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Wells, Forster, Firbank, Lewis, Huxley, Compton-Burnett, Green: the modernist novel's experiments with narrative (II)

JONATHAN GREENBERG

“So much life with (so to speak) so little living”¹ – thus Henry James disparages the fiction of H. G. Wells during a debate about the nature of the novel that helps to establish the canon of modern fiction. Whereas the canonical modernists – Conrad, Ford, Joyce, Woolf, Lawrence – follow James in developing narrative and linguistic innovations to accommodate a newly scrupulous attention to epistemology and psychology, the seven writers surveyed here generally spurn stream of consciousness, often appear indifferent to the exploration of the psyche, and sometimes follow Wells in renouncing Jamesian formal unity. Thus E. M. Forster breaks with modernist practice in relying on a prominent, moralizing narrator, Wyndham Lewis attacks his contemporaries’ obsession with interiority, and Wells and Aldous Huxley embrace a didacticism at odds with reigning protocols. Ronald Firbank, Ivy Compton-Burnett, and Henry Green follow James in their attention to style, but they depart from modernist orthodoxy in representing surfaces rather than depths. In voice, structure, style, and characterization, however, a rebellious spirit in all these novelists challenges both inherited and emergent ideas of what a novel is and how a novel’s prose can read.

H. G. Wells

The author of science fiction adventures, speculative utopias, and social satires, H. G. Wells has come – due in part to James’s criticism – to represent precisely those values (materialism) and methods (didacticism) that modernism rejects. Resisting James’s demand for a unifying consciousness, Wells argues that such a focus leads to highly wrought but sterile “tales of nothingness”; the novel, he insists, is not a unified whole but rather “a discursive

thing,” and the discursiveness that he champions offers an important alternative to Jamesian closure (Edel and Ray, *Henry James*, 249, 136). Wells begins his career writing “scientific romances,” which initiate the modern science fiction tradition and spawn numerous adaptations in literature, film, and (famously) radio. Developing the Victorian adventure genre of Haggard, Stevenson, and Kipling, Wells’s tales exploit popular scientific notions (vivisection, time travel, alien life) to give a veneer of realist credibility and a frisson of futurist excitement to ancient motifs such as invisibility or the island kingdom. Characterization is sketchy, un-Jamesian, and subordinated to plot; the plots, equally un-Jamesian, reduce the protagonist to the brute conditions of survival. Chapters end with melodramatic discoveries, as in *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1896): “Could it be . . . I thought, that such a thing as the vivisection of men was possible? The question shot like lightning across a tumultuous sky.”² Frequently a first-person (always male) narrator travels to a new environment, confronts its mysteries, gathers information, and puzzles out conclusions. Yet initial conclusions can prove faulty, allowing for reversals and recognitions, and implicitly championing a steady English empiricism.

For all their stock formulae, however, Wellsian adventures reveal surprising resemblances to the modernist texts against which they are often contrasted, suggesting that the James/Wells debate poses a false choice. The techniques of the impressionism attributed to James, Conrad, and Ford are there in the early Wells’s use of narration:

I heard something breathing, saw something crouched together close beside me. I held my breath, trying to see what it was. It began to move slowly, interminably. Then something soft and warm and moist passed across my hand.

All my muscles contracted. I snatched my hand away. A cry of alarm began, and was stifled in my throat. (IDM, 191)

Only later is this sensation identified as an animal’s “licking kiss.” This impressionist technique, which Ian Watt has named delayed decoding, provides subjective and objective perspectives at once, rendering an event’s impact on the senses before the focalizing character can cognitively overcome its strangeness. Wells’s impressionism even comes complete with modernist invocations of the limits of representation: “I am afraid I cannot convey the peculiar sensations of time travelling. They are excessively unpleasant.”³

Darwinism is the greatest intellectual provocation for Wells’s fantasies. In *Dr. Moreau*, Darwin’s discovery of human–animal kinship makes possible the transformation of beasts into men; in *The War of the Worlds* (1898),

environmental pressure has rendered the Martians smarter, stronger, and crueler than humans, who “must be to them at least as alien and as lowly as are the monkeys and lemurs to us.”⁴ Indeed, the net cast by Darwinism in the *fin de siècle* snares multiple social problems – about race, gender, class, sexuality – and Wells fuses questions about the origin of the species with the social concerns of nineteenth-century utopianists. The evolution of the species in *The Time Machine* therefore reflects class struggle, as the subterranean, laboring Morlocks ascend at night to prey on their leisured, effete Eloi “masters.” Similarly implicit is the presence of empire, saturated with racial anxieties: in *The War of the Worlds*, the Martian invasion is compared to the British conquest of Tasmania. Wells’s visionary fantasies are thus disrupted by gothic nightmares, and his Victorian progressive ideals jostle against *fin de siècle* fears of degeneration.

For the rest of his career Wells exploits the discursive possibilities of fiction to advance his socio-political views. Those views are laid out comprehensively in *A Modern Utopia* (1905), a fiction–philosophy hybrid in which a beneficent world state has established female suffrage, near-universal education, racial equality, minimum wages, vegetarianism, and electric train travel. Despite this utopia’s liberalism, however, to maintain its health Wells envisions a government of oligarchs who recognize, from their (mis)reading of Darwin, that “life is a conflict between superior and inferior types”;⁵ and although Wells scorns the use of Darwin to justify nationalism, patriotism, and racism, he proposes state-enforced eugenicist limits on the reproductive rights of the drunk, the irresponsible, and the insane.

While Wells’s *Utopia* aims to solve social problems, his realist fiction of the Edwardian years is content to explore them. *Ann Veronica* (1909), for example, champions new roles for women through a young heroine who defies her father in her pursuit of a scientific education, her suffragist activism, and a scandalous affair with a married teacher. Darwinism is adduced to support the naturalness of sexuality, and to promote a feminism at odds with the teetotaling, vegetarian, and sexually phobic spiritualism preached by Ann Veronica’s friend Miss Miniver. In *Ann Veronica*, as in dozens of his other novels, fiction becomes Wells’s vehicle for dramatizing an ambitious social reform grounded in scientific materialism.

E. M. Forster

In her canon-making essay “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” (1924) Virginia Woolf denigrates Wells and other Edwardian “materialists” in favor of more “spiritual” Georgians of her own generation. One Georgian she praises is

E. M. Forster, who shares Woolf's psychological interests and charts delicate fluctuations in the mental lives of his characters; his first novel, *Where Angels Fear to Tread* (1905), is a Jamesian tale of an ambassador sent to retrieve a love-struck Englishwoman from morally dangerous Italy. Yet Forster is hardly Woolf's model modernist. He inserts his own voice loudly into his narrative, refusing to withdraw in god-like Joycean detachment behind the artwork. Like Wells in *Tono-Bungay* (1909) Forster revives the "condition-of-England" sub-genre, and he openly sides with Wells in the debate with James, arguing that "a rigid pattern" too often "shuts the doors on life."⁶

In his most famous novels, *Howards End* (1910) and *A Passage to India* (1924), Forster intertwines the lives of characters around resonant symbols (such as the Marabar Caves in *A Passage*) while upending the Austenian marriage plot. In *Howards End* an engagement promised in the first pages dissolves, and the child born at the novel's end is illegitimate; in *A Passage* another engagement crumbles, and the bachelor Fielding pronounces marriage to be "absurd"⁷ – though in a typical Forsterian irony, he himself later marries. Forster himself scorns the "idiotic use of marriage as a finale" (*AN* 38), rejecting its heteronormativity along with its wooden conventionality. And although readers complain about conventions in Forster's own plotting, his use of coincidence can highlight parallels or disparities between classes, races, or genders. Forster's focus is thus the search for human connection, forged across boundaries – of class and gender in *Howards End*, of nation and religion in *A Passage*. Yet while his novels advocate liberal humanist values, Forster modifies his liberalism with a quasi-Romantic recognition of what he calls "the unseen" or "Infinity," embodied in both novels by a wise, aging, ultimately beatified mother: Mrs. Wilcox in *Howards End*, Mrs. Moore in *A Passage*. Even as he critiques Christianity, Forster remains unreconciled to Wellsian materialism.

In *Howards End* materialism is represented by ceaseless construction in London, by motorcars spewing smoke across the countryside, and by a pervasive flux "even in the hearts of men."⁸ The novel juxtaposes such materialism, associated with the capitalist and patriarchal Wilcox family, with a spiritualism based in culture, expressed by the socialist, feminist Schlegel sisters, Margaret and Helen. Forster's sympathies are with the Schlegels, but he concedes that their bohemian life requires capital accrued by empire, and he recognizes the condescension with which they confront the upward striving of the clerk Leonard Bast. And although the book's conclusion might seem like escapism – Margaret, now married to Henry Wilcox, and Helen, now single mother to Leonard's child, inherit the country house of the title – Forster's idyll cannot accommodate Leonard himself, who has been

killed for his sexual transgression. Thus, although the novel's epigraph, "only connect," is Forster's most famous expression of his ideals, connection remains more an injunction than an accomplishment.

A Passage to India, which centers on an Englishwoman's false charge of attempted rape against an Indian doctor, similarly stresses the complexities of human relations, and is even more wary than its predecessor of "spurious unity" (94). Whenever Forster's characters triumph over national or religious differences, the novelist tacks the other way, revealing new conflicts and new points of view; as the doctor says, "Nothing embraces the whole of India, nothing, nothing" (160). As Forster indicts the Wilcoxes' conservatism while remaining skeptical of the Schlegels' socialism in *Howards End*, so in *A Passage* he condemns the arrogance of the English without idealizing the Indians. Indeed, the ever-widening perspectives in the novel include those of monkeys, insects, and even stones, as Forster situates his ethnography of Anglo-India within a deep time fathomed by nineteenth-century geology:

In the days of the prehistoric ocean the southern part of the peninsula already existed, and the high parts of Dravidia have been land since land began, and have seen on the one side the sinking of a continent that joined them to Africa, and on the other the upheaval of the Himalayas from a sea. They are older than anything in the world. (135)

Neither the star-gazing Bloom of *Ulysses*' "Ithaca" nor the eon-leaping hero of Wells's *Time Machine* takes a more cosmic view.

Forster's idiosyncratic narrative voice enables him to mix ironic skepticism with moral conviction. The narrator of *Howards End* is by turns pedantic, ironic, and lyrical, and indulges in present-tense generalizations: "It is thus, if there is any rule, that we ought to die – neither as victim nor as fanatic, but as the seafarer who can greet with an equal eye the deep that he is entering, and the shore that he must leave" (107). The narrator assumes the first person, describes himself as male, and even rehearses an argument with his grocer about raisins. The narrator of *A Passage* is less earnest and intrusive, but he too makes explicit signals to the reader and makes sweeping claims about English and Indians as social groups. This later voice, however, prefers to drop bits of wisdom in passing, or to promote its views through deadpan ironies. ("Aziz was led off weeping. Mr. McBryde was shocked at his downfall, but no Indian ever surprised him, because he had a theory about climatic zones" [184].) In both novels eccentricities of voice illustrate the continuing dialectic in Forster between earnestness and irony, between defending liberal values and recognizing the incompleteness of those values.

Wyndham Lewis

Forster might then connect the passion of Woolf and the prose of Wells, finding middle ground between Woolf's spiritualists and materialists. Yet Woolf's very schema rests upon dichotomies – between essay and novel, content and form, matter and spirit – that circumscribe the way the modernist novel is theorized. So argues Wyndham Lewis, who dismisses “the old battle of the Woolfs and Bennetts” as “a rather childish, that is to say an over-simple, encounter.”⁹ Lewis denies that the Paterian-Jamesian tradition has any monopoly on access to the soul, and asserts that Bloomsbury aesthetics have reduced the novel to a “salon scale” favored because it can “accommodate [the] not very robust talents” of the writer-critics who deploy it (*MWA* 166, 167). Yet neither does Lewis endorse the methods of Wells and Bennett. In fact, Lewis's booster Ezra Pound lauds Lewis's *Tarr* (1918) for dispensing with “the particular oleosities of the Wellsian genre,”¹⁰ and Lewis himself mocks Wells's utopian imaginings.¹¹ For Lewis the very terms of the James–Wells or Woolf–Bennett debate ignore the “vigor” of works such as *Ulysses*, and, implicitly, of his own fiction.

Consequently, Lewis relishes combat with both bourgeois culture and the bohemian modernism that claims to oppose it. As a novelist, he works in what Northrop Frye called the “low mimetic” and “ironic” modes, in which the characters are held in lower esteem than their narrators. *Tarr* mocks the would-be artists of the Parisian Left Bank; *The Apes of God* (1930) sends up the pretensions of Bloomsbury and the Sitwell salon; *The Revenge for Love* (1937) derides the radical chic of Oxford-educated communists. As an editor, he attempts to set the terms for a British avant-garde by using his magazine *Blast* (1914–1915) to denounce all rival cultural-artistic movements including naturalism, Impressionism, aestheticism, and Futurism. As a cultural critic, he lambasts the emergent modernist canon: James, Eliot, Stein, Proust, Joyce, Woolf, Hemingway, Faulkner – even Pound, his old partner in crime. Linking these figures to a Bergsonian “time-cult” that overvalues subjective experience, Lewis advocates instead an aesthetic of the eye, external rather than internal, classical rather than romantic, spatial rather than temporal, derived from his own experience as a painter, and allied to the genre of satire.

The title character of *Tarr* lays out his author's anti-modernist modernism, claiming that one condition of art “is absence of *soul*, in the sentimental human sense.”¹² He continues, rebuking Pater: “The lines and masses of the statue are its soul. No restless, quick flame-like ego is imagined for the *inside* of it. It has no inside” (300). Lewis by no means expunges the representation of thought;

Firbank, Compton-Burnett, and (sometimes) Green do that more thoroughly. His target is rather a narcissistic *obsession* with consciousness at the expense of the reality principle. Hence *Tarr* repeatedly subjects its characters to contingencies, debunking their artistic ambitions and frustrating their efforts at asserting personal will. In *The Revenge for Love* champagne socialists can never sort out party line from authentic commitment, “bluff” from “belief,” and characters appear less as “human persons” than “as big portentous wax-dolls, mysteriously doped with some impenetrable nonsense, out of a Caligari’s drug-cabinet.”¹³ At the novel’s end, the heroine’s own personality fractures, as she is torn between private, sentimental fantasy, and the brutal reality she confronts in war-torn Spain. For Lewis, the internal life does not transcend the dead externality of the real; instead, reality exposes interiority as a mere hiding place.

Lewis’s thinking and his aggression are entangled with his distinctive prose style, which Pound praises as “volcanic” and “brimming with energy” (*Literary Essays*, 424, 425). In Hugh Kenner’s words, Lewis creates a “Vorticist prose” that is “composed of phrases, not actions,” one that emphasizes nouns and adjectives over verbs, like the block-print salvoes of *Blast*’s Vorticist manifesto. (Kenner cites from “Enemy of the Stars” [1914]: “The stars shone madly in the archaic blank wilderness of the universe, machines of prey.”)¹⁴ The vitality of this style persists throughout Lewis’s work:

“Speak, *mujer*.”

He thundered the “moo-hhhair!” in a shortwinded pant, as if the African aspirate was too much for his sedentary flesh and there was a shortage of wind in his paunch, exhausted by the calls made upon it by the hurtling *jota*.

(*RL* 23)

If the clash of languages here intimates a political conflict between England and Spain, it also foregrounds the materiality of the signifier, and fractures words into letters and phonemes. Alliterative repetitions and steady accretions of phrases give the sentence a baroque artificiality that offers no lyrical prettiness, nothing in the manner of the middle-brow “beauty-doctor-class” Lewis scorns (*RL* 143). In other places Lewis deploys a grotesque metaphoricity, informed by his painter’s eye: “His spine was not as straight as the spine of an honest man should be. A tell-tale crook made an arc at the top of it, on which his head hung – instead of standing up stoutly upon his shoulders, like a rooster upon a dunghill in the act of crowing” (*RL* 118). The energy of Lewis’s Vorticist prose derives from a combination of diction, syntax, metaphor, and, not least, underlying dramatic conflict, creating an electric tension; this

tension exists equally on the macro-level of the novels, whether in the unceasing verbal sparring between or within characters, or its frequent eruption into actual violence.

Ronald Firbank

Ronald Firbank is as un-Jamesian as Wells or Lewis, though his writing shows little kinship with either Wells's sociological discourses or Lewis's linguistic violence. In Firbank's case, as E. M. Forster notes,¹⁵ it is the lightness of his comic tone that pushes him to the margins of the canon, to the specialized tradition of the camp novel. Not that such a categorization lacks merit; Firbank's short novels brim with queer sexuality, self-mocking play with melodrama, and general delight in opulence and ritual (Catholicism and clothing are equally grist for his mill). Like Max Beerbohm, Firbank makes cameos in his own fiction, and he revels in scatological and sexual innuendo. The language can be as baroque as Lewis's, though with a decidedly less ornery tone: "[She] regard[ed] dreamily the sun's sinking disk, that was illuminating all the Western sky with incarnadine and flamingo-rose. Ominous in the falling dusk, the savannah rolled away, its radiant hues effaced beneath a rapid tide of deepening shadow."¹⁶

Yet neither Firbank's camp indulgences nor his queer thematics mitigates his technical radicalism. Robert Kiernan calls his books "milestones in the effort of the twentieth-century novel to free itself from nineteenth-century realism," and they open possibilities in both composition and characterization.¹⁷ Firbank's achievement in composition is, in the words of his disciple Evelyn Waugh, to break "the chain of cause and effect" by splintering realist narrative into a collage of fragments which garner interest primarily as local bursts of humor, lyricism, or mood.¹⁸ (*The Waste Land*, with its juxtaposed fragments, its overheard voices, its parataxes and excisions, shares this achievement.) As for characterization, Firbank's lack of interest in plumbing interior depths produces an "objective" method that proves useful not only to Waugh but also to Huxley, Green, Compton-Burnett, and Anthony Powell. Like Lewis, Firbank employs a poetics of surface – even if his affectionate caricatures differ tonally from Lewis's satiric assaults. The result is a thorough suspension of the moral; in Forster's words, Firbank's books "do not introduce the soul nor its attendant scenery of Right and Wrong" (140). Firbank goes where Forster's didacticism never allows, brushing away duty and wisdom to surround the reader with the pleasure of the text.

Two techniques are notable in Firbank's achievement of this freedom. The first is a deconstruction of the conventions of the printed text that derives from

Tristram Shandy. Footnotes, scraps of songs, foreign phrases, onomatopoeic spelling, exclamation points, and capital letters decorate Firbank's page. (In *The Flower Beneath the Foot* (1923), a nun's imprecation is rendered in symbols appropriate to her office: "Maladetta ✠✠✠✠!" [89].) Dashes and ellipses compel the reader to collaborate in the author's naughtiness. When a valet opens a bottle of champagne:

"What he calls a *demi-brune*, sir. In Naples we say *spumanti!*"

"To – with it."

"Non é tanto amaro, sir; it's more sharp, as you'd say, than bitter . . ."

". . . .!!!!!!"

And language *unmonastic* far into the night reigned supreme. (107)

Firbank also masters the arrangement of patches of comic dialogue, unattributed or logically disconnected, so that they sound, in Alan Hollinghurst's phrase, "picked up as if by a roving microphone."¹⁹ As Waugh writes: "from the fashionable chatter of his period, vapid and interminable . . . [he] plucked, like tiny brilliant feathers from the breast of a bird, the particles of his design" (58). The writer becomes a stenographer, displaying the verbal found objects of modernity for the reader's delectation.

Firbank's engagement with modernity is thus marked by both immersion and escape. He works with modern forms of discourse like gossip columns and modern milieux like nightclubs, and his characters pursue social advancement, sometimes desperately, in tightly knit enclaves. Yet the absurdities of modern manners also represent an escape: the greater tides of history with their wars and revolutions never wash the sea-coasts of his Bohemias. Firbank enjoys his characters' sensuous pleasures and recognizes their pain, but these feelings are tempered by the detachment of the collector looking for the brilliant fragment. Firbank therefore serves as a pioneer for homosexual writers not by a psychological treatment of the struggles of gay love (as Forster attempts in *Maurice* [1971]), but through his use of irony, indifference, and parody, which suspend morality to reveal desire in both confining and liberating forms. As Christopher Lane argues, "Firbank brings heterosexuality into relief as an elaborate construction" by "casting heterosexuality as an arduous social ritual that veers away from the 'natural' Firbankian affection of each gender for its own."²⁰

Firbank's management of feeling and form extends the erotic into all manner of sublimated pleasures. For Hollinghurst, Firbank recognizes "that human behaviour is governed and given meaning by caprice, impulse and yearning, whether erotic, aesthetic or mystical," while Brigid Brophy links her

“defence” of his work to a defense of the novel itself, which has been vilified since Cervantes’ day for its affinities with daydreaming and the masturbatory.²¹ Indeed, Firbank’s books are full of reveries and daydreams (as well as the occasional masturbation joke); the pleasures of idle fantasies are the long-repressed pleasures of reading, released from Victorian notions of moral uplift or functional utility. The political force in Firbank lies in his very frivolity.

Aldous Huxley

Improbably blending the influences of Firbank and Wells is Aldous Huxley. Huxley’s first novels, written in the 1920s and described as conversation novels or parlor satires, feature Firbankian exchanges of dialogue among the idle and overeducated, arranged in counterpoint; in the 1930s, he undertakes Wellsian speculations that incorporate science fiction and utopian themes, while displaying Wells’s rejection of Jamesian unities. Ignoring Proust’s dictum that an artwork with ideas in it is like an object with its price tag on, Huxley gains a reputation as a public intellectual, and later as a counter-culture guru. (His book advocating LSD, *The Doors of Perception* [1954], takes its title from Blake and gave Jim Morrison the name for his rock band.)

Although Lewis openly ridicules Huxley’s *Point Counter Point* (1928) for its “tone of vulgar complicity with the drearies of suburban library-readers” (MWA 302), Huxley follows Lewis in satirizing modernism itself, and he fills his works with mediocre artists who search for aesthetic principles in a modernity where the greatness of Shakespeare and Michelangelo is no longer attainable. A painter, Lypiatt, voices Huxley’s rejection of Bloomsbury’s (modernist) ideal of significant form:

Life only comes out of life, out of passion and feeling; it can’t come out of theories. That’s the stupidity of all this chatter about art for art’s sake and the esthetic emotions and purely formal values.²²

Instead Lypiatt advocates a reintegration of art and life, an art not for art’s sake but for god’s sake. Yet Huxley, refusing to spare his own mouthpiece, renders Lypiatt a talentless *poseur* whose own formulaic style is best suited for Cinzano advertisements.

The failure of Huxley’s artists to find governing values is symptomatic of a culture where the belief-systems of religion and tradition are no longer tenable, but where modern substitutes (promiscuity, parties, intellectual talk) offer only moral and sexual confusion. *Antic Hay* (1923) offers a steady

buzz of chatter and rapid movement from scene to scene that formally replicates the mindless activity of 1920s' London. A familiar catalogue of entertainments and technological developments – “Cinemas, newspapers, magazines, gramophones, football matches, wireless telephones” (31) – saturates the public sphere, and even Gumbriel's tailor recognizes these amusements not as the liberating gifts of a new capitalist utopia, but as further restraints on the imprisoned modern subject: “take them or leave them if you want to amuse yourself. The ordinary man can't leave them. He takes; and what's that but slavery?” (31). This rejection of capitalist modernity takes center stage in the later science fiction and openly didactic writings.

Huxley's most famous novel, *Brave New World* (1932), retains Huxley's earlier novels of ideas in its critique of modernity, its incorporation of intellectual conversation, and its narrative scaffolding of an ill-fated romance. Yet it also inaugurates a new exploration of genres that continues in *After Many a Summer* (1939), which weds the Hollywood novel to sci-fi speculation about evolution; and in *Ape and Essence* (1948), a post-nuclear dystopia written largely in the form of a screenplay. Like Forster's science fiction effort, “The Machine Stops” (1909), *Brave New World* is a rejoinder to Wells's utopian progressivism; as Jerome Meckier puts it, Huxley takes Wells's proposals about free love, social engineering, and world government “to an alarmingly successful and essentially insane conclusion.”²³ (*Crome Yellow* [1921] already spoofs Wells as Mr. Scogan, a pompous elder intellectual who predicts the demise of the family and forecasts a centrally planned society [Meckier, *Aldous Huxley*, 176].) Because *Brave New World*'s critique extends to Soviet totalitarianism, the novel has gained outsize prominence in American secondary school curricula; still, it remains, alongside Wells's *oeuvre*, a foundational text for the dystopian sub-genre.

Brave New World gestures at modernist style – an early chapter moves several sub-plots along through a Firbankian collage of dialogue snippets – but it is unabashedly a novel of ideas. It presents a future in which humans are mass-produced in labs by an all-controlling world state; manipulated through eugenics and behaviorism to accede to the needs of society; raised communally rather than in families; kept in line through happiness drugs and mass entertainments; and prevented from falling in love through the normalization of promiscuity. Yet this future feels like the 1930s: luggage is carried by negro porters, numbers are looked up in telephone books, and men invariably initiate sex and drive the hovercraft on dates. The story pits a Lawrentian primitive, raised on an Indian reservation in New Mexico, against the modern dystopia he calls the brave new world. As Huxley's fellow California *émigré* Theodor Adorno notes, the novel's prediction of the mass production of humans

works as a metaphor for the deadening sameness of modernity, a uniformity of thought that includes “the standardized consciousness of millions which revolves in the grooves cut by the communications industry.”²⁴ Yet Adorno also discerns that Huxley’s vision of rampant promiscuity “fails to distinguish between the liberation of sexuality and its debasement” (103), aligns the author with reactionary moralists, and condemns capitalism for satisfying human needs rather than for failing to do so.

Fearing that the gains made by science and material progress will outstrip the human capacity to manage their implications, Huxley seizes on the flexibility of the novelistic form, its protean ability to absorb all manner of prose genres, to address his social concerns. Like Wells before him, he fuses novel and essay to further a counter-strain of modernism that implicitly criticizes the claims of autonomous form.

Ivy Compton-Burnett

Ivy Compton-Burnett extends Firbank’s innovations with dialogue in a different direction, retaining from the Jamesian tradition a structural severity and a cool observation of the oddities and ironies of human behavior. Her twenty novels display a striking consistency of content, tone, and style. Even the titles – which balance alliterative or parallel terms on either side of an “and” (*Parents and Children, Elders and Betters, A Family and a Fortune, A God and His Gifts*) – are so similar as to suggest a compulsive returning to the scene of some primal literary crime. Her focus is the landed gentry who interested Austen and George Eliot; her stories, usually set in the late Victorian years of the author’s childhood, concern the passions, hatreds, jealousies, cruelties, deceptions, and occasional kindnesses of domestic life. The central source of cruelty is typically a tyrannical, miserly parent whose brutality breeds alliances, conspiracies, and affairs among the weaker members of the household – children, wives, tutors, governesses, and omnipresent financially dependent adult relations. While the symmetry and patterning of Compton-Burnett’s plots owe a debt to James, they also show a kinship to the middlebrow whodunits of her contemporary Agatha Christie, who similarly withholds crucial plot events until the necessary dramatic moment. Hence Compton-Burnett’s stories hinge on revelations of dark secrets: incestuous affairs, illegitimate children, forged wills, secret elopements, murder, infanticide. Yet because the prevailing affect of the novels is blank and detached, these novels seem to skirt the melodramatic rather than to indulge it.

While her focus on rural, isolated families from the past suggests a reluctance to face modernity, Compton-Burnett is a socially engaged satirist who eviscerates sentimental fictions about domesticity. Marriage often seems a refuge for the desperate and a source of the perpetuation of suffering. Even more than Forster she debunks the marriage plot; in *A House and Its Head* (1935) two female cousins (probably lovers) speculate on “a feeling of escape in the spinster population,” and burst into “fits of laughter” at the thought of marrying the local rector.²⁵ The frequency with which inheritance becomes a cause for hatred suggests a further critique of a patrilineal economy. Religion is shown to be a tool of oppression and a shelter for hypocrites.

As astonishing and unique as the narrative content of the novels is their technique. As in parts of *Firbank*, narration is reduced to a minimum; scenes consist of long exchanges of dialogue. Even the plot is advanced through talk, and the reader may learn of events only when one character relates them to another. The characters are physically described only when first introduced, and then in a manner that can seem deliberately perfunctory or parodic of realism. Meanwhile, the metonymic impulse of realism is virtually nonexistent; characters can enter or exit, walk from home to church, or even die without narratorial acknowledgment. This almost exclusive reliance on dialogue banishes both Forsterian narratorial comment and Woolfian exposition of the contents of the mind.

Compton-Burnett’s dialogue itself appears stylized and aphoristic because of the formal manners of the class she treats, the intelligence she grants her characters, and the disdain she displays for the conventions of realism. She is not given to *Firbank*’s illusion-shredding jokes, but her manner itself signals the inescapability of artifice, and her obedience to self-imposed rules implies the belief that mastery is revealed through limitation. Still, the author’s enigmatic wit emerges in the way that she bends these rules; when she dips beneath the surface of dialogue to reveal characters’ thoughts, she keeps to the dialogue form:

“Is that what you are supposed to be doing, George?” said a voice that George took at first to be of divine origin, but recognized in a moment as of a more alarming source.

“No. No, sir.”

“Then why are you doing it?”

“Because I am so plainly fed, that the dining-room pudding was irresistible,” said George, but only in his heart.²⁶

Because of this dialogic method, often the characters’ speech is talk about talk itself. Characters question and parse each other’s language, comment on each

other's words and silences, probe sub-texts, dismantle figures of speech – and force the same kind of scrutiny on the reader. Indeed, they come to resemble ordinary language philosophers as they analyze speech acts in their complex social contexts. Meanings ramify, and language becomes a weapon and a shield in domestic battle. Consequently, insides and depths can only be provisionally surmised from the painstaking analysis of surfaces:

“Is that fire smoking?” said Horace Lamb.

“Yes, it appears to be, my dear boy.”

“I am not asking what it appears to be doing. I asked if it was smoking.”

“Appearances are not held to be a clue to the truth,” said his cousin.

“But we seem to have no other.” (MM 3)

This opening encapsulates the problem of Compton-Burnett's fiction, in which appearances may not indicate truth, yet they remain the only guide available.

The meticulous pursuit of meanings and truths behind words and surfaces ultimately suggests a cruelty underlying human relations, and, like Freud, Compton-Burnett suggests that the modernist may be seen as a temporal refugee from a traumatic Victorian past. Fredrick Karl even compares Marcus Lamb's rebuke of his father in *Manservant and Maidservant* (1947) to Kafka's letter to his father:²⁷ “We are afraid of you. You know we are . . . You did not let us have anything; you would not let us be ourselves. If it had not been for Mother, we would rather have been dead” (MM 233). Harsh words like these are spoken in novel after novel, since Compton-Burnett's unhappy families are all unhappy in exactly the same way.

Henry Green

In his rigorous self-effacement, his reliance on evocative symbols, and his foregrounding of style, Henry Green continues the high modernist, Jamesian tradition. Yet he also generally presents characters from the outside rather than the inside, deploying free indirect discourse or interior monologue only sporadically; late in his career he takes up novels in dialogue – *Nothing* (1950), *Doting* (1952) – in the manner of Compton-Burnett. Although his literary manner is quite different from that found in Wells's or Huxley's novels of ideas, his works show a persistent interest in social questions, especially those of class, and he even offers an unorthodox dystopia in *Concluding* (1948). In an idiosyncratic way Green thus reconciles the two sides of the James–Wells debate.

Green's work is notable both for its consistency and its variety. Like Compton-Burnett, his titles follow a pattern: all are single words (if the reader supplies a hyphen in *Party Going*); six of the nine are gerunds (if one includes the false gerund, *Nothing*). The consistency in naming reflects a consistent practice – a steady attention to the nuances and peculiarities of human behavior. Yet Green also treats characters from across the social spectrum. *Living* (1929) focuses on workers in a Birmingham iron foundry, *Party Going* (1939) on wealthy young socialites, *Caught* (1943) on firemen during wartime, *Loving* (1945) on English servants in Ireland. This attention registers the social and economic realities of his time – whether through ironic contrasts in *Party Going* between bright young things and their servants, or through ironic parallels in *Living* between upper- and lower-class stories of erotic rejection. Although both sympathy and satire creep into Green's fiction, for the most part he closely observes his characters' behavior with minimal moral judgment and an implicit valuing of the ordinary.

The language of Green's novels demonstrates a distinctive style, or cluster of styles. In his earliest novels he omits articles and certain deictics ("He looked into grate which had pink paper fan in it");²⁸ his sentences use punctuation sparingly, presenting, as his admirer John Updike says, "bold phrases roped together by a slack and flexible grammar."²⁹ This language sometimes fosters lyricism, but it also creates awkward disturbances that command the reader's attention. Like Gertrude Stein, he repeats words and phrases with minor variations in order to capture the rhythm of thought rather than its exact language: "So in his thinking he thought now Mr Dupret is dying. He thought how he'd worked fifteen years for Mr Dupret. 'And never a cross word between us.' He began now in his thinking" (*LI* 281). In Green's own apt description, his prose is "not quick as poetry but rather a gathering web of insinuations."³⁰ To this narratorial language, Green adds the spoken idioms of his characters, and he follows Dickens and the Joyce of *Ulysses*' "Cyclops" in achieving a richness of image and implication through attention to local idiolects: "They're like a pair of squirrels before the winter layin' in a store with your property mum against their marriage if they ever find a parson to be joined in matrimony which I take leave to doubt" (*LO* 162).

Green professes that "the author must keep completely out of the picture,"³¹ and his technique tends toward the dramatic. Scene and character take precedence over authorial or narratorial interpretation of events, and he even thematizes his skepticism about knowing other minds, as if to justify his narrative practice: "no one can be sure they know what others are thinking any more than anyone can say where someone is when they are asleep" (*PG*

463). From time to time his narrator will point a moral, or acknowledge the created nature of his tales, yet these interventions are so rare that they appear as deliberate idiosyncrasies or blank jokes, coy acknowledgments of the relaxation of technique.

Green's use of symbols similarly teases rather than satisfies the reader's desire for meaning. On the first page of *Party Going* a woman finds a dead pigeon in a train station, washes it in the lavatory, and wraps it in brown paper; why, we never learn. *Loving*, set in an Irish castle, begins with, "Once upon a day," ends with "happily ever after," and features a lost ring – but the reader must strain to read this work as a fairy tale. As Green comments, "Life, after all, is one discrepancy after another" (AF 13). Hence unlike other exponents of surface or scenic methods – Lewis, Firbank, Waugh, and (to a lesser extent) Compton-Burnett – Green does not make his characters into types. His omission of explicit motive works to deepen his characters' psychological complexity, illustrating what Yeats says of *Hamlet* – that nothing has life except the incomplete. Green's characters are in addition often notable for a vital sensuousness, like that of Amabel of *Party Going* drying herself after a bath: "As she went over herself with her towel it was plain that she loved her own shape and skin. When she dried her breasts she wiped them with as much care as she would puppies after she had given them their bath, smiling all the time" (PG 480). In short, Green's self-effacement allows his cast of characters to emerge, vibrant in the colors of their varied settings. Thus while Forster rebukes Jamesian formalism for "shutting the doors on life," Green's own attention to technique does just the opposite. Like many other not-quite-canonical modernists, his narrative experiments open doors to what James himself calls not life but living.

Notes

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3. H. G. Wells, *The Time Machine* (New York: Penguin, 2005), p. 19.
4. H. G. Wells, *The Complete Science Fiction Treasury of H. G. Wells* (New York: Knopf, 1978), p. 266.
5. H. G. Wells, *A Modern Utopia* (New York: Penguin, 2005), p. 218.
6. E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (New York: Harcourt, 1927), p. 162 (hereafter *AN*).
7. E. M. Forster, *A Passage to India* (New York: Harcourt, 1924), p. 292.
8. E. M. Forster, *Howards End* (New York: Random, 1989), p. 143.

9. Wyndham Lewis, *Men Without Art* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1964), p. 159 (hereafter MWA).
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11. Wyndham Lewis, *Time and Western Man* (Boston: Beacon, 1957), pp. 257–258.
12. Wyndham Lewis, *Tarr* (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow, 1990), pp. 299–300.
13. Wyndham Lewis, *The Revenge for Love* (South Bend: Gateway, 1978), p. 147 (hereafter RL).
14. Hugh Kenner, *Wyndham Lewis* (Norfolk, CT: New Directions, 1954), p. 14.
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16. Ronald Firbank, *The Flower Beneath the Foot and Prancing Nigger* (Norfolk, CT: New Directions, 1962), pp. 262–263.
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24. Theodor W. Adorno, *Prisms* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1982), pp. 100, 98.
25. Ivy Compton-Burnett, *A House and Its Head* (New York: New York Review Books, 2001), p. 267.
26. Ivy Compton-Burnett, *Manservant and Maidservant* (New York: New York Review Books, 2001), p. 56 (hereafter MM).
27. Fredrick R. Karl, “The Intimate World of Ivy Compton-Burnett,” in *British Modernist Fiction, 1920–1945*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1986), p. 185.
28. Henry Green, *Living, Loving, Party Going* (New York: Penguin, 1978), p. 351 (abbreviations LI, LO, PG refer to this edition).
29. John Updike, Introduction, *Living, Loving, Party Going*, p. 12.
30. Henry Green, *Pack My Bag: A Self-Portrait* (New York: New Directions, 1993), p. 84.
31. Henry Green, Interview, “Henry Green: The Art of Fiction #22,” *The Paris Review* 19 (1958) (<http://www.theparisreview.org/viewinterview.php/prmMID/4800>), p. 13 (hereafter AF).