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A 20-C Inheritance: From Woolf to Murdoch and Winterson

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As I sat down to think about this writing project, I was suddenly struck by its portentous meaning. We have come or we will come, depending on your perspective, to the end of the twentieth century in the next two months. In my studies, my particular field of specialization is this time period— its literature, history, science, technology, politics, cultural mores, etc. Now, it should presumably stop changing and stand unified in time. As scholars of literature, however, we naturally know that this is not the case. The long eighteenth century does not sit in contentment within its temporal borders nor did the study of the twentieth century modes and mores begin in 1901. After further consideration, I did manage a small sigh that at least now this

canon should begin to take account of itself from a more retrospective aspect which is the purpose of this exploration.

The past century has been one of tremendous innovation in the realm of British Literature as a whole, but particularly in the realm of British fiction. As the moderns began to react against that proper society of the Victorians, they became obsessed with traversing the boundaries of interior and exterior. I was recently at a conference at Texas A&M where Professor Victoria Rosner spoke at a faculty roundtable on a book project in which she will focus on the environment that the Bloomsbury Group occupied and their various forays into the visual arts and even furniture making. In one slide, she showed a Roger Fry harpsichord that looked perfectly acceptable for any parlor when the lid was closed but on raising it, the figure of a naked female was revealed, lounging with her body constrained by the available space which seems to capture the tentative raids on proper manners practiced by this group of innovators.

It was this attitude that lead authors to eschew the traditional reliance on an omniscient narrator, the conventional order of chronology, and introduce stream of consciousness narratives. As these changes took place, British fiction authors began to venture into new genres and categories of knowledge, such as the realms of science and philosophy. The interdisciplinary quality of the work produced towards the latter end of this century is astounding in its depth and breadth. The loss of omniscience in narrative voice and chronological ordering of plot has opened a gateway into the world of the quantum.

Many of these principles of change have been influenced by and in some cases have anticipated Einstein's theories of relativity and a new understanding of time. Since the world no

longer operates in a linear fashion, it is understandable that the portrayal of time becomes equally elusive. At the beginning of the twentieth century, creative artists such as Ford Maddox Ford, James Joyce, and Virginia Woolf transformed the face of narrative fiction. Even before the theories of Einstein were widely popularized, these artists understood the chaos of the twentieth century and the separation that technology had created in the hearts of humanity.

In *The Good Soldier*, Ford presents the reader with a first person narrator rather than an omniscient voice, but a narrator who is often left out of the main action of the novel and cannot be completely trusted. Dowell is often unsure of his own feelings, much less those of the characters around him with whom he is expected to have reached a certain level of intimacy. From the very subtitle of the novel, "A Tale of Passion," the reader is led to expect gut-wrenching honesty from the man telling the story, but instead Dowell remains aloof but somehow still unobservant. How reliable is a narrator who was unable to discover the secret of his wife's poor health after years of marriage? As the reader comes to know the narrator through his own words, doubt in his assessment of the events eventually makes it nearly impossible to trust any of his conclusions. In the Vintage reprinting of the novel, Mark Schorer writes in his introductory interpretation:

The fracture between the character of the event as we feel it to be and the character of the narrator as he reports the event to us is the essential irony, yet it is not in any way a simple one; for the narrator's view, as we soon discover, is not so much the wrong view as merely a view, although a special one. No simple inversion of statement can yield up the truth, for the truth is the maze, and, as we learn from what is perhaps the major theme

of the book, appearances have their reality. (Ford vii)

And it is in this maze of appearance and reality that Ford plies his craft, on the unstable ground of Dowell's perceptions. Although as the narrator, he tells us within the first pages that he is unreliable and indeed knows "nothing-nothing in the world-of the hearts of men," still the reader perseveres as the story slowly unfolds (Ford 7). The reader is disarmed of suspicion by Dowell's protestations that he will not render truth, but perhaps assumes wrongly that he will offer the facts in their proper order and to the best of his ability.

The implications of Ford's narrative point of view can be used to suggest the general tone of British Literature at the beginning of the century. As Samuel Hynes has commented, "the narrative technique of Fielding, with the author omniscient and all consciousnesses equally open to him, implies eighteenth-century ideas of Reason, Order, and General Nature, while the modern inclination toward a restricted and subjective narrative mode implies a more limited and tentative conception of the way man knows." (54) Thus instead of hearing the story through multiple narrations or seeing the conflicting views of the other characters involved, we are forced to travel Dowell's reality and thus question the very notion of this construct. The reader is seeking to understand a series of events and emotions that the man who has lived through them cannot comprehend.

Although David Lynn argues that Dowell does experience moral growth through the telling of his story and in his final choice to care for Nancy Rufford, the overarching tone of the novel suggests a deeper epistemological quandary. The form remains that of the dramatic monologue, but Dowell's inability to understand the nature of his fellow humans even after

recognizing his own blindness implies the larger modern dilemma of perception and reality. In the end, Dowell is left to tell his own impressions of the various events in the story. Thus, according to Eugene Goodheart:

Ford's famous commitment to Impressionism is a statement that we have nothing but impressions. Yet the impressions bespeak not an emptiness but a palpable insubstantial absence. There are no longer any substantial invisibilities, only insubstantial visibilities. All permanent, meaningful structures (God, character, the virtues) have disappeared, but not the desire for them. (93)

Thus, Ford's novel captures the modern longing for understanding while maintaining its futility. In *Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man*, Joyce reiterates the non-chronological form of narrative and the complexity of human reality as he flows backwards and forwards in time telling the story of young Stephen Dedalus. Even as Dedalus stands still in one moment, his mind is casting around in a series of memories so that his whole life becomes part of a narrative based on a much briefer period of time. The fragmentary style of stream of consciousness allows Dedalus to focus on particular images in his memory and in the first pages the reader begins to attach meaning to sensual cues such as the odors and sounds of his childhood. Thus, memory becomes a series of free associations based on their importance in the formation of Dedalus as an individual and as an artist.

Joyce, in seeking to capture the growth of young Dedalus, engages his protagonist in conversation about the manner and meaning of art, beauty, and truth. Dedalus insists that the artist cannot be left out of the creation. He uses as an example the English ballad *Turpin Hero*

which employs a first person narrative but closes in the third person, the opposite form of *A Portrait of the Artist* which begins with a modified third person narrative from Dedalus' point of view and closes with a direct address in the first person. On his quest toward individuality, Dedalus defines the role of the artist:

The personality of the artist, at first a cry or a cadence or a mood and then a fluid and lambent narrative, finally refines itself out of existence, impersonalises itself, so to speak. The esthetic image in the dramatic form is life purified in and reprojected from the human imagination. The mystery of esthetic like that of material creation is accomplished. The artist, like the God of the creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails. (233)

Joyce, instead of allowing Dedalus' personality to wane, chooses to end with his diary entries, but this choice also removes him as artist of the novel further from his creation. As the protagonist struggles free from the cocoon of doubt determined to enter the world of experience, Joyce concludes his fairy tale that began "once upon a time" in the labyrinth of his own conception.

Joyce's technique requires the critical engagement of the reader with the text. As Marguerite Harkness has pointed out in a discussion of Dedalus' interaction with the prayers to the Blessed Virgin, "just as Stephen discovers the meaning of the liturgy, so we discover the meaning of this tale by thinking about it and its parts" (89). By delving deeper into the underpinnings of the artist's growth, Joyce provides an interactive text which crosses boundaries of author, artist, and audience. While similarities may be drawn between Dedalus and Joyce, they

may be simultaneously contradicted by older versions of each and by the inherent distance offered between life and art.

Virginia Woolf also confronted the issues of narrative and the modern techniques of novel writing. According to Maureen Howard, she

was beset by the inadequacies of the old designs but well aware that a display of method could appear shallow and heartless and that mere technical innovation made nothing new.

The novel, John Middleton Murry admonished, was at an impasse: Virginia Woolfe's answer was *Mrs. Dalloway*. The novel, she knew, had only to be re-imagined, an enormous task, but what a grand and immediate occasion. (Woolf viii)

Her work fleshes out the story of one day in the life of Clarissa Dalloway by pursuing the wanderings of her inner consciousness. As she prepares for her evening party and winds her way through the streets of London, Clarissa ponders the connection between men and women, the complexity of friendship, as well as her own past relationships. The form and structure of the novel represent the quintessential kernel of the epistemological longing of the modern period.

By placing Clarissa Dalloway in the midst of a busy day preparing for a grand occasion in which past and present aspects of her life will collide, Woolf was free to explore her protagonist's inner world and the intersection of this world with the characters and objects around her. For Woolf, concerns of character were of primary importance in the construction of the novel, and Clarissa is, according to Harold Bloom, "a complex of images; not just a heap of broken images, but still an articulation of perceptions and sensations" (3). The narrative structure is subjugated to the wanderings of character instead of what was, in her opinion, the Edwardian

obsession with environments. The word “thought” is used 253 times in the novel, only surpassed by “said” at 411.

Woolf’s fiction vividly portrays the disconnection of the modern era and the disjunction between an ever increasing world population that is nonetheless becoming more isolated. As David Dowling observes, the novel “locates the heart of the problem in subjective perception and shows how difficult it is to live in society and at the same time to remain tolerant of other points of view” (127). Clarissa’s filter for the other is her consciousness as formed by the people and events that have passed through her life. Like Ford and Joyce, Woolf uses a limiting narrative point of view to convey the immense bulk of twentieth century existence.

As the century has passed and Einstein’s theories have become part and parcel of modern society, narrative structures have become even more diverse and the relationship of various disciplines to the study of the novel has become increasingly important. With the changes in narrative provided by innovators like Ford, Joyce, and Woolf, novelists began to explore other epistemological avenues including philosophy, science, and the intersection of history and literature. The universal standards of the New Critics gave way to a backlash of critical schools including reader’s response, post-colonial studies, gender criticism, postmodernism, etc. Even as the dust settles around the crumbling Parthenons and hastily constructed scaffolding, artists of the novel continue to ply their craft. The fiction of Iris Murdoch and Jeanette Winterson demonstrate the depth of this second half of the century.

Murdoch specializes in the study of moral philosophy and in her novel, *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*, she addresses the age-old philosophical question of the nature of good and

evil, even staging these seemingly “unknowables” as characters within the structure of the novel. Murdoch pits the diabolic Julius King against the altruistic Tallis Browne with love at stake. Evil will prevail, but the defeat of the good will be a fairly honourable one.

Like Woolf, Murdoch is concerned with characterization but her speculation falls beyond the temporal plain. According to Elizabeth Dipple, “in interviews, Murdoch has pointed to a fairly obvious allegory of Christ, Satan and the human soul, in which Tallis plays Christ to Julius King’s powerful Satan and Morgan’s horrible human soul” (18). Narrowing the novel to simply a parable, however, limits the multifarious interpretations available in the rich textual structure. Her reordering of the Christian mythos has been openly criticized because of her avowed atheism, but Peter Hawkins finds that “the language of grace which it articulates seems to me no less eloquent for its indirection, for the freedom in which the reader is finally left alone with a choice before a mystery that will not easily give over its burden” (127). Thus, Murdoch’s fiction can be embraced by both believer and non-believer because of its firm commitment to the search for truth in human nature and the construction of “good” and “evil.”

Murdoch’s foray into the realm of philosophy and its combination with literary forms is certainly not novel, but her prose is marked by a unique twentieth century attitude towards epistemological understanding. The knowledge of selfhood that she explores in her fiction involves complex religious and philosophical systems. Similarly, Winterson peppers her novels with these symbol systems as well as incorporating postmodern scientific theory. In *Gut Symmetries*, she plays with grand unification theory in a complicated story of triangular love. The definition of GUTs in the Cosmiverse Reference Library is:

In theoretical physics, collective name for attempts to unite three of the fundamental forces of nature----the strong and weak nuclear forces and electromagnetism---in a single theoretical framework. These forces, along with gravitation, govern the interactions of all matter. For several decades scientists have sought to show these forces to be different manifestations of a single, underlying force (see Unified Field Theory).

<<http://www.cosmiverse.com/reflib/Grand%20Unification%20Theory.htm>>

In Winterson's novel, the validity of this science of forces is called into question by its juxtaposition with the reading of tarot cards. Throughout the disjointed narrative, Winterson applies both scientific and tarot readings to the interaction of her characters. Within the first few pages of the novel, she elaborates the search for self in terms of the new spacial boundaries of the twentieth century,

What is it that you contain?

The Dead. Time. Light patterns of millennia. The expanding universe opening in your gut. Are your twenty-three feet of intestines loaded with stars?

The Miracle of the One that the alchemists sought is not so very far from the infant theory of hyperspace, where all the seeming dislocations and separations of the atomic and sub-atomic worlds are unified into a co-operating whole. This is not possible in three spatial dimensions or even in four. Ten, at least, lure us out of what we know.

Star-dust that we are, will death lose its sting? Theoretically there will be no death, only an exchange of energy into what is likely to be another dimension. (2-3)

Winterson's unique voice destroys the boundary between narrative and plot. She is interested in

characterization, but her narrators are stymied by their own inept attempts to convey the story. Michael Wood has described her novels as “parables and/or pictures” which “scarcely ever come together in the larger scope of a plot” (190). As with Ford’s Dowell, Winterson’s narrator explores various avenues of human emotion without coming to a conclusion.

So where has this left us at century’s end, glancing back over tired shoulders searching for bits of truth and meaning? The twentieth century, like its predecessors, has been a hundred years not spent in solitude but in relational change. The introduction of the quantum and the false intimacy of technology has slowly effaced confident structural narration. With each novel tale, the speaker asks as Winterson’s narrator does,

Walk with me. Hand in hand through the nightmare of narrative. Need to tell a story when no story can be told. Walk the level reassuring floor towards the open trapdoor. Plank by plank to where the sea begins. This is a sea story, a wave story, a story that breaks and ebbs, spilling the boat up on the beach, dragging it out to a tiny dot. Life asail on its own tears.

Walk the plank. The rough springy underfoot of my emotions. The ‘I’ that I am, subjective, hesitant, goaded from behind, afraid of what lies ahead, the drop, the space, that gap between other people and myself.

Hear me. Speak to me. Look at me. (157)

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