

22 The Experimental Novel

THE EXPERIMENTAL NOVEL

Bridesley, Birmingham.

Two o'clock. Thousands came back from dinner along streets. "What we want is go, push," said works manager to son of Mr Dupret. "What I say to them is - let's get on with it, let's get the stuff out."

Thousands came back to factories they worked in from their dinners.

"I'm always at them but they know me. They know I'm a father and mother to them. If they're in trouble they've but to come to me. And they turn out beautiful work, beautiful work. I'd do anything for 'em and they know it."

Noise of lathes working began again in this factory. Hundreds went along road outside, men and girls. Some turned in to Dupret factory.

Some had stayed in iron foundry shop in this factory for dinner. They sat round brazier in a circle.

"And I was standing by the stores in the doorway with me back to the door into the pipe shop with a false nose on and green whiskers. Albert inside was laughin' and laughin' again when 'Tis 'im comes in through the pipe shop and I sees Albert draw up but I didn't take much notice till I heard, 'Ain't you got nothin' better to do Gates but make a fool of yourself?' And 'e says to Albert, 'What would you be standin' there for Milligan?' And I was too surprised to take the nose off, it was so sudden. I shan't ever forget that."

HENRY GREEN *Living* (1929)

"THE EXPERIMENTAL NOVEL" was a phrase coined by Zola to claim some equivalence between his sociologically oriented fiction and scientific investigation of the natural world, but this comparison will not stand up to scrutiny. A work of fiction is not a reliable method of verifying or falsifying a hypothesis about society, and "experiment" in literature, as in other arts, is more usefully regarded as a radical approach to the perennial task of "defamiliarization" (see Section 11). An experimental novel is one that ostentatiously deviates from the received ways of representing reality - either in narrative organization or in style, or in both - to heighten or change our perception of that reality.

The second and third decades of the twentieth century, the heyday of modernism, were notable for experimental fiction - Dorothy Richardson, James Joyce, Gertrude Stein and Virginia Woolf are just a few names that come to mind. One writer's experiments, however, are quickly appropriated and put to different uses by others, so it is usually difficult to attribute the discovery of a particular technique to a single author. The opening of Henry Green's *Living* is unmistakably of its period in method. The abrupt shifting of the discourse from narrative to dialogue and back to narrative, without smooth transitions or explanatory links, is analogous to, and perhaps directly influenced by, the cubist compositions of Picasso, the cinematic jump-cuts of Eisenstein, the fragments T. S. Eliot shored against his ruins in "The Waste Land". Fragmentation, discontinuity, montage, are pervasive in the experimental art of the nineteen-twenties.

But there is one feature of *Living* that was an original innovation of Henry Green's, and that is the systematic omission of articles (*a, the*) from the narrative discourse. It is not absolutely consistent in this passage the men "sat round brazier in a circle"), but it is sufficiently thoroughgoing to arrest the reader's attention, reinforcing the effect of other, more familiar types of condensation (the omission of finite verbs, for instance, and of nouns and adjectives with sensuous or emotive weight). Where a conventionally smooth, elegant narrative prose would read, "It was two o'clock. *Thousands of workers came back from their dinners along the streets,*" or even, in a more old-fashioned literary style, "*Thousands of factory*

hands wearing cloth caps and headscarves hurried back through the drab streets from their hastily consumed mid-day meals," Henry Green writes: "Two o'clock. Thousands came back from dinner along streets."

Henry Green was the pen-name of Henry Yorke, whose family owned an engineering firm in Birmingham. Henry trained to become its managing director by working his way up through the various departments from the shop floor, acquiring in the process a priceless understanding of the nature of industrial work, and a deep affection and respect for the men and women who laboured at it. *Living* is a wonderful celebration, tender without being sentimental, of English working-class life at a particular moment in time.

One of the difficulties of writing truthfully about working-class life in fiction, especially evident in the well-intentioned industrial novels of the Victorian age, is that the novel itself is an inherently middle-class form, and its narrative voice is apt to betray this bias in every turn of phrase. It is hard for the novel not to seem condescending to the experience it depicts in the contrast between the polite, well-formed, educated discourse of the narrator and the rough, colloquial, dialect speech of the characters. Consider, for example, Dickens's handling of the scene in *Hard Times* where Stephen Blackpool refuses to join in a Trade Union strike on conscientious grounds:

"Stephen Blackpool," said the chairman, rising, "think on't agen. Think on't once agen lad, afore thou't shunned by aw owd friends."

There was a universal murmur to the same effect, though no man articulated a word. Every eye was fixed on Stephen's face. To repent of his determination, would be to take a load from all their minds. He looked around him, and knew that it was so. Not a grain of anger with them was in his heart; he knew them, far below their surface weaknesses and misconceptions, as no-one but their fellow labourer could.

"I ha thowt on't, above a bit, sir. I simply canna come in. I mun go th' way as lays afore me. I mun tak my leave o'aw heer."

Green tried to close such a painfully obvious gap between authorial speech and characters' speech in *Living* by deliberately deforming the narrative discourse — giving it, as he said himself, something of the compactness of Midland dialect and avoiding "easy elegance". Not that the narrative sentences are in the same register as the characters' dialogue. There is a bleak, functional economy about the former, expressive of the mechanical, repetitive routines that industry imposes on its workers, to which the speech of the characters offers a kind of resistance in its poetic redundancies ("beautiful work, beautiful work") proverbial phrases ("a father and mother to them") and private codes (the works manager is known by the phrase used to warn of his approach, "'Tis'im"). By such experiments with style an old Etonian, improbably enough, produced what is arguably the best novel ever written about factories and factory workers.

It is easy to accept and appreciate experiments like Green's that have some discoverable mimetic or expressive purpose. More problematical are stylistic deviations which set an arbitrary, artificial obstacle between the language of prose and its normal functions, such as the "Hiprogram", in which a letter of the alphabet is systematically omitted. The late Georges Perec, a French novelist best known for his *Life: A User's Manual*, wrote a novel called *La Disparition* which excludes use of the letter "e", for instance, a feat even more astonishing in French than it would be in English (though one does not envy Gilbert Adair, currently reported to be engaged in translating it). The contemporary American writer, Walter Abish, wrote a novel called *Alphabetical Africa*, the chapters of which conform to the following fenciably difficult rule: the first chapter contains only words beginning with "A" ("Africa again: Albert arrives, alive and arguing about African art, about African angst and also, alas, attacking Ashanti architecture . . ."); chapter two contains only words beginning with B and A, the third only words beginning with C, B, A; and so on, each succeeding chapter being allowed to draw on words beginning with an additional letter of the alphabet, until Z is reached; upon which the novel reverses

itself and the range of available words shrinks, chapter by chapter, initial letter by initial letter, until A is reached again.

These works are probably more fun to read about than to read. Such drastic and all-embracing constraints obviously preclude the composition of a novel according to normal procedures — starting with a thematic and/or narrative kernel, which is expanded by the invention of actions and actants according to some kind of narrative logic. The challenge is to tell any kind of coherent story at all within the self-imposed constraints of the form; and the motive, presumably (apart from the writer's satisfaction in testing his own ingenuity) is the hope that the constraints will yield the kind of pleasure that comes from the achievement of formal symmetry against odds, and also lead to the generation of meanings that would not otherwise have occurred to the author. In this respect such experiments in prose resemble very ordinary features of poetry, such as rhyme and stanzaic form. They seem to constitute a deliberate transgression of the boundary that normally separates these two forms of discourse, and, astonishingly clever as they are, to be "marginal" to the art of fiction.

23 The Comic Novel

"Let's see now, what's the exact title you've given it?" Dixon looked out of the window at the fields wheeling past, bright green after a wet April. It wasn't the double-exposure effect of the last half-minute's talk that had dumbfounded him, for such incidents formed the staple material of Welch colloquies; it was the prospect of reciting the title of the article he'd written. It was a perfect title, in that it crystallized the article's niggling mindlessness, its funeral parade of yawn-enforcing facts, the pseudo-light it threw upon non-problems. Dixon had read, or begun to read, dozens like it, but his own seemed worse than most in its air of being convinced of its own usefulness and significance. "In considering this strangely neglected topic," it began. This what neglected what? His thinking all this without this strangely neglected what? His thinking only made him having defied and set fire to the typescript only made him appear to himself as more of a hypocrite and fool. "Let's see," he echoed Welch in a pretended effort of memory: "oh yes; *The Economic Influence of the Developments in Shipbuilding Techniques, 1450 to 1485*. After all, that's what it's . . ."

Unable to finish his sentence, he looked to his left again to find a man's face staring into his own from about nine inches away. The face, which filled with alarm as he gazed, belonged to the driver of a van which Welch had elected to pass on a sharp bend between two stone walls. A huge bus now swung into view from further round the bend. Welch slowed slightly, thus ensuring that they would still be next to the van when the bus reached them, and said with decision: "Well, that ought to do it nicely, I should say."

KINGSLEY AMIS *Lucky Jim* (1954)