

CHAPTER I

Character

Characters are persons who perform actions in stories. In realist novels they are generally present in the action, substantively complete in their composition and therefore fully “in character,” structurally solid as a coherent unit, stable in basic identity over time even as they respond to changing circumstances, admirable (as protagonists) if not classically heroic, and oriented to life in a purposive way. In modernist novels the formal features of presence, substance, structure, stability, stature, and purpose change in subverting and reworking the historical content of the master narratives.

PRESENCE: CONSPICUOUS ABSENCE

That main characters are present and center in the action that moves stories would seem to be a truism. Throughout the realist period such was the case, but in the modernist period some characters began to disappear significantly. Realist presence gave way to modernist absence in stories about a black, a lesbian, and a young man, who subvert conventionally biased distinctions that ground the imperial, courtship, and national narratives.

In Conrad's *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* (1897), the black seaman James Wait is from the British West Indies and as a colonial subject is the victim of racial prejudice. His presence is announced prominently in the title, but he is conspicuously absent in the story even as he dominates the action. He is late to board the *Narcissus*, his name on the ship's list is a smudge, and he spends most of the time below deck. He is isolated from the crew because of illness as well as race and is absent from the main action of a storm and a near mutiny, which his laziness and apparent malingering trigger. He is repeatedly identified with mist, fog, and darkness, and he leaves the ship early, because he dies and is buried at sea. Still, his absence dominates the novel. As the narrator explains, “he made himself master of every moment of our existence,” adding that “through him we were becoming highly humanized, tender, complex, excessively decadent: we understood the

subtlety of his fear, sympathized with all his repulsions, shrinkings, evasions, delusions – as though we had been over-civilized, and rotten, and without any knowledge of the meaning of life.”¹ One sailor blames the storm on his presence, and his death seems to restore calm. In a preface to the 1914 American edition, Conrad explained that “in the book [Wait] is nothing; he is merely the center of the ship’s collective psychology and the pivot of action.” While Conrad intended to celebrate human solidarity during a storm at sea, he forged it amid divisive racial prejudice among his sailors through a character who controls the story by his absence.

Djuna Barnes’s *Nightwood* (1936) subverts the courtship narrative through the perspective of a bisexual outsider, Robin Vote, who is chronically absent from the lives of her male and female lovers. Introduced as one who has fainted and is therefore unconscious, she marries Felix Volkbein but remains uncommunicative. Her clothes are of another period, and she is unable to grasp what Felix says or respond to his love. She leaves him, wanders to other cities, and meets Nora Flood whom she also repeatedly abandons. Robin’s absence drives Nora to grasp the constraints of heterosexual courtship conventions. Dr. O’Connor explains to Nora how those conventions keep some people from gratifying unconventional urges: “what is this love we have for the invert, boy or girl?”² Robin’s physical absence dramatizes what is emotionally absent from dehumanizing gender and courtship conventions, especially for lesbians. In realist novels, a character’s lover might be absent, but the character always has an identifiable beloved, whereas Barnes’s absentee is fundamentally estranged from love itself, which is impossible for her in her time.

The most significantly missing character is in Woolf’s *Jacob’s Room* (1922), which tells the story of Jacob Flanders, whose conspicuous absenteeism symbolizes the approximately 885,000 Englishmen who were killed in World War I, half of them blown to bits and unrecovered, with only around 10 percent returned to England for burial. While the conditions of trench warfare forced soldiers to live with dead bodies, civilians did not see them. They were buried where they fell, if they were recovered at all, and beginning in 1916 the Defence of the Realm Act banned publishing photographs of dead soldiers.³ Amid the chaos, countless caskets were empty, while many contained parts of two or more bodies. From Jacob’s titular empty room and his brother’s opening unanswered call, “Ja-cob! Ja-cob!” to the concluding gesture of his mother holding up his old shoes, Woolf’s novel offers a historically unprecedented rendering of the number of ways a character can be absent or deficient and still profoundly impact others as he himself is groomed to become cannon fodder. I count sixty-four instances of Jacob’s absenteeism in five modes, including the following:

1. *Physically*: late, never came, already gone, out in front, lags behind, not in his room, left the house, turned to go, lost during a hunt, gone to Paris.
2. *Intentionally*: does not want to play, hides from his mother, disobeys his mother, covers his face with a handkerchief, ignores a woman in a railway car, fails to read Shakespeare, remains silent.
3. *Cognitively*: asleep, does not hear, bored, absent-minded, looks vacant, opens hymn book at wrong place, does not know history, knows nothing about music, cannot dance.
4. *Objectively*: cannot be found, Mr. Floyd walks by him at Piccadilly, Professor Huxtable walks past him at Cambridge, his article is rejected for publication, a maid misunderstands his name, Evan Williams cannot find him, calls to him go unanswered.
5. *Symbolically*: a creaking wicker chair, a galloping riderless horse, Jacob's empty room, his empty shoes.

These conspicuous absences magnify formally the absurdity of the mass death from war that Woolf evokes as an ominous background beginning with Jacob's surname *Flanders* that conjures up the killing fields of Belgium and Northern France. The soldiers sliding back in the muddy maze of trenches are suggested symbolically by the crab that young Jacob captures in a bucket, futilely circling the sandy bottom, "trying with its weakly legs to climb the steep side; trying again and falling back, and trying again and again" (*JR*, 14). Woolf cuts from explaining how "character-drawing" can produce only "exquisite outlines enclosing vacancy" to evoking powerfully how guns fire and "a dozen young men in the prime of life descend with composed faces into the depths of the sea," while on land an entire army "falls flat, save that . . . one or two pieces still agitate up and down like fragments of broken match-stick" (155–56). The novel ends in Jacob's empty room with his friend Richard futilely calling out "Jacob! Jacob!" and his despairing mother holding up his empty shoes, a moment that poignantly recalls her question that opens the novel: "Where *is* that tiresome little boy?" Woolf exploits the innovative formal strategy of conspicuous absence to assail the war and the men who caused it, rewriting the national master narrative from a story of patriarchal pomposity and progress to one of deadly hubris and decline.

The innovative narrative technique of a conspicuously absent main character enabled Conrad, Barnes, and Woolf to subvert respectively the imperial, courtship, and national narratives with novels that do not merely moralize about victimizing specific populations but dramatize the annihilating experience of being excluded from privileged sanctuaries by racial intolerance, homophobic intolerance, and nationalist chauvinism.

SUBSTANCE: CONCRETE NOTHINGNESS

Realist characters, whether miserly like Monsieur Grandet in Balzac's *Eugénie Grandet* (1833), loyal like Abel Magwitch in Dickens's *Great Expectations* (1860–61), or passionate like Anna in Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* (1851), are what they are inside to outside and remain so throughout the story. In response to challenging circumstances, they become more fully realized as characters. Such existential plenitude was resisted by some modernists who increasingly questioned whether a person can actually *be* anyone thoroughly. A modernist theory of the positive function of negation as the essence of character is Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* (1943), which views human existence as devoid of any inherent meaning, with, rather, nothingness at its core. People experience "concrete nothingness" in many ways: as in questioning, absence, regret, and the ever-present possibility of death. Unlike the being of nonhuman things that are always totally what they are, wall-to-wall being, human existence is never completely anything; it is rather a constant slippage from being one with itself as it struggles with the fundamental "elsewhere of consciousness" in any given moment and endlessly moves away from its lost past and toward its uncertain future, always tempted to flee from the responsibility of endlessly defining itself that is required by its freedom.

Sartre forecast this philosophy in his earlier novel *Nausea*, about Antoine Roquentin, the main character who, as a first person narrator, is always present and in the reader's mind but nevertheless embodies concrete nothingness, which he occasionally contemplates explicitly: "I am the one who pulls myself from the nothingness to which I aspire."⁴ Plagued by chronic nausea when contemplating his life, he grasps its nature when looking at the meandering root of a chestnut tree, which is simply there – excessive and superfluous (*de trop*), without any reason for or justification of its existence. But human existence is even more formless than the root, because it is essentially a gaping nothingness that is the key to its essence as conscious, free, and responsible for itself. Roquentin's experience is ultimately liberating, however, because if one is essentially nothing, one can become anything. Sartre's novel challenges the personal narrative of realist fiction as well as the liberal narrative as Roquentin rejects the bourgeois world of Bouville (Mudtown) where he lives. In the end he affirms art as a purpose by drawing inspiration from a jazz singer and by resolving to become a writer.

Sartre defines man as "a being which *is* what-it-is-not [because consciousness is always beyond itself] and which *is not* what-it-is [because it must

change].” Those paired paradoxes echo Martin Heidegger’s earlier quip in *Being and Time* (1927) that “Everyone is the other, and no one is himself.” Such existential paradoxes permeate modernist fiction. The narrator in Ford’s *The Good Soldier* (1915) wonders “who in this world can give anyone a character?” His skepticism centers on the inability to assign clear motivation.⁵ Woolf offers a motto for modernism with the reflections of her protagonist in *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925): “She would not say of any one in the world now that they were this or were that” and, at the end of that paragraph, more specifically, “she would not say of Peter, she would not say of herself, I am this, I am that” (*MD*, 8–9). The wise but unstable Darl Bundren in Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying* (1930) concludes: “I don’t know if I am or not. Jewel [Darl’s brother] knows he is, because he does not know that he does not know whether he is or not” (*AD*, 80). Joyce dramatizes the impossibility of self-definition when Leopold Bloom, after a seaside encounter with Gerty MacDowell, attempts to write a message about himself for her in the sand but can only come up with “I,” and then a moment later, “AM. A.” and finally rubs out the incomplete sentence. The conclusion of Descartes’s *cogito ergo sum* – *I think, therefore I exist* – the proof of his existence that he held to be indubitable and that grounded philosophical inquiry into existence for three centuries, eludes Bloom who sweeps it away with his boot. In the “Lestrygonians” episode Bloom records the blunt existential conclusion, “No-one is anything” (*U*, 135).

Concern about how public roles drain inner substance energizes Musil’s *The Man Without Qualities* (1930–43), the most sustained challenge to the substantiality of a character in modernist fiction. In contemporary Austria, the narrator explains, one’s qualities or characteristics are diffused by multiple roles, as an individual has a professional, national, civic, class, geographic, sexual, conscious, unconscious, and private character. The protagonist Ulrich attempts to unite them, “but they dissolve him, so that he is really nothing more than a small basin hollowed out by these many streamlets.” This “empty, invisible space” offers the possibility to create his own characteristics, an undertaking that most people fail to engage in (*MQ*, 30). After a losing battle in youth, people accept the public persona that enfolds their lives. Some may come up with “a slogan in which they think they can recognize themselves . . . a new mustache or a new idea,” but such gestures fail to counteract the “heavy world, weighing on tongue, hands, and eyes . . . and inside nothing but an unstable, shifting mist” (137). Ulrich is the man without everyday qualities who attempts to shape his interior space as his own (7). To do so he must divest himself of “all those prefabricated compartments and forms of life, semblances of reality, the

molds set by earlier generations” (135). He is without public characteristics because he resists those pressures.

This existential insubstantiality highlights by contrast the stifling, all-too-substantial values of an Austro-Hungarian Empire that was dominated by aristocratic standing larded up with family pedigree. Ulrich’s critique of “pseudoselves” exposes the pseudoreality of the Empire as self-deceived about its imperial strength and propped up by imperial propaganda and bourgeois liberalism. In elaborating on the gaping emptiness at the core of his protagonist, Musil suggests an analogous emptiness behind the over-inflated patriotic, imperial, and liberal narratives that held together the Empire in its final year of peace; but while Ulrich’s emptiness was a realm of potential free action, the Empire’s emptiness was a hollow shell that crumbled in military defeat at the end of the war.

STRUCTURE: BLURRING AND FRAGMENTATION

As Leo Bersani argues, “The richly detailed textures of characterization in realist fiction seldom subvert the coherent wholeness of personality . . . Psychological complexity is tolerated as long as it doesn’t threaten an ideology of the self as a fundamentally intelligible structure unaffected by a history of fragmented, discontinuous desires.”⁶ The minds of such characters are made up of separate faculties that cohere in a unified subject. Major challenges to that view were made by Ernst Mach and William James, who held that the self was nothing but consciousness itself. For Mach, “the ego is not a definite, unalterable, sharply-grounded entity” but rather “a mass of sensation, loosely bundled together.”⁷ For James the self is a “stream of thought, of consciousness.”⁸ Freud saw the self as a fragmentary mental agency that lacks autonomy. “The ego,” he announced, “is not even master of its own house,” as the mind is undergirded by myriad intersections of unconscious processes.⁹ In accord with such challenges, several modernists created characters whose basic structure is blurred or fragmentary.

Modernists created characters as a mass of sensations whose ego boundaries are blurred with identities distributed between themselves and others or outside objects. In Rainer Maria Rilke’s *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* a tram rides over and into the narrator as he sleeps.¹⁰ Not content to relate merely how a person moves about a city, modernists make city experience constitute the person. The two subjects in the title of Alfred Döblin’s *Berlin Alexanderplatz: The Story of Franz Biberkopf* (1929), the city and the man, interpenetrate as when Biberkopf, just out of prison, is

assaulted by the fear that sliding rooftops will crash into his head, and inanimate objects like cars and houses come alive. In a review of *Ulysses* in 1928, Döblin noted the destabilizing impact on personal identity of cinema and newspapers along with “the streets, the scenes changing by the second, the signboards, automobile traffic.”¹¹ The titular hero of Wyndham Lewis’s *Tarr* (1918) believes that “all personality [is] catching: we are all sicknesses for each other.”¹² His nemesis, the artist Otto Kreisler, boasts, “I am as many people as the different types of people I have lived amongst” (258). This *boulevardier* is swept up in the vortex of city life, existentially usurped by people he meets on the street and by advertisements and newspaper headlines he sees. Writing at the end of World War I, Lewis parlays his characters’ blurring into a critique of chauvinistic nationalism, which is undercut by the contagious internationalism of his main characters.

Clarissa Dalloway merges with London as she wonders during a walk, “did it not become consoling to believe that . . . somehow in the streets of London, on the ebb and flow of things, here, there, she survived, Peter survived, lived in each other, she being part, she was positive, of the trees at home; part of the people she had never met” (*MD*, 9). In Woolf’s *The Waves* (1931) six characters merge repeatedly in waves of experiences that flow through one another. Bernard notes that when he and the five others sit close, “we melt into each other with phrases.”¹³ While this novel concerns mainly the personal and courtship narratives, it also subverts the imperial narrative with a seventh character, Percival, a conspicuously absent mock-hero who is degraded as he falls off a horse during his imperial escapades in India.

Joyce’s Bloom wonders what it would be like to be a cat, a blind man, or a seagull. To underscore his and Stephen’s fusion with each other the narrator refers to the two of them as “Stoom” and “Blephen.” At the cemetery Bloom thinks about Hindu widow suicide and then other burial customs, musing “If we were all suddenly somebody else” (*U*, 91). His empathizing undercuts the chauvinism of Irish nationalism and antisemitism. During lunch he thinks about a slaughterhouse, as though he himself were being butchered, an empathetic moment that Joyce captures with fragments and coinages that render the sights and sounds of the carnage and suggest its acrid smell and slimy surfaces.

Wretched brutes there at the cattlemarket waiting for the poleaxe to split their skulls open. Moo. Poor trembling calves. Meh. Staggering bob. Bubble and squeak. Butchers’ buckets wobbly lights. Give us that brisket off the hook. Plup. Rawhead and bloody bones. Flayed glass-eyed sheep hung from their haunches, sheepsnouts bloodypapered snivelling nosejam on sawdust. (140)

Realists such as Upton Sinclair in *The Jungle* (1906) criticized the meat-packing industry from the outside with descriptive prose and forceful polemics, whereas Joyce suggests how Bloom experiences the slaughter as if he had fused with the butchers, shoppers, and observers.

Realists celebrated strong characters by making them central to the narrative, and while they acknowledged that some were weak, they did not question whether a singular self undergirded them. Even split personalities in realist novels are neatly divided as with Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, whose unified selves in their fully good and evil modes take over sequentially. In contrast, modernists splintered personalities that are simultaneously present as fragmentary aspects of a hybrid entity.

A few modernists captured fragmentation from shell shock.¹⁴ Rebecca West's protagonist Chris Baldry in *The Return of the Soldier* (1918) suffers from shell shock that splits his personality and his life between a pre-war lover he adores and the woman to whom he is married but does not even recall in a home he can no longer recognize. Shell-shocked Ludwig Gödicke in Broch's *The Sleepwalkers* (1931) experiences the "scattered fragments" of a "series of persons living within him" that do not hang together.¹⁵ In ten essays on the "Disintegration of Values" that interrupt the story, Broch theorizes how Gödicke's fragmentation personifies the loss of national cohesion that plagued postwar Germany. In *Mrs. Dalloway* "the throb of the motor engines sounded like a pulse irregularly drumming through [shell-shocked Septimus Smith's] entire body," while the leaves in Regent's Park "connected by millions of fibres with his own body" (*MD*, 15, 22).

Some modernist homosexual characters are fragmented by conflict over their sexuality. In Gide's *The Immoralist* (1902) Michel is split between his tepid feelings as a husband and his passion for Arab boys. In *Remembrance of Things Past* Proust explains his homosexual characters' dilemma because they are even rejected by other homosexuals "in whom they inspire only disgust at seeing themselves as they are" (II, 637–38). The lesbian novelist Bryher (Winifred Ellerman) opens her autobiographical *Two Selves* (1923) with a syntactically fragmented statement of her fragmentation: "Two selves. Jammed against each other, disjointed and ill-fitting. An obedient Nancy with heavy plaits tied over two ears that answered 'yes, no, yes, no,' according as the wind blew. A boy, a brain, that planned adventures and sought wisdom. Two personalities uneasy by their juxtaposition."

A few modernists saw fragmentation as a source of life-affirming complexity, as Strindberg explained in the foreword to *Miss Julie* (1888): "My souls (characters) are conglomerations of past and present stages of

civilization, bits from books and newspapers, scraps of humanity, rags and tatters of fine clothing, patched together as is the human soul.” In the preface to *A Dream Play* (first performed in 1907), he adds how in that play “the characters are split, double and multiply; they evaporate, crystallize, scatter and converge.” In Hermann Hesse’s *Steppenwolf* (1927), Harry Haller discovers his “schizomania” as a key to existence and aspires to cultivate his “hundred or a thousand selves.”¹⁶

A formally innovative rendering of character “in pieces” is in Gertrude Stein’s *The Making of Americans* (1925), most of which she wrote from 1906 to 1911 when Picasso did a portrait of her (1906) and went on in 1910 to create his most fractured cubist portraits of Ambroise Vollard and Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler. While Picasso produced single images of fragmented faces simultaneously from different perspectives, Stein offered multiple images of persons sequentially from slightly different perspectives in slightly varied sentences. To capture this fragmentation she devised the techniques of beginning again and repetition to reconfigure characters’ subtly different modes like a cubist composition coming into being over time. Early on the narrator is confident she can catch the “bottom nature” of characters with repetitive descriptions of how they repeat themselves. After several hundred pages she explores contradictions in their bottom natures, how they are “dependent-independent” or “independent-dependent,” turning on which trait is dominant. Eventually, she concedes that some people do not have a bottom nature: “There are very many of them . . . pieces that never make of them a whole one, not because of complication in them, not because of difficulty envisaging them but because really such of them are in pieces inside them” (*MA*, 311). Later she gives up identifying a bottom nature: “Perhaps not any one really is a whole one inside them to themselves” (519). In contrast to her novel’s title, she actually crafts the *un*making of an American family. The Hersland family declines from personal and historical experience including patriarchal domination and bourgeois conventions, but more significantly it expires in the formal invention of narratives repeated so many times that, like a word too often repeated, they lose all meaning. Stein struggles to find a new way to render the numbing sameness of character as well as the myriad varieties of people. Her narrative technique of beginning again with slight variations captures an inescapable truth about characters whose language and lives are tediously repetitive. She so suffocates her fragmented characters with repetition that they all but disappear from the story.

Modernists subverted and reworked the coherent ego of realist characters with blurring and fragmentation that modified a variety of master

narratives. Blurring captured urban influences on character: penetration in Rilke, assault in Döblin, contamination in Lewis, exhilaration in Woolf, and empathy in Joyce. Fragmentation was evident in shell shock that subverted the nationalist narrative, homosexuality that subverted the courtship narrative, and anti-patriarchy that subverted the family narrative.

STABILITY: VOLATILE EGOS

In a letter of June 5, 1914, D. H. Lawrence announced, “You mustn’t look in my novel for the old stable *ego* of the character.” He proposed to craft “another ego” passing through various “allotropic states” to reveal a less stable one than his realist predecessors offered. While allotrope suggests a static state (diamond is an allotrope of carbon), Lawrence meant temporal instability. He overstated his upcoming historical contribution, because realist novels are full of unstable egos; but their instabilities develop from clearly identified causes: greed in Vautrin (*Old Goriot*, 1834), revenge in Captain Ahab (*Moby Dick*, 1851), jealousy in Bradley Headstone (*Our Mutual Friend*, 1864–66). Throughout the story these unstable characters are ready to explode, and the climax comes when they do. In contrast, modernists believe that everyone is unstable even when external pressures are mild. The instabilities of modernist characters are not the result of clearly identified specific circumstances, as is the case with so many of Dickens’s characters, but are rather a function of human existence per se. These instabilities are manifest in a character’s name, religion, nationality, race, family, profession, gender role, and mental state.

Characters with many names are a simple indication of instability and variability. Miriam Henderson in Richardson’s *Pilgrimage* (1915–38) is also Mim, Hendie, Chickie, Mimmy, Mirry, Miriorama, Miriametta, Mira, and Mirissima, nicknames used by different persons addressing her different social personas. In *Ulysses*, Bloom is also Poldy, Papli, Jewman, Leopold, Leeolee, L. Boom, Ben Bloom, Booloohom, Henry Flower, Ruby Cohen, Sir Leopold, Herr Professor Luitpold Blumenduft, and Jollypoldy the rixdix doldy, among others. These names suggest changing aspects of his fantasy life, conscience, and character, which include his religion. Father Farley refers to him as “an episcopalian, an agnostic, an anythingarian” (*U*, 400). His friend Ned Lambert asks, “Is he a jew or a gentile or a holy Roman or a swaddler or what the hell is he?” (276). Bloom is a part Jew who was baptized into the Irish Protestant Church under the direction of his converted father and was re-baptized as a Catholic for his marriage to Molly. He owns a Catholic cemetery plot, is uncircumcised, and first thing in the

morning of the story eats pork kidney. In the hallucinatory “Circe” episode, characters young and old, rich and poor, living and dead appear to define Bloom’s multifarious identities symbolized by nineteen costume changes. He is even interpreted surrealistically by a bar of soap, a crab, a fan, a hoof, and a yew tree. Positively these characters and objects view him as intelligent, thoughtful, generous, and capable of performing miracles or building a utopian city. They call him Mayor of Dublin and emperor-president Leopold the First, even the Messiah. Others voice his dark side as a “fendish libertine” and “vile hypocrite.” This multiplicity of perceptions provides a new kind of stability-out-of-instability for Bloom in steering a resolute course in his love for Molly and faith in others amid the rip tides of these diverse influences.

In Faulkner’s *Light in August* (1932) uncertain racial identity torments Joe Christmas, who acknowledges, “I got some nigger blood in me.”¹⁷ But he does not know how much, or if it is there at all. His dilemma is the pivot of the novel that assails the inhumanity of racism. In an interview Faulkner summed up Joe’s character in terms of stability: “I think that was his tragedy – he didn’t know what he was, and so he was nothing. He deliberately evicted himself from the human race because he didn’t know which he was.” “The most tragic condition a man could find himself in,” Faulkner added, is “not to know what he is and to know that he will never know.”¹⁸ Joe’s unstable racial identity subverts the moral stature of the Southern national narrative, which drains away as Joe bleeds to death from castration by racial bigots.

The force of ancestry loomed large among Victorians, who were ignorant about genetics. They believed in telegony, which refers to the direct influence of impregnation on a female’s reproductive system and all her subsequent offspring. Thus, if a woman has a child sired by one man and a second child sired by another man, the second child will partly resemble the first father, whose characteristics, they believed, remained in her blood after delivery. Lacking a correct understanding of the function of the placental barrier and believing erroneously that mothers share fetal blood, they concluded that traces of the first father remain forever in her blood and hence in her reproductive system.¹⁹ Victorians’ misunderstanding of hereditary transmission fueled wild fears about how children inherit birth defects and vices along with their parents’ property and social standing. Family lineage thus played a major role in defining character. Modernists, who had a better grasp of the nature of heredity, did not so readily explain character from a family’s blood line, and characters search in vain for stability and meaning deriving from family heritage. In *Nightwood*, Barnes mocked such

a search in Felix, a Jew, who adopts the sign of the cross, claims to have descended from an Austrian aristocratic family, and styles himself a Baron. He attempts to ingratiate himself in a world of fake family narratives based on fake titles and origins. While he is destabilized trying to establish a fake family identity, Gide's character Bernard in *The Counterfeiters* is destabilized when he learns that he is illegitimate and not the son of the man he thought was his father.

Realist characters take different jobs but in so doing maintain their personal identity, while in modernist novels such changes can be symptoms of a fundamental instability in character. In Kafka's *The Castle* (1926), the protagonist, who has no first name and only the initial of his last name, K., introduces himself as a land surveyor to a group of villagers who question his professional credentials and eventually erode his personal identity. His two assistants do not bring any surveying instruments, and they know nothing about surveying. In time he wonders whether he ever was a surveyor – if indeed it is possible to be a surveyor – and becomes a school janitor and finally a horse groom. These are not mere job changes but responses to disorientation in a world where no one has a stable identity, and even the castle that hired K. dissolves in fog and darkness. Among the many connotations of *kafkaesque* is instability of character that is reinforced by an intrusive and unfathomable social world.

Victorians typically believed that gender character was determined fully and indelibly by sexual differences: men are polygamous, active, and rational, while women are monogamous, passive, and intuitive. Sexual difference, determined by an initial visual inspection of the genitals, shapes gender roles and the entire personality so completely, Victorian experts held, that male inverters are necessarily also transvestites and effeminate and cannot whistle because whistling is a masculine skill.²⁰ Thus dichotomous gender roles penetrate the deepest layers and fullest reaches of the entire personality. Thinkers in the modernist period reworked that male-female binary with affirmations of gender depolarization from genetics, endocrinology, embryology, evolutionary theory, feminist theory, psychoanalysis, sociology, and anthropology as well as literature and art.²¹ Bloom is one example, as several times during the novel he fantasizes what it would be like to be a woman, and during the "Circe" episode he becomes "the new womanly man" and gives birth to eight children. For Joyce such mental experimentation is a source of richness that strengthens character, although it also destabilizes the dichotomous gender roles that grounded the conventional courtship narrative.

Some characters lose their identity by fusing with others, at least in the imagination. In Woolf's *The Waves* Bernard says: "I changed and changed;

was Hamlet, was Shelley, was the hero, whose name I forget, of a novel by Dostoevsky; was for a whole term, incredibly, Napoleon; but was Byron chiefly" (184). Gide's intention to create unstable characters is presented in *The Counterfeiters* by the fictional novelist Edouard in a notebook entry on "Inconsistency" that rejects "characters in a novel or a play who act all the way through exactly as one expects them to," adding that "this consistency of theirs, which is held up to our admiration, is on the contrary the very thing which makes us recognize that they are artificially composed" (C, 336–37). The inconsistency of Gide's characters insures their instability, at least as compared with the predictable types in Zola's naturalistic novels, whose characters are over-determined by psychological typing. Zola's characters are destabilized by hereditary taints or by overwhelming emotions such as jealousy and lust that compel them to rape or kill, while Gide's are destabilized in moments of calm reflection when they ponder the counterfeit nature of human existence generally, including social life and religious faith, even love and art.

Gide's innovation of unstable character enabled him to assail contemporary values embedded in the national, imperial, religious, courtship, family, and liberal narratives that he also subverted and reworked in his own life. Born into a patriotic and pious French Protestant family, he abhorred nationalism and imperialism and became an atheist. He defied gender roles as the first prominent French intellectual to acknowledge his homosexuality in print. He married a cousin but never had sex with her and later intentionally sired a child out of wedlock to challenge the sanctity of marriage. His novels questioned patriarchal authority by mocking cold and menacing fathers, and he subverted family values in maintaining that he preferred his characters to be orphans, unmarried, and childless. His novels about crime challenged the liberal narrative of the French penal system that based punishment on clearly determined motives for crimes, which he believed to be an artificial juridical construct.

The ultimate instability of character is insanity. In *As I Lay Dying*, one of the fifteen narrators, Darl, is part of a dysfunctional family that journeys for nine days to bury their dead mother Addie, rotting and stinking in her coffin. Darl is the most insightful family member but also the most unstable, and in the end he is committed to an asylum after burning a barn, hoping to incinerate his mother's body inside and stop this morbid funeral journey. Along the way he thinks about personal identity in an increasingly deranged family without compass or direction: "How do our lives ravel out into the no-wind, no-sound, the weary gestures wearily recapitulant: echoes of old compulsions with no-hand on no-strings: in

sunset we fall into furious attitudes, dead gestures of dolls" (*AD*, 207). Faulkner uses unconventional syntax to capture an unstable mind in a family gone mad. Victorian families in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847) and Charles Dickens's *Dombey and Son* (1846–48) are full of anxiety and instability, but they are nonetheless central to individuals' and characters' motivations, actions, and identities; and it is unlikely that even under extreme distress they would be described the way Faulkner did as "old compulsions with no-hand on no-strings."

STATURE: A NEW KIND OF HERO

While the first four sections on presence, substance, structure, and stability center on more distinctively formal aspects of characters, the following sections on stature and purpose center more on an overall interpretation of the substance of characters. Stature is based on moral, aesthetic, and existential value judgments, while purpose is based on judgments about the goal orientation of a life.

For realists, stature was largely about moral character. Some realist novels have genuine villains such as Bill Sikes, Uriah Heep, Alec d'Urberville, Vautrin, and Javert. The modernist would-be villain Biberkopf is an alcoholic, burglar, rapist, pimp, murderer, and peddler of Nazi newspapers, but his stature is not defined by moral judgments about these activities. What defines it is rather his "hard, true, and enlightening existence," his hallucinatory insights in a confrontation with death as he goes mad in a prison asylum.²² Camus's Meursault in *The Stranger* (1942) is also a murderer, but that novel is conceived precisely to challenge moral judgmental categories altogether.

Other realist novels have virtuous heroes: Daniel Deronda is kind and helpful, Sydney Carton is ultimately loyal and self-sacrificing, Jean Valjean is strong and courageous. For modernists, stature is less about moral character and more about creativity and fulfillment. In assessing modernist protagonists, critics use the term *anti-hero* for one who lacks classical virtues of strength, beauty, courage, wisdom, and pride. As Lionel Trilling wrote: "Nothing is more characteristic of the literature of our time than the replacement of the hero by what has come to be called the anti-hero, in whose indifference to or hatred of ethical nobility there is presumed to lie a special authority."²³ But protagonists are never just anti. Modernist protagonists are rather neo-heroic, that is, admirable in new ways even when they are physically unattractive, sexually unconventional, impotent, cowardly, immoral, or even dead. The most famous one is a cuckold.

Clarissa Dalloway describes herself as having a “narrow pea-stick figure; a ridiculous little face, beaked like a bird’s,” but she also stabilizes the world around her emotionally and is especially sensitive to the feelings of others (*MD*, 10). In *Women in Love* (1920) Rupert Birkin is “very thin and hollow, with a ghastly look in his face,” although he is also emotionally inventive and determined to forge a thoughtful love with Ursula Brangwen (*WL*, 124). Franz Biberkopf has “pimpley cheeks, red lines on his forehead, a nose like a cucumber, and ghastly old goggle-eyes like a cow’s,” but he is also tenacious in the face of difficulties and loyal even to a crook who throws him out of a moving car (164).

The most sexually unconventional modernist female character is Molly Bloom in *Ulysses*, whose concluding monologue reveals a historically innovative view of the female body, sexual appetite, and gender role. In a letter Joyce explained that the “four cardinal points” of the final episode were “the female breasts, arse, womb and cunt expressed by the words *because*, *bottom* (in all senses bottom button, bottom of the class, bottom of the sea, bottom of his heart), *woman*, *yes*.”²⁴ His pairings suggest that sex is the center of her being: her breasts explain sexual attraction, her “arse” is the bottom of all things, her womb is woman’s central meaning, and her sex organ generates a continual desire for the orgasmic *yes*.

Molly’s breasts are not the perfect orbs idealized by Renaissance sonneteers but earthy organs for nourishing babies and preoccupying men. Earlier, Leopold viewed her “large soft bubs, sloping within her nightdress like a shegoat’s udder” (*U*, 51). In the final episode Molly wonders about the veins in them and marvels at how nipples get firmer from touch. When she was pregnant with Milly they were so full that Leopold had to suck her nipples to relieve the pressure. Molly is proud of her bottom but insulted by the way Leopold is attracted to her “wrong end.” The insult to her dignity from his fascination with these “2 lumps of lard” where women “havent 1 atom of any kind of expression” reaches a high point near the end of her monologue when she fantasizes about repaying his attraction with a crude gesture: “if he wants to kiss my bottom Ill drag open my drawers and bulge it right out in his face as large as life he can stick his tongue 7 miles up my hole” (639, 642). Molly reflects briefly on her womb with recollections of a previous pregnancy and the immediate onset of menses as she sits on her commode with blood “pouring out of [her] like the sea” (633). She is frequently aroused, capable of intense sexual feelings accompanied by fantasies as erotic as those of the gypsies and murderers that she fantasizes about seducing. She masturbates frequently and fantasizes about seducing young boys and priests and in particular Stephen Dedalus: “I wouldnt mind taking him in my mouth if

nobody was looking as if it was asking you to suck it so clean and white . . . even if some of it went down what its only like gruel or the dew" (638). Recalling her sexual pleasure earlier that afternoon with Blazes Boylan, she thinks: "I wished he was here or somebody to let myself go with and come again like that I feel all fire inside me or if I could dream it when he made me spend the 2nd time tickling me behind with his finger I was coming for about 5 minutes with my legs round him I had to hug him after O Lord I wanted to shout out all sorts of things fuck or shit or anything at all" (621). Such fantasies were thoroughly suppressed, if not non-existent, in the heroines of Dickens, Balzac, and Flaubert.

It took ten years for that literary revelation of the female body, sexual desire, and gender roles to germinate in Joyce's writing, as is suggested by the sexually explicit love letters he exchanged with Nora Barnacle in December of 1909. He left her in Trieste in order to help set up the first cinema theater in Dublin where he wrote back of his loneliness and deep love for her. Gradually, with her apparent epistolary cooperation, he began to share wild sexual fantasies. On December 2, he wrote: "Side by side and inside this spiritual love I have for you there is also a wild beast-like craving for every inch of your body, for every secret and shameful part of it, for every odour and act of it." He imagined "feeling your fingers fondling and tickling my ballocks or stuck up in me behind and your hot lips sucking off my cock while my head is wedged between your fat thighs, my hands clutching the round cushions of your bum and my tongue licking ravenously up your rank red cunt." That letter concludes with a reference to her as his "beautiful wild flower of the hedges," a description used several times in these letters and then three times in a slightly varied form as "a flower of the mountain" in the final climactic pages of the novel.²⁵ The next day he referred to her sexual assertiveness. "It was not I who first touched you long ago . . . It was you who slid your hand down down inside my trousers . . . and friggged me slowly . . . It was your lips too which first uttered an obscene word."²⁶ By December 9, he acknowledged her letter, "which you say is worse than mine," and went on to urge her to write more explicit things to help him masturbate, which she apparently did.²⁷ By the end of the month, the letters intensified in sexual explicitness to include fantasies of flagellation, fetishism, sodomy, scatology, voyeurism, and endlessly inventive styles of masturbation for both of them. While her letters from this period have not survived, what one can glean of their content from Joyce's responses suggests their enormous historical significance for Joyce's final depiction of female sexuality in *Ulysses*, because they evidently offered in writing the uninhibited expression of the sexual desires and activities of a woman,

which Joyce ten years later transposed into Molly's interior monologue that captures *the* sexually unconventional female character of the modernist canon.

As modernist women campaigned for rights and became sexually empowered, they confounded men's gender roles and patterns of loving. The men responded in inventive ways. That sexual challenge to men was particularly intensified by war. The classic mythology of war was that men do heroic deeds including defending women from sexual assault, but the reality of World War I was that men were degraded by trench life while women were cultivating themselves at home by raising children, going to school, taking "men's" jobs, and learning how to love more assertively and rewardingly. When the men came home reality slammed into myth, and male sexual prowess shrunk. In *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) Hemingway crafted one dramatic casualty of war with Jake Barnes, whose war injury allows him to still feel sexual desire but makes him unable to perform. He is obliged to cultivate a special sort of understanding in his relationship with Brett Ashley that transcends conventional jealousy during her affair with a matador. Jake is no conventional old and silly cuckold, and throughout he seems to be in control of their strained love relationship even though its consummation is impossible. His injury confounds not only the courtship narrative but also the nationalist narrative that came to disaster in the war.

Some characters lack conventional courage but have a new source of stature in compensatory traits. In Conrad's *Lord Jim* (1899–1900) the chief mate of the *Patna*, Jim, grew up with the heroic ideal of nineteenth-century sea romances, as "he saw himself saving people from sinking ships, cutting away masts in a hurricane, swimming through a surf with a line" (*LJ*, 6). But Jim acts cowardly when as an officer he jumps ship, abandoning 800 Muslim pilgrims when he thinks (it turns out incorrectly) that the ship is sinking. Conrad is not interested in passing moral judgments as Jim himself remarks: "There was not the thickness of a sheet of paper between the right and the wrong of this affair" (130). Judgments about courage are irrelevant to assessing Jim's stature, as a French officer on the ship that rescued the *Patna* notes: "one is no cleverer than the next man – and no more brave . . . Man is born a coward" (146). Conrad is interested rather in the workings of a mind processing such a mistake. He probes aesthetic and existential questions more than moral ones, that is, whether one lives an authentic and full life rather than a conventionally courageous or moral one.

Other modernist protagonists are downright immoral. Gide's protagonist Michel in *The Immoralist* (1902), in pursuing Arab boys, drags his tubercular wife to North Africa and ultimately causes her death. In *Heart of Darkness*

Kurtz is the spiritual leader of Congolese who engage in cannibalism and head-hunting, and he himself has no doubt committed numerous “horrors.” Mann’s Gustav von Aschenbach in *Death in Venice* (1912) fails to warn a family of a cholera epidemic in Venice because he has fallen in love with the family’s young son and does not want them to leave, even if staying endangers their lives. Although these protagonists violate moral standards, they have a stature that comes from expanding their horizons existentially as well as geographically by cultivating aspects of existence that were constrained by those standards. Their stature negates conventional heroism as well as morality, but their purpose is to transcend codes rather than negate them.

World War I further eroded the stature of courage, at least military courage, as the new weaponry turned hard-charging soldiers into cannon fodder. In *Under Fire* (1917) Henri Barbusse detailed the degrading impact of artillery on men’s bodies: a head flattened like a pancake, femurs and backbones sticking out of clothes, a man split apart from skull to hips. In his epic trilogy, *U. S. A.*, John Dos Passos devoted one section to the character who was celebrated as a symbol of heroism, the Unknown Soldier, with a literary collage of a Congressional document, President Warren Harding’s speech, and newspaper reports interlaced with accounts of the soldier’s medical exam, war experience, and preparation for burial.

MEDICAL EXAM: “they weighed you, measured you, looked for flat feet, squeezed your penis to see if you had clap, looked up your anus to see if you had piles, . . . charted your urine and your intelligence.”

WAR EXPERIENCE: “The shell had his number on it. . . the blood ran into the ground, the brains oozed out of the cracked skull and were licked up by the trenchrats, the belly swelled and raised a generation of bluebottle flies.”

PREPARATION FOR BURIAL: “In the reek of chloride of lime and the dead, they picked out the pine box that held all that was left of enie menie minie moe . . . containing what they’d scraped up of Richard Roe . . . how can you tell a guy’s a hundredpercent when all you’ve got’s a gunnysack full of bones.”²⁸

This collage of voices, points of view, and literary styles subverts the national narrative that the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier was intended to memorialize by focusing on the soldier’s meaningless death and the boiler-plate sentiments that accompany his burial. Dos Passos establishes the soldier’s dignity with other accounts of his places of residence, upbringing, and jobs, interlaced with his plaintive voice repeatedly asking, “*how I can get back to my outfit.*” The Unknown Soldier was always lost.

While Dos Passos's soldier was unknown, the best-known modernist character blatantly challenged conventional ideas about heroism. Joyce crafted Leopold Bloom to be a modern version of the handsome, athletic, virile, cunning, and courageous Odysseus from Homer's *The Odyssey*, who spent twenty years fighting in the Trojan Wars and sailing the Mediterranean, cavorting with nymphs and goddesses and battling mythical monsters before returning to his wife Penelope. In contrast, Joyce's soft, overweight advertising salesman Bloom is a pacifist landlubber who carries a rolled-up newspaper in place of wielding the Odyssean sword, brandishes his cigar in place of the Odyssean spear, and flosses his teeth in place of stringing the Odyssean bow.²⁹ Odysseus was the loyal son of Laertes, the protective father of Telemachus, and the devoted husband of Penelope; Bloom is in some ways a failure as a son, a father, and a husband, because his father committed suicide, his son is dead, and he has not had sexual intercourse with his wife in over ten years. He is introduced as a man of earthy tastes: "Mr Leopold Bloom ate with relish the inner organs of beasts and fowls . . . Most of all he liked grilled mutton kidneys which gave to his palate a fine tang of faintly scented urine" (*U*, 45). During a day of traveling around Dublin, he defecates,³⁰ worries about his hemorrhoids, runs clumsily on "flurried stork's legs," views his penis in a bath as a "languid floating flower," checks a statue of Venus in a museum to see if it has an anus, exits a pub gassy with the sound of his flatulence ("Pprpffrrppfff"), masturbates while gazing at a woman on the beach, hallucinates himself transformed into a woman, picks his toe-nail and smells the pickings, and buys soft porn for his wife before being cuckolded by her later that afternoon. Upon returning to Ithaca, Odysseus, assisted by Telemachus and two servants, killed Penelope's 108 suitors, appearing afterward "caked with blood like a mountain lion when he has gorged upon an ox," and had his house washed and purged with sulfur before he could settle into it. In contrast Bloom is "reluctant to shed blood" and upon entering his usurped home burns incense to clear the air. When he looks at the bed in which Molly has had sex with Boylan, he finds Boylan's form still impressed on the sheets and simply brushes away the crumbs of potted meat that the two had been eating. One post of Odysseus's solid bed that symbolizes his solid marriage he carved out of a living olive tree, while the brass quoits of Bloom's jiggly bed squeak "jigajiga" in his mind throughout the day as a reminder of his cuckoldry. Before getting into that bed next to Molly, he kisses "the plump mellow yellow smellow melons of her rump" (604). Bloom's marital status is particularly degraded in contrast to that of Odysseus, whose wife waited for him to return and became the prototypical faithful wife of Western literature.

But Bloom is no mere anti-hero. He is a new kind of hero with new valued qualities. He is sensitive to the feelings of others such as a blind stripling, an old woman wandering the streets, and a woman who has been in labor for three days. He goes out of his way to comfort Paddy Dignam's widow and is saddened by the starving Dedalus children. He spends much of his day trying to protect and be fatherly to Stephen Dedalus and come to terms with the death of his own infant son Rudy. He is imaginatively responsive to the sights and sounds of Dublin and to being Irish even as he is repeatedly treated as an outsider. Even one of his critics admits that "he's a cultured allroundman, Bloom is . . . there's a touch of the artist about old Bloom" (193). He ponders the meaning of life, the instability of personal identity, and the temptations of self-deception and hypocrisy. His mind swirls with a smattering of ideas about reincarnation (metempsychosis), botany (language of flowers), chemistry (drugs), death (funerals and coffins), optics (parallax), and journalism (especially advertising). He has emphatically ordinary credentials with an inelegant job and a circle of friends who make insensitive remarks about his father's suicide and his wife's sex appeal; and yet he is related allusively to Moses, Jesus, and Odysseus and emerges as an exceptional but still ordinary person. When he sees the "conquering hero" Boylan leave a bar to have sex with Molly, he remains an "unconquered hero," a description suggesting resiliency, specifically the equanimity that eventually displaces his gnawing jealousy. That such a historical break in conventions about the traditional hero was Joyce's intention is evident from a letter to his brother Stanislaus in which he maintained that "the whole structure of heroism is, and always was, a damned lie."³¹

Joyce captures Bloom's neo-heroic character with puns, neologisms, anagrams, lyricism, local wit, slang, foreign languages, songs, poems, classical allusions, parodies, stylistic imitations, stream-of-consciousness technique, a lexicon of rhetorical devices, and a dazzling deployment of metaphor. Bloom is the most fully realized character in modernist fiction, crafted with formal techniques that represent a sea change compared to those that prevailed in the preceding age.

PURPOSE: *BILDUNGSROMAN* TO *KÜNSTLERROMAN*

In realist novels characters either have a strong sense of purpose or are struggling to find one as are Pip, Dorothea Brooke, and Daniel Deronda. For realist characters purpose is grounded in the idea that individuals develop in accord with an organic model, as a tree grows from a seed,

through stages toward a goal. For some realist characters that teleology is directed by a providential spirit or deity who cares for his creatures and directs their lives. Thus a number of early realist novels are governed by a “providential aesthetic” and interpret coincidences as evidence of an overriding destiny.³² Christianity demanded singularity of purpose, modeled after Jesus who claimed that he was “the way.” Modernists challenged these views. In place of a continuous organic unfolding in life, they saw discontinuity, wrong turns, and dead ends. They viewed the organic model as romantic biology and interpreted the idea of an ultimate purpose in life as naive idealism. Coincidences were evidence not of providential design but of life’s inherent flukiness. Singularity of purpose in the search for Christian faith or a nation’s history was a myth. Modernists also rejected conceptions of personal progress as cumulative and viewed it rather as a process of repeated self-criticism and reconstruction. Thus Nietzsche in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* emphasized self-overcoming, an endless self-questioning analogous to an artist’s repeated self-corrections. His overman is the most fully realized self, a product of endless self-renewal.

The literary genre that realists used to dramatize the purposive development of characters was the *Bildungsroman*, typically the story of a young man who clashes with his family, leaves his home in the country for the city where he learns professional and social skills, overcomes difficulties in love, cultivates his sensibilities, and finally returns to his rural home prepared for mature adulthood, marriage, and social integration.³³ After Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship* (1795) other *Bildungsromane* followed: Dickens’s *David Copperfield* (1850), Adalbert Stifter’s *Indian Summer* (1857), and Gottfried Keller’s *Green Henry* (1855). Modernists replaced the youth who aspires to assume responsibilities of adulthood with one who is suspicious of conventional adult institutions. They did not render early romance as evolving into conventional love but rather rendered love and urges for sexual fulfillment as strongly physical and sometimes a failure or traumatic or even comical. They replaced concluding reintegration into family and society by chronic alienation from public values, and crafted characters who meander through a life of new undertakings and discoveries but no ultimate purpose.³⁴ Every main character in Dos Passos’s *Manhattan Transfer* (1925) wanders the streets of the city, enacting various destructive scenarios including divorce, suicide, abortion, alcoholism, bankruptcy, and murder. At the novel’s end, the reporter Jimmy Herf leaves Manhattan and in response to a question how far he is going answers, “I dunno . . . Pretty far.”

Modernists resisted a strong sense of purpose because they were skeptical about the institutions that directed lives toward shared goals: especially

marriage, family, school, community, and religion. World War I further eroded the authority of the national and imperial narratives that interpreted the lives of the men who fought in it as stories with an overall purpose. Modernist characters sought in these institutions rather partial fulfillment in limited projects with short-term goals. As the purposes of the courtship, family, national, imperial, capitalist, liberal, and religious narratives were challenged and recast, personal lives had to be reconstituted with different values and goals as well as new narrative strategies. The one undertaking that offered modernists an unambiguous purpose in life was art. While some modernists parodied the *Bildungsroman*, others replaced it with the *Künstlerroman* about the development of an artist as the model of a meaningful life.³⁵

Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* (1924) parodies the *Bildungsroman* with a story about an "ordinary" young man, Hans Castorp, who is orphaned at age seven and so does not have any primary family conflict to resolve. His *Bildung* begins not in the country but in a city, Hamburg, from where he retreats from society and his engineering studies to travel to a rural sanatorium in the Swiss Alps to visit his tubercular cousin Joachim and plunge into a society obsessed with disease and death. He falls in love with Clavdia Chauchat, whom he meets outside an x-ray room, and keeps as a memento a photograph of her tubercular lungs. Hans's high point is an epiphany in the Alpine snow when he resolves not to let the forces of death preside in his life, but for the remaining third of this long novel he stays at the sanatorium obsessively taking his temperature and doting on death. The purpose of the sanatorium is to make people get well, but he gets sick, and many of the inmates, including Clavdia and Joachim, die. He remains there from 1907 to 1914, as his life becomes increasingly devoid of purpose. The ultimate irony is that while the traditional *Bildungsroman* concludes with the hero learning to lead a meaningful and productive life, Mann's ends with his hero facing a meaningless and unproductive death, lost in the smoke and fire of World War I.

In *Jacob's Room* Woolf also parodies the *Bildungsroman* and the idea that life has some overall purpose. Formally, she uses the omniscient narrator of the conventional *Bildungsroman* who is capable of entering the mind of all characters, but at times she shifts to another narrator who is limited to guessing at Jacob's words and thoughts and who announces twice that "It is no use trying to sum people up" (*JR*, 31, 154). The novel's content further blocks teleology in Jacob's life. His father has died and his mother always seems to be elsewhere, so he does not originate from an explosive family situation that sets his life's course. He moves to London but acquires no

urban wisdom. Thus, early portents lead nowhere. The direction of his life is symbolized by the pathetic, circular motion of the crab in the bucket. Jacob has the opportunity of a fine education at Cambridge, but the dons are inadequate, and he makes little of the university. Jacob studies history and travels to Greece to see ancient sites, but when he tries to write out his thoughts he begins to draw a nose. Such non-sequiturs abound in this novel that repeatedly subverts any clear sense of Jacob's purpose and includes numerous sentences that stop in the middle with incomplete thoughts.

In a diary entry of January 26, 1920, Woolf noted a technique she used to achieve "looseness and lightness [and] . . . a gaiety – an inconsequence."³⁶ By reducing Jacob's motivation and purpose Woolf was free to explore the richness of his immediate everyday experience. She not only abandoned conventional motivations and explanations but rendered them useless, suggesting that one cannot explain even a single character, let alone a war. And if one cannot explain a war, then perhaps one might not fight it or, next time around, start it. Focusing on immediate experience allows her to reinterpret how family, school, work, love, and travel impact on characters free from the oversimplified scenarios of cause and effect as well as the values that underlay the major master narratives, in particular the national narrative and the "liberal rationalism" that unraveled in the war. Her novel undermines not just the content of the master narratives but the unexamined idolatry of the rational thought processes that sustain them.³⁷ Woolf assails the national narrative explicitly with a few images of sailors drowning and soldiers blasted to bits and with her final image of Jacob's mother holding up his shoes, suggesting that Jacob was lost in the trenches; but the most historically significant subversion and reworking of the national and other master narratives is the novel's parody of the *Bildungsroman* as a genre that falsified life as having a transcendent purpose, especially heroic sacrifice in the trenches for Country, King, and God.

Amid all the breakdown of Western values and institutions included in the subversion and reworking of the master narratives, one narrative remained unequivocally celebrated by a majority of modernists – the story of a life devoted to art. The *Künstlerroman* recounted such a purposeful life. Modernists produced a good number of them and projected their personal struggle into characters: Mann into Aschenbach in *Death in Venice*, Lawrence into Paul Morel in *Sons and Lovers* (1913), Gide into Edouard in *The Counterfeiters*, Hesse into Goldmund in *Narcissus and Goldmund* (1930), and Joyce into Stephen in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.³⁸

The name of Joyce's protagonist, Stephen Dedalus, references the artistic vocation that shapes his life. *Dedalus* recalls *Daedalus*, the mythic "old

artificer” who invents wings to flee his prison. The novel ends as young Stephen takes over from the third-person narrator with a first-person journal where he makes his final announcement that he has found purpose in life – “to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race.” On the way to that end Stephen encounters many restraints, as he explains to a friend: “When the soul of a man is born in this country there are nets flung at it to hold it back from flight. You talk to me of nationality, language, religion. I shall try to fly by those nets” (*PA*, 179). That formulation reveals the dialectic between prison and escape that structures Stephen’s artistic evolution. His art will enable him to fly by, that is, fly past, those nets, but it will also take shape as he learns to fly by means of them.³⁹ Stephen pushes to become an artist by refusing to serve the ensnaring institutions of the Irish nation, the Gaelic language revival, the Catholic Church, and (elsewhere) the family that the nets signify. While Joyce addresses the nationality issue in heated discussions about Charles Parnell and Irish Home Rule, the central institutional target is religion.

The grip of religion tightens after Stephen goes to prostitutes, and a priest prompts him to renounce his sinful ways and consider joining the priesthood. To terrify Stephen about the punishment for sins of the flesh, Father Arnall presents a series of lengthy sermons on hell. The unrepentant sinner, Arnall threatens, is thrust into the grave to rot and be devoured by rats. Each of his senses is assaulted: sight, by eternal darkness, hearing by howls and execrations, smell by a reeking sewer that produces an intolerable stench “multiplied a millionfold” with rotting human fungus, taste by nauseating foul matter and suffocating filth, and touch by the fire of hell that burns furiously in absolute darkness. Blood boils in the veins; eyes flame like molten balls. Arnall’s sermons are the most forceful literary assault on religion in the modernist canon. By having a priest ask young boys to imagine such torment for eternity, Joyce has his readers consider what kind of a religion could think up such a scenario of eternal damnation, elaborate it with such vivid detail as a moral compass, and pound it into young minds at their most impressionable age. At the end of the sermons, Stephen reconsiders the meaning of his sexual desire, which soon becomes the mainspring for his vocation as an artist.

The argument of this book is that modernism was a subversion and reworking of nine master narratives and an unqualified celebration of a tenth, which together embodied the values and institutions that defined the history of the early twentieth century. The artistic narrative was the only one that emerged with its stature fully intact, aside from stories of failed artists such as Otto Kreisler or successful artists who failed for other reasons

such as Aschenbach, and the single instance of the dadaists' assault on artists who produced war propaganda during World War I. Most *Künstlerromane* told of success, or at least potential success, such as the one Joyce portrayed in *Portrait* as essentially a struggle between a dispiriting religious narrative that recruited followers by instilling fear of hell and an inspiring narrative that led Stephen to resolve to become an artist.