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1
Introduction

In his narrative case study, ‘Fräulein Elizabeth Von R.’, in the 1895 collection *Studies on Hysteria*, Freud expresses anxiety about his use of the techniques of fictional narrative in developing the case study method. These techniques are necessary, he argues, to explain the process of uncovering the aetiology of hysterical symptoms. The implication is that hysterical symptoms themselves deploy the human impulse for mediating trauma and anxiety through narrative:

> Like other neuro-pathologists, I was trained to employ local diagnoses and electro-prognosis, and it still strikes me myself as strange that the case histories I write should read like short stories and that, as one might say, they lack the serious stamp of science. I must console myself with the reflection that the nature of the subject is evidently responsible for this, rather than any preference of my own.
> (Freud, 1895b, p. 160)

Throughout his early work, Freud equivocates around his decision to abandon empirical and quantitative methods of analysis in favour of the narrative case study model. He worries also about his own and his readers’ use of these texts as prose fiction. At this same historical moment, English language fiction was developing its mediation of the experience of subjectivity through what critics had begun to call ‘psychological’ fiction. In both arenas, the development of the modern idea of subjectivity is articulated through a self-conscious aesthetics focussed on the apprehension of unstable and unreadable female figures at the centre of narrative. For Freud, these are sometimes hysterical women patients, and sometimes maternal figures for his male subjects of the primal scene.
The intersection of these two impulses, fictional psychology and psychological fiction, forms the ground of enquiry for the present volume. The following chapters explore the use of inscrutable feminine will and desire as a mediation of the experience of modernity at the intersection of these two forms of narrative. Ultimately, these textual relations structure the emblematic modernist moment in which James Joyce’s Gabriel Conroy demonstrates his subjective alienation by asking himself, ‘what is a woman, standing on the stairs in the shadow, listening to distant music, a symbol of’ (Joyce, 1914, p. 260). The relational gendering of the experience is not accidental but reflects the specific development of subjective narrative consciousness across the history of prose fiction. The philosophical notion of the human individual, articulated through the Enlightenment project, is rearticulated in relation to changes in capitalist culture which place woman at the centre of dramatic shifts in material and legal agency. These combine in the later nineteenth century with philosophical and scientific questions regarding the nature of consciousness in material relation. By the end of the century a pronounced subjective turn in Western culture places one half of these questions under erasure. These effects are refracted through various movements in the novel, where female consciousness becomes the signal location of the unstable experience of modernity. The current volume traces one thread of that history, in the decades leading up to the moment of modernist fracture described in Joyce’s ‘The Dead’.

This study owes a great deal to the body of critical work done over the past half-century on female fiction writers, both Victorian and modernist. The present book is concerned, however, with the function of central female characters in the work of later nineteenth-century male authors. The works examined here are overtly concerned with the problem of (Anglo) female agency within the social context of political reform and early feminist activism. The novel as a cultural form is coincident with an increasing sense of female public agency in European culture. This is not accidental, nor is its coincidence with the development of the bourgeois economy and with the spread of empire, as Ian Watt and Nancy Armstrong have demonstrated. This work also takes as a given that women writers have been central to the development of the form since its inception. The following chapters are concerned with the manner in which the cultural problem of feminine agency and an increasing sense of female subjectivity are central to the development of aesthetics, psychological fiction and eventually canonical Modernism at the end of the nineteenth century. More specifically, they examine
the manner in which central female characters, written as semi-distant subjects, locate these changes for male authors.

Novelists such as Wilkie Collins, Anthony Trollope, George Gissing, Henry James and E.M. Forster were, for a variety of reasons, far more involved in working through the problem of feminine agency than their male counterparts during feminism’s second wave. The fragmented and unstable position of woman as the unreachable object of subjectivity forms a tension which lies at the very centre of modern culture in the West. In these novels she is both a representation of real women in the social field and a fantasmatic projection which mediates the crisis of modern (male) consciousness. This vacillating relationship is central to the manner in which modernity organises itself through literary form.

An anxiety regarding shifts in the economic, legalistic and symbolic status of woman, widely considered to be central to the *fin de siècle* moment, characterises all of these narratives. The female figure here somehow performs a signifying function with regard to modernity—that is, with regard to shifts in economic, legalistic and symbolic relations *per se*. She ‘stands in for’ particular instabilities and anxieties, and yet, at the same time, she is clearly never wholly separate from them, never a discrete ‘symbol of’ anything. Thus the status of these female characters as metaphorical is troubled. What, then, is the relationship between the representation of material shifts in culture and the signifying function of fictional female figures associated with those shifts? In essence, this begs an old question about literature, ideology and ‘real’ life. In the later nineteenth century, this was most often discussed, in science, philosophy and literature, as the problematic relation between subjective consciousness and material object-relation. What is particularly promising and rich about these narratives and the period in which they were produced is that these central female figures stand as mediations of that very question, within the developing form and structure of the English novel.

In *Marxism and Literature*, Raymond Williams, following Louis Althusser to some extent, makes the important point that we cannot read art (literature) as a simple reflection of the culture of which it, itself, forms a part. Literature can mediate, it can allow us to obtain a partial consciousness of the material forces that shape us, but it can never be separate enough from those forces to objectively reflect them. One part of culture cannot reflect the whole in which it is embedded. In the narratives under examination here, the female figure embodies this very problematic. James’ Isabel Archer is specifically marked as an experiment on the part of both author and authorial character (Ralph Touchett).
What will happen if she has economic self-determination? How will this affect her ability to instrumentalise the desires which define her? As a kind of ‘new woman’, Isabel is the perfect figure for this experiment. She is marked by the shifting relationship between liberation and containment that characterises modernity itself, and also as a semi-distinct other from the subject position of author and focalising character. This effect of instability and partial separation characterises all of the central female figures under examination here, whether the specifically fictionised women characters of the novels, the mythic universal ‘woman’ of Freud’s family romance or the imagined female reader of popular fiction.

The relation between the economic and the legalistic individual is peculiarly present in the debates around the economic agency and political representation of women which raged in Britain in the 1850s, 1860s and 1870s. The lasting effects of what may retroactively be called a feminist movement form a particular background for the novels of Collins, Trollope and Gissing. Indeed, law itself is the narrative reordering of the problem of individual agency in the material world, with which it becomes increasingly preoccupied (alongside questions of nation and representation) throughout the nineteenth century. Characters such as Trollope’s Lizzie Eustace exist in a double relationship with the law, both as perfect embodiments of the potential for enlightened liberation and as a troubling excess which rational law cannot contain. The same tensions which Lizzie embodies in terms of political and social law, Freud’s ‘woman’ manifests as a location within symbolic law, the paradoxical problem of containment and excess.

There are any number of psychoanalytic readings which seek to decipher the gendered and sexualised meanings of all of the novels considered here. These readings often view texts as linguistic constructions—that is, as opportunities for symbolic substitution. Yet they must extrapolate, whether they admit it or not, onto a psychically driven sexuality grounded in the material body. These women can only work as fantastic constructions in the symbolic field of narrative if they bear some relation to the conscious actors living in material bodies who apprehend them. At the same time their existence as fantastic projections rests within an economic politics of publication and reading involving real agents in culture. To separate out the symbolic function of these characters from the material mediations of the novels in which they exist is to create a falsely universal, a kind of utopian, symbolic. For this reason the methodology employed in the following chapters views the novels, wherever possible, in the context of the aesthetic criticism,
political debate and advertising with which they were surrounded in their original serial publication.

On the other hand, materialist readings sometimes locate texts histori­cally as direct evidence of social relations. This methodology is also problematic. Analyses based on identity can fall into the trap of reading texts as representations of an actual social field which existed unproblematically at the time they were written. Texts are thus treated as primary historical evidence in all manner of troubling ways. To some extent, critical constructions of both the ‘new woman’ and the ‘sensation novel’ fall into this trap, taking as they do contemporary, reactionary constructions out of periodicals and turning them into critical categories. In fact, these novels were constituted within a material field apprehended through ideology and must be read as dynamic mediations between ideas and material culture. This kind of mediation, in one sense, defines modernity. In its most complex articulation, this was how the social realist project defined itself. Positivist arguments against ‘metempiricism’ were formulated in this way. The female characters in these novels are perfectly situated to embody that very dynamic between meaning and existence. It is this, I would argue, that constitutes their fascination for these writers.

The relation between symbolic and materialist readings is perhaps most evident around the question of female sexuality. The eponymous jewels of Trollope’s *The Eustace Diamonds* may, as William Cohen argues, in some way stand in for the central character’s sexuality, but they are particularly suited to do so because they also represent an unstable relationship between public and private wealth. This unstable relationship is sexuality. Lizzie Eustace’s female sexuality is not originary, it doesn’t precede the culture in which it is constituted. Whether and to what extent Freud understood this point is a subject of continuing debate. It is, however, certain that the unifying tendencies of psychoanalytic theory, in which gender is an absolute (whether symbolic or material), are constituted by a distinct aporia around the specificities of material culture. The many scenes in which male characters in these novels gaze at printed images of women similarly locate the material context of gendered object-relation.

As signs, women have been imagined not to embody meaning in themselves but to stand in for it. As early work by Teresa de Lauretis (1984) has it, the job of the female is to represent a place in the ‘traditional plot’ rather than any set of actions. She is somewhere the hero journeys to, somewhere wealth and lineage pass through. To some degree this is overly simple. The female Gothic novel and other romance
forms have been exploring the particular problem of female subjectivity since the eighteenth century, as discussed in Chapter 2. Yet the problem of representation persists. In Joyce's short story, in Rita Felski's work, and in my own preceding discussion, certain slippages around words such as 'symbol', 'sign' and 'representation' highlight a problem with the female figure as both a material actor in culture and a metaphorical function within various narratives of modernity, including aesthetics and psychoanalysis.

For these late-nineteenth-century male authors, the problem appears somehow new, overtly startling and tied up with national economics. Women no longer represent a stable 'place' in the plot. They are no longer passive conduits for wealth and meaning. A complex web of interrelated values—in the market, the family and the nation—begins to shift. Their troubling exercise of will threatens the meaning and stability of family, law and nation. These things most often hinge on their position as leaky conduits for the transfer of material wealth and/or (particularly for Trollope and Forster) national identity. Likewise, a diversion in the flow of family wealth is the condition for Isabel Archer's self-determination, tied by James to the meaning of her existence as a gendered individual posed between a modern new republic and a troubled monarchy. This position, between national, economic and subjective instability, makes these female characters particularly rich locations of socially enacted will and desire as subjective interiority.

Gender, aesthetics and the material

The instability of this relationship, the sense of shift embodied here, defines the modern relationship of self and identity _per se_. Latterly, it has been fashionable to characterise this sense of subjective fragmentation and instability as 'postmodern'. In fact it has been a marked characteristic of modernity since at least the era of Romanticism. In the mid-1980s Frederic Jameson, Francois Lyotard, Andreas Huyssen and others concretised the postmodern in critical theory by reiterating particular views of modernity. Jean Baudrillard presents modernity as a mythic, ideological formulation of change and crisis which expresses, but doesn’t constitute, any historical or material change: ‘As a canonical morality of change, it opposes itself to the canonical morality of tradition… though linked to historical and structural crisis, modernity is really only a symptom of it’ (Baudrillard, 1985, p. 63). Still he, a thinker in the left tradition, locates modernity's origin in changing relations of production and power associated with the 'destruction of customs and traditional culture'. These
changes ‘will mark modernity, in decisive fashion, as a social practice and way of life articulated on change and innovation—but also on anxiety, instability, continual mobilization, shifting subjectivity, tension, crisis…’ (pp. 65–6). This is a reiteration of the ‘everlasting uncertainty and agitation’ which, for Marx and Engels, characterised the bourgeois epoch (Marx and Engels, 1967, p. 45).

Modernity is characterised by these problematic relations between individual and culture, by a new preoccupation with the sense of self experienced by individual human subjects and the relation of that self to a newly constituted public sphere. The question which has preoccupied critics since Marx is: what is the relation between these things? In the words of the *Communist Manifesto* that provide the title of Marshall Berman’s influential study of modernity,

> All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions are swept away, all newly formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face, with sober senses, his real conditions of life and his relations with his kind.

(Marx and Engels, 1967, p. 46)

More on universal and specific gendered pronouns elsewhere. For now we can say that economic and psychic relations are linked through the sense of crisis in tradition and morality which accompanies industrialisation. Any reordering of the material world relates to a concomitant ordering of the human consciousness which is formed within it, regardless of the specifics of cause and effect. As Terry Eagleton puts it, ‘social transformation… requires as one of its prerequisites a changed human subject, yet… such reconstituted subjects are as much the product of social transformation as the precondition of it’ (Eagleton, 1995, p. 21).

From the outset, the modern philosophical project, in sweeping away the first principle of divine order, necessitated a set of negotiations around the location of individual consciousness. The new individual subject of Enlightenment law, politics and philosophy was the expression of troubling questions about, and prolonged meditations on, the nature of subjectivity itself. Eventually these questions resulted in psychoanalysis, but, in developing his own theory of the process of human subjectivity, Freud was simply responding to a set of questions which had been present for 200 years, and certainly articulated by Marx 50 years prior. Psychoanalysis, then, is an aggravated symptom of
modernity, and the character of its universality is the effect of Freud's eschewal of its social and historical context.

Before psychoanalysis, modernity expressed itself in the form of the novel. In the history of long fiction the psychological effect which is characteristic of modern life experienced its most pronounced development. Though he may oppose fiction to medical narrative, Freud cannot do without the techniques of novelistic fiction because they are the fundamental cultural medium through which the modern self is constructed. This utility is discussed at length in Chapter 7.

Within the narratives of both fiction and psychoanalysis, the central female figure focusses the material and psychological tensions present in the culture at large. Critics such as Rachel Bowlby, Huyssen and Felski have explored the notion that ‘woman’ is associated with ‘mass culture’ from the mid-nineteenth century. The presence of the unstable and inscrutable female subject in the most remembered narratives of this period, across all cultural registers, expresses both the problematic relationship between representation and the real—because the female figure reveals the location of knowing as problematic—and the shift in the dynamics of will and desire that defines industrial and consumer culture in the modern period.

These relations become more pronounced throughout the nineteenth century. At the same time the novel ascends the cultural ladder and acquires the status of art, enacting a distinct shift from its original status during the period of its early development. We might see the eighteenth century as an era of playful experiment in defining the form of novelistic narration. The novel’s position, excluded from the register of high culture and developed in relation to a gendered popularism associated with the bourgeois reader, left it open to all manner of exuberant experiment throughout this early period. Writers such as Jane Austen, at the end of this century, solidified ideological mediations of form and style, not accidentally concomitant with the successful ascendancy of the *haute bourgeoisie*. The continued fetishism of the anti-Romanticist Austen in both critical and popular culture is highly significant in this regard. Most important here is the relation of the formation of a new class structure inextricable, in writers like Austen, from the negotiation of (upper-class) female self-determination.

This view of the history of the novel as mediation of material relations of gender is very different from modernist and postmodernist critiques which (albeit usefully) read femininity and desire as defining cultural attributes of mass modernity. Felski’s analysis in *The Gender of Modernity* is important in that it views femininity as a cultural force
rather than an attribute of biological women. If we revisit the question of aesthetics and gender with regard to the writers examined in this monograph, we may uncover some driving forces which have shaped not only the place of women in the novel but also dominant critical constructions of Modernism, with regard to the relation between gender and material life. The novel, in its later nineteenth-century serial context, was understood as part of a public sphere in which various political, economic and social problems currently at issue might be explored and mediated. Many important critiques of Jürgen Habermas’ construction of the public sphere as democratic point to its exclusions, with regard to gender and empire (Habermas, 1992; Crossley and Roberts, 2004). The periodical culture centred in London during the nineteenth century was by no means an exhaustively democratic arena. At the same time, it is clear that the novels of this period were embedded within a legal, social, political, aesthetic and philosophical conversation, which included in all these discursive expressions a desire to work out the problem of the subject in social relation. The situation of these novels in periodicals alongside political, scientific and aesthetic discussions is not incidental. Canonical Modernism moved the novel into the realm of high art at roughly the same time first publication of novels moved singly into volume form. Between these two changes the public function of the novel was to some extent lost. It is important to note that this happened before the advent of other forms of ‘mass media’.

In his discussion of the Aesthetic Movement in *Culture and Society*, Raymond Williams notes first of all the relation between fin de siècle aestheticism and the longer Romantic tradition of sensibility as response to modernity. Most importantly he uncovers the aesthete’s radical state of contemplation, of ‘being’ and ‘becoming’ as a repudiation of the social real which separates art from its material context: ‘the reduction of a whole process, characterized by its movement and its interactions, to a fragmentary, isolated product’ (Williams, 1958, p. 171). Interestingly, the reading of Gissing which immediately follows this discussion of the Aesthetic Movement does not view the novelist in relation to it, but rather focusses on Gissing’s critique of Victorian relations of literary production in *New Grub Street*. Williams also produces an interesting dismissal of Gissing’s ‘new woman’ novels of the 1890s: ‘His novels after 1891 (he had remarried in 1890) are perhaps better, but in many ways less interesting, than his work in the 1880s…’ (p. 177). We are left to imagine the relation between second marriages and ‘less interesting’ novels, which isn’t explicated.
These points and elisions are, I would argue, related. The doctrine of aesthetics is a component of the overall structure of feeling of this period in which the relations among artistic culture, mass production and increasingly self-aware subjects of labour were worked out in a variety of ways. Viewing these responses as distinct misses the historical factors which drive them. The Aesthetic Movement was in part a class-based defence of high culture, of the *raison d’être* of the leisured class, whose role was to produce and contemplate the beautiful. As both Huyssen and Felski point out, mass production and an increasingly feminised reading/consuming public are set against the fine singularity of high aesthetic culture. Yet at the same time romanticised aesthetic subjectivity is evident as a protest against capitalist culture from the perspective of working people in Gissing’s fiction.

Gissing’s prose is arguably less ‘finely wrought’ than, say, James’. He is more influenced by the social project of naturalism. Yet his are responses to the same problems viewed from a very different class position by Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde. He sometimes produces a solidly Paterian response to the beautiful. For both Gissing and more ‘aesthetic’ writers such as James, an uneasy apprehension of the female subject allows an examination of the relations between aesthetic desire and material life. The contemplative (male) subject of aesthetics must have his object, a beautiful thing on which to turn his gaze, and a long tradition of culture, embodied for example, in Pater’s discussion of the *Giaconda*, writes this object as the inscrutable woman. This inscrutable woman also sits at the centre of the late-nineteenth-century English novel, where she embodies, however, not just the aesthetic object but also the slippery subject of work, wealth and consumption. Gissing’s Emily Hood is one embodiment of these relations. She sits both structurally and symbolically as the unreachable object of Wilfred Athel’s desire, driving narrative, character and reader identification. Fiction’s formal mediation of human consciousness, of subjective interiority (borrowed by Freud for the narrative case study of psychoanalysis), is always bound up with its narrative function as mediator of the social world. The interdependence of these two functions in the novel places its central female characters as the location of tensions between aesthetics and social/material life. By the first decade of the twentieth century, the relation between gender and aesthetic pretension was so pronounced as to enable Forster to launch a successful career by lampooning it.

Felski reads the Aesthetic Movement as a subversive, subcultural (and also covertly misogynist) occupation of femininity by male artists and
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