goldstone@rutgers.edu))  
Office hours: Murray 019, Mondays, 2:00, or by appointment

January 28, 2021. “The Middle Years,” cont.;  
James, “The Art of Fiction”; Woolf, “Modern Fiction.”

## commonplacing groups

A: Last names A–Ma

B: Last names Mc–Z

# review

- ▶ delay
  - ▶ it feels good to put things off
  - ▶ technique: delayed specification of referents
- ▶ perception
  - ▶ the importance of observation
  - ▶ the importance of not seeing it all once
  - ▶ “center of consciousness” / character-bound focalization

deep, man

It was the abyss of human illusion that was the real, the tideless deep.  
(335)

He lived once more into his story and was drawn down, as by a siren's hand, to where, in the dim underworld of fiction, the great glazed tank of art, strange silent subjects float. (337–38)

## is it so silent?

He enjoyed this gushing modern youth and he felt, with an acute pang, that there would still be work to do in a world in which such odd combinations were presented. (342)

“I gave her up for *you*. I had to choose,” his companion explained. ...  
“I chose to accept, whatever they might be, the consequences of my infatuation.” (354)

He grew vivid, in the balmy air, to his companion, for whose deep refreshment he seemed to have been sent; and was particularly ingenuous in describing how recently he had become acquainted, and how instantly *infatuated*, with the only man who had put *flesh* between the ribs of an art that was starving on superstitions. (342)

procrastination, censorship, aestheticism

“There’s a beautiful passage toward the end,” he broke out; and again he laid his hand upon the volume. (344)

He was amused once more at the thoroughness with which an intention could be missed. (349)

## the terrified revise

“Not my glory—what there is of it! It *is* glory—to have been tested, to have had our little quality and cast our little spell. The thing is to have made somebody care. *You’re* crazy, of course, but that doesn’t affect the law.”

“You’re a great success!” said Doctor Hugh, putting into his voice the ring of all young cheer.

“The Middle Years,” *Scribner’s* 13, no. 4 (April 1893): 620. [HathiTrust](#).

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The last thing he ever arrived at was a form final for himself. (344)

## legitimacy: James's art of fiction

Only a short time ago it might have been supposed that the English novel was not what the French call *discutable*. It had no air of having a theory.

“The Art of Fiction” (1884), 375–76

## fiction: won't you think of the children?

These books [the “works of fiction”] are written chiefly to the young, the ignorant, and the idle, to whom they serve as lectures of conduct, and introductions into life. They are the entertainment of minds unfurnished with ideas, and therefore easily susceptible of impressions; not fixed by principles, and therefore easily following the current of fancy; not informed by experience, and consequently open to every false suggestion and partial account.

Samuel Johnson, *Rambler* no. 4 (1750)  
(source: [ECCO text](#) or [facsimile](#))

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- ▶ Society of Authors founded in UK (1884)
- ▶ first literary agents (1890s)
- ▶ international copyright (1889, 1891, 1909)

(lessons in snark)

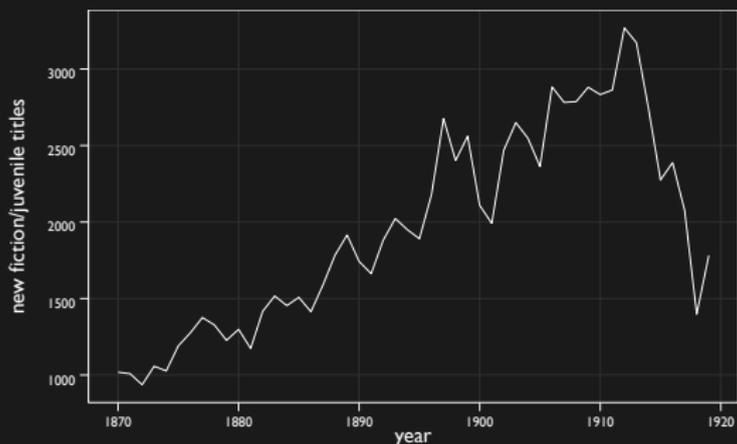
For the rest I should find it difficult to dissent from any one of these recommendations. At the same time, I should find it difficult positively to assent to them, with the exception, perhaps, of the injunction as to entering one's notes in a common-place book. (387)

## legitimation problems

“Art”...is supposed in certain circles to have some vaguely injurious effect upon those who make it an important consideration.... That, I think, represents the manner in which the latent thought of many people who read novels as an exercise in skipping would explain itself if it were to become articulate. (381–82)

Certainly this [seriousness of the novel] might sometimes be doubted in presence of the enormous number of works of fiction that appeal to the credulity of our generation...a commodity so quickly and easily produced. (383)

the enormous number of works of fiction that appeal to the credulity of our generation, for it might easily seem that there could be no great character in a commodity so quickly and easily produced (383)



New fiction and juvenile titles published in the UK. Source: Simon Eliot, *Some Patterns and Trends in British Publishing* (London: Bibliographical Society, 1994), Appendix C.

## taste

a comfortable, good-humoured feeling abroad that a novel is a novel, as a pudding is a pudding, and that our only business with it could be to swallow it. (376)

The “ending” of a novel is, for many persons, like that of a good dinner, a course of dessert and ices, and the artist in fiction is regarded as a sort of meddlesome doctor who forbids agreeable aftertastes. (382)

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The young aspirant in the line of fiction whom we continue to imagine will do nothing without taste, for in that case his freedom would be of little use to him. (388)

## realism

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### Discussion

What are the characteristics of James's version of realism? Consider both prescription and proscription.

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- ▶ A novel is in its broadest definition a personal, a direct impression of life. (384)

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(mimesis and diegesis)
- ▶ “Try to be one of the people on whom nothing is lost!” (390)
- ▶ The air of reality (solidity of specification) seems to me to be the supreme virtue of a novel. (390)  
reality effect/*effet de réel* (Roland Barthes)

## James: autonomy (I)

The good health of an art which undertakes so immediately to reproduce life must demand that it be perfectly free. It lives upon exercise, and the very meaning of exercise is freedom. The only obligation to which in advance we may hold a novel, without incurring the accusation of being arbitrary, is that it be interesting. (“Art of Fiction,” 384)

## James: autonomy (2)

We must grant the artist his subject, his idea, his *donnée*; our criticism is applied only to what he makes of it. (394–95)

Questions of art are questions...of execution; questions of morality are quite another affair. (405)

# The Times

## LITERARY SUPPLEMENT.

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LONDON, THURSDAY, APRIL 10, 1919.

[Registered as a Newspaper.] PRICE 2d.

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The number of copies of <i>The Times Literary Supplement</i> sold last week was 32,216.	

### MODERN NOVELS.

In making any survey, even the freest and looser, 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 and mending bicycles, we have learnt anything about making literature. We do not cease to write better than 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 cranny 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 obtained 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 liliness 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-out 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 own way what we might venture to call life itself; and to figure further as the semi-transparent envelope, or luminous halo, surrounding us

## Woolf: strategy (I)

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. (185)

The proper stuff of fiction is a little other than custom would have us believe it. (189)

## Woolf: strategy (I)

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Life escapes; and perhaps without life nothing else is worth while. (188)

## Woolf: strategy (1)

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Life escapes; and perhaps without life nothing else is worth while. (188)

did not the reading of *Ulysses* suggest [i.e., if only it didn't suggest] how much of life is excluded or ignored (192)

## Woolf: strategy (2)

Any method is right, every method is right, that expresses what we wish to express. (192)

Everything is the proper stuff of fiction. (194)

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These three writers [Wells, Bennett, and Galsworthy] are materialists. It is because they are concerned not with the spirit but with the body that they have disappointed us. (185)

## Woolf: prescription (1)

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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. (189)

## Woolf: prescription (2)

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. (189)

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. (190)

Nothing—no ‘method’, no experiment—is forbidden. (194)

## next

- ▶ Bring back “Modern Fiction”
- ▶ Joyce’s *Portrait*, chaps. 1–2
  - ▶ will focus on chap. 1 next time
  - ▶ notes in Oxford edition are helpful, but don’t drown

## Commonplacing

- ▶ Group A (last names A–Ma): childhood
- ▶ due Sunday 5 p.m.