FROM RHETORIC TO DECONSTRUCTION
Lecture Eleven: Fiction

Common meaning of **fiction**: "an invented story" = not **fact** (< Latin facere [factus]: make/create; fingere [fictus]: invent). NB. What passes for fiction today may have been taken for fact in the past (*euhemerism*: the view of myth as story based upon actual reality < Euhemerus, 4th-3rd c. BC). In broadest sense: any form of **narrative**; practically: **novel, romance, novella/novelette, short story**. The concern of this lecture: the novel (& romance).

HISTORY
Something like the novel known to antiquity. Petronius, *Satyricon* (AD 1st c.); Apuleius, *The Golden Ass* (AD 2nd c.); Heliodorus, *Aethiopica* (AD 3rd c.). Loose, episodic structure, resting on sequence of adventures; it may have had some influence upon the rise of the modern European novel in the 16th & 17th centuries (the picaresque novel < picaro [rogue]). Landmarks in the history of the novel: Rabelais, *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (1532-34) and Cervantes, *Don Quixote* (1605-15, translated into English as early as 1616). *DQ* had a profound influence on the English novel (Fielding and Sterne).

The rise of the novel to "respectability": in *DQ* canon's defence of romances of chivalry on the ground that heroic epics may be written in prose as well as in verse; Fielding on his *Joseph Andrews* (1742): a "comic epic in prose." Hegel: the epic = about man at peace with society; the novel = about man in conflict with society (the poetry of the heart in conflict with the prose of circumstances, i.e. ideal & real are incompatible).

ELEMENTS OF FICTION

Character
The most important requisite of fiction. The theme a mere abstraction if not enacted and made apparent in individual lives. "Enactment": the dynamic relationship of the fictional characters. Ideally, characters interact not only with each other, but with the situations in which they are caught; those situations act upon them and in turn, they act upon the situation.

☛Marlow in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* finds himself in mysterious Africa as a direct consequence of both his adventurousness and his need for a job; mysterious Africa gives him self-knowledge, making it impossible, thereby, that he should be trapped in the same situation again.

Novel of character: character gives rise to incident and incident shapes character; **novel of incident**: characters enter the fictional reality distinctly drawn and stay as they are throughout. The relative importance of character-analysis and social panorama; in novels of character, the external—social or natural—reality tends to be subordinated to the requirements of character-portrayal while in novels of incident the principal role of character is to draw within the work's compass a representative section of the social world in which the novel is set. Describing people in fiction as **round** and **flat** largely rests on this difference in orientation.

☛The traditional idea of character in fiction rests on **mimetic** assumptions. The **semiotic** view denies that fictional characters are imitations of people in real life or have a person-like quality, which can be understood in psychological or psychoanalytical terms. "[A]s segments of a closed text, characters are at most patterns of recurrence, motifs which are continually recontextualized in other motifs. In semiotic criticism, characters dissolve" (Weinsheimer 1979). This claim, however, rests on shaky foundations, as we can vividly recall any number of fictional characters in novels without remembering a single word of the text in which they were created (Chatman 1978).

Story
The most ancient element; mere sequence of events ("and then… and then") intended to gratify the listener's/reader's curiosity ("What will happen next?"). ("He walked fast. He arrived home before sunset"). The picaresque novel often conforms to this pattern. "Life in time" represented (E. M. Forster in *Aspects of the Novel* [1927]).

Plot
When there is a causal link between the events that make up the story ("As he walked fast, he arrived home before sunset"). "Life by values" represented (Forster). Aristotle: **plot is "complete" & "whole". "A whole is that which has a beginning, a middle, and an end. A beginning is that which does not itself follow anything by causal necessity, but after which something naturally is or comes to be. An end, on the contrary, is that which itself naturally follows some other thing, either by necessity, or as a rule, but has nothing following it. A middle is that which follows something as some other thing follows it. A well-constructed plot, therefore, must neither begin nor end at haphazard, but conform to these principles"** (*Poetics*, VII). Paul Ricoeur: **two dimensions of time** (1) **episodic** ("and then and then") > an open-ended series of events; (2) **configurational**, which makes the succession of events into significant wholes > **plot**, which may be translated into one thought; **the configuration of plot superimposes the sense of an ending on the open-endedness of mere succession** ("The Human Experience of Time and Narrative" [1978]).

☛Modernist attempts (Joyce & Woolf) to abolish story & plot unsuccessful. Woolf: "**if a writer were a free man and not a slave [to convention]….there would be no plot, no comedy, no tragedy, no love interest or catastrophe in the accepted style**" ("Modern Fiction" [1919]).

Changing patterns of plot reflect changing attitudes to reality. 17th to 19th c. (Defoe to early Dickens): the underlying belief is that the world is of a certain order > **organic plots**, in which events move towards resolution of conflict; resolution (reunion, marriage) favourable to (good) main characters (poetic justice dispensed); unifying factors inhere in the subject matter; **inorganic plots**: when faith in divine dispensation weakens or disappears and perception of life as an endless series of crises gains currency (19th & 20th centuries, mature Dickens to postmodernism); **open**- or **broad-ended** novels, with nothing resolved, story/plot--a series of events with a meaning—rejected as a distortion of life because life has no meaning (Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady* [1881], the novels of V. Woolf). This development anticipated by Cervantes.

Plot and experience

External (adventure) and/or internal experience. Shift from external (or from balance of external & internal) to internal experience in modernism. Walter Pater: experience is only a group of impressions—colour, odour, texture—in the mind of the observer. **"Everyone of those impressions is the impression of the individual in his isolation, each mind keeping as a solitary prisoner its own dream of a world"** ("Conclusion" to *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* [1873]). Echoes of this in H. James (experience is "the atmosphere of the mind"—"The Art of Fiction" [1884]) and V. Woolf (an ordinary mind on an ordinary day receives a myriad impressions, "an incessant shower of innumerable atoms" > **"life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end"**—"Modern Fiction"). Consider hero of James's *The Ambassadors* (1903) at fashionable party in Paris: "He had an amount of experience out of any proportion to his adventures." The tendency to represent "the inward world of thought and feeling" culminates in **stream of consciousness** (uninterrupted flow of thought and feeling in works of Joyce & Woolf).

Time

(1) The time of the clock: external or **objective time**, dominant in the older type of fiction (the time of external experience). (2) The time of the mind, internal or **subjective time**, to be found in modern psychological/stream-of-consciousness novels. Subjective & objective time represented simultaneously by Joyce & Woolf (objective time [one day] framing the portrayal of the minds in which time is subjective, i.e. unlimited—*Ulysses* [1922] & *Mrs Dalloway* [1925]). **Time-shift** (broken chronology: moving back & forth in the objective time of fiction) to suggest absence of linearity in our construction of meaning, as in the novels of Joseph Conrad.

Narrator and point of view, focalization

Who talks to the reader, the author or his *persona* (narrator) in 1st or 3rd person or ostensibly no one? Plato & Aristotle already aware of the problem (Socrates pointing out to Adeimantus how at the beginning of *The Iliad* Homer speaks first in his own name as poet—this is simple narration; then he takes the person of the aged priest Chryses, which is a case of imitation—*Republic,* III; cf. also *Poetics* on the same question). Not so much concern with the point of view as with the **narrative situation**. The evolution of the novel seen by the New Criticism as evolution towards greater objectivity which was accompanied by the exploration of the potential for objectivity that various points of view had. Varying degrees of "objectivity" to be achieved by

(1) **omniscience** (all <u>narration</u> [James's "picture"] & <u>dialogue</u>, but not yet scene with its detailed particulars of setting; <u>narration</u>/<u>scene</u>; <u>neutral</u> when there is no direct intrusion by the narrator, yet omniscience because even scene is presented as perceived by narrator). **Telling** and **showing**—narration and scene

(2) **limited (single) point of view** (<u>selective omniscience</u>: consciousness of main character used as a filter through which sense of the world is conveyed, cf. Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* [1916]; <u>multiple selective omniscience</u>: point of view shifting from one character to another without narratorial intrusion, cf. V. Woolf's novels). In the case of first-person narrators: **narrator-agent** (the "I" as protagonist—cf. Marlow in *Heart of Darkness* [1899]) & **narrator-observer** (the "I" as witness—cf. Marlow *Lord Jim* [1900])

(3) the **dramatic mode** and the **camera**

☛In more up-to-date terminology: **diegesis** (the narrative/story); narrator either **extra-diegetical** or **intra-diegetical**; first-person singular narrator: **homo-diegetical**.

☛It has been proposed that instead of the not fully adequate **point of view**, technical analysis of narrative prose should look for the finer distinctions of **narration** (and thus **narrator**—the question of "who speaks?") and **focalization** (the question of "who sees?"). **Narrator** and **focalizer** may be one and the same person, but they may also be different: the omniscient narrator's vision or perspective may coincide with that of a character, who will then be focalizer; the object of attention will be the **focalized**, while the speaking voice will firmly belong to the narrator. (See Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse* [1982], publ. in French in 1972).