modernism's mid-life crisis

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Interpreting Modernist Writers: Macro History, Personal History, and Manuscript History. Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2008. vi, 342 pp. ISBN 0-7734-5108-0. [Individual purchases can be made through the publisher for $39.95]

In elucidating the trends of "The New Modernist Studies," Douglas Mao and Rebecca Walkowitz, in an article of the same name, refer to the field's "expansive tendency" as typical of "period-centered areas of literary scholarship" (737). We see this in an array of contemporary texts on the subject of modernism by some seminal critics. Nineteen-ninety-nine, the year Mao and Walkowitz date as this new study's birth, brought with it the dawn of the Modernist Studies Association and the journal *Modernism/Modernity*, and thus greater exposure for a previously shrinking field. Perhaps more importantly, 1999 is also the initial publication year of what Charles Altieri unabashedly calls "clearly the best book ever written on modernism": T.J. Clark's *Farewell to an Idea* (127).

Here Clark proposes and rather persuasively defends an admittedly absurd dating of modernism that has fueled a continuing expanse of the field: October 16, 1793, the day Jacques-Louis David's painting of Marat, "the martyred hero of the [French] revolution...was released into the public realm" (15).[i] That day, one in which painting seems to have entered politics quite deliberately, is also the day in which Marie-Antoinette was guillotined.[ii] By arguing for the primacy of contingency in the process of modernist "picturing," Clark argues for a long historical narrative of modernist developments from about a century before its more typical dating—one approached in 2008 by Peter Gay, who in *Modernism: The Lure of Heresy*, chooses Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs de Mal* (1857) as a "founding document of modernism" (39). Dating back to the second half of the nineteenth century, Gay makes a case for a primarily thematic (as opposed to historical) reading of the movement which

merges formal literary and aesthetic developments with a singular impulse toward heresy.

These texts represent two sides of a confusing, perhaps irreconcilable, coin. They are two examples of a central problem plaguing contemporary scholars of modernism, literary or otherwise: what was (is) it? Over half a century has passed since Charles Olson introduced the term "post-modernism" as a lexically tenable paradigm, and yet the field still lacks a unified identity able to occupy both its historical and qualitative modes.[iii] Are there, as Gay argues, exceptions within the historical timeframe modernism occupies (anti-modernists like Knut Hamsun and T.S. Eliot)? Or perhaps, as Clark claims, is contingency—one of modernism's defining characteristics—the only substance out of which paintings (or art, more generally) could be made post-Marat?

Stanley Sultan's *Interpreting Modernist Writers* is a welcome interlocutor at a time when stakes within the field remain relatively high. While it is unfortunate that this sprawling study of several of high modernism's landmarks makes little mention of critical work done within this century, Sultan provides a collection of erudite readings in what proves to be the work of a master of literary and historical nuance. One of the benefits of this ambitious project, much like his *Eliot, Joyce, and Company* (1990), is, however, also a rare shortcoming. This work is a collection of disparate essays contained within the three, distinct categorical rubrics of his title. An earlier version of the first chapter, for example, was published in 1991, and so much of the material fails to directly address the contemporary problems mentioned above. Perhaps the benefit of this approach is that it reifies traditional readings of modernism in contemporary contexts, forcing readers, as Sultan always does, to return to the texts.

Despite this work's datedness, Sultan's readings are far more rewarding than most contemporary commentary on similar subjects. Most of the chapters in this work are rich in bibliographical references and erudite, careful readings of some of modernism's cornerstones: Elizabeth Bishop, Virginia Woolf, William Faulkner, D.H. Lawrence, James Joyce, J.M. Synge, and Eliot are his main subjects. Perhaps most interesting and important is his first chapter, which, despite its failure to address the likes of contemporary scholarship on the subject, argues brilliantly against the ways in which critics define modernism as politically reactionary.[iv]

Sultan calls this association—between fascism and the literary movement and historical period—a "fledgling historical myth," and is careful to point out the differences between the politics of the trio that most famously receive this accusation: W.B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, and Eliot. When he is not revealing differences in their politics, Sultan does well in reminding readers that these are just a select group of very prominent modernists, most of which have quite different political affiliations. His argument—that modernism did not require nor engender a reactionary literature—is as developed and detailed as his careful, close readings of *Ulysses* (1922) and *The Waste Land* (1922). That modernist aesthetic values have no

necessary political equivalent is rarely argued, and Sultan is nothing short of virtuosic in revealing the points at which art and politics converge and separate.

Careful not to paint modernism with a single brush, Sultan complicates matters when he argues that "both left-wing Modernists and right-wing Modernists valued tradition" (12). His words on the subject are as clear and definitive as any:

> The Modernists seem to have explored new ways of both fully *embodying* traditional/formal/representational values, and fully *rendering* innovative/phenomenological/expressive pressures, in their art. A synergetic combination, a syncretism, of contrarities—articulation and impulse, complexity and energy, Tradition and Development (to borrow Eliot's capitalized pair of synergetic contraries)—was the radical source of their newness. (13)

The political and cultural liberalism that Sultan ascribes to most modernists comes into truck with what he considers reverence for tradition—what others would call a source of anxiety. This treatment of contradictory attitudes offers astute biographical and literary analysis, both as separate and independent sources of study and as interconnected parts of studying the whole of modernism.

A curious and rather off-handed analysis that plagues parts of the first section of this book is Sultan's use of the terms "non-modernist" and "anti-modernist." He refers to Hilaire Belloc, Evelyn Waugh, and C.S. Lewis, among others, as "non-modernist contemporaries of the Modernists," a claim that begs for further explanation (21). Several pages later, Sultan calls Roy Campbell an "anti-modernist," perhaps a deserving label for an enemy of the high modernist literari, but a loaded term that brings to mind Gay's problematic coinage of "anti-modern Modernists" (397). Both Gay and Sultan treat modernism as something of an intellectual, cultural, and artistic mood with a loose historical correlative, as both claim that some contemporaries of *modernism* were not, in fact, *modernists*. This kind of division, as Modris Eksteins argues in his review of Gay's book, seems both inappropriate to a discussion of a movement saturated by an age of ubiquitous war and, for Sultan, contradictory to his earlier claims regarding "synergetic contraries." It seems unclear throughout this and other studies how figures like Waugh and Graham Greene—who, like their contemporaries, write in wrest with what Altieri calls the "philosophical and psychological economies put in place by modernity"—are so categorically removed from writers as formally, thematically, and geographically disparate as Thomas Mann, Lawrence, and Joyce (141). The use of such terms do no service to the rather complex issue of reading modernism as both a historical and qualitative phenomenon, as an intellectual and aesthetic movement occupying a finite period in time and as a cultural mood permeating history.

Sultan does a better job showing the relationships fostered by the modernists with antiq-

uity and the self. His argument that modernism can and should be read through a lens of "macro-history" renders especially rich readings of Joyce's use of allusion, a window, Sultan demonstrates, into the ideological conditions imbued in modernist texts. The chapters on literary autobiography that follow utilize textual and biographical readings of Bishop and Lawrence especially. Sultan's detailed readings of Lawrence's early works, though largely rooted in earlier writings of his on the author, display a deep understanding for the ways in which art and life intersect and influence both the production of text and biography. The section on Joyce is a wonderful supplement to his reading of Lawrence, as Sultan demonstrates quite convincingly, that their respective treatments of autobiography (Lawrence's writing is typically considered "compulsively autobiographical," Joyce's properly detached from autobiography) are not as radically different as is typically believed (85).

Tracing the development of the manuscripts of *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907) and *The Waste Land*, the book's final section presents an argument construed from Eliot's "Ulysses, Order and Myth" (1923): the "mythical method" that defines modernist innovation is "not a 'continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity,'" but the "'manipulating' of such a 'parallel' in depicting 'contemporary history'" (174). This kind of synoptic claim—that modernists are united in their methodological manipulations of history in their art—inform the preceding chapters, forging an avenue for unification amid a rather wide range of subjects.

Undoing categorical divisions—between fixed modes of artistic expression, between life and art, between the immanent and transcendent—was a central aim for much of the moderns, but not, apparently, for much of contemporary modernist criticism. Here Sultan offers a new set of categories, ones that are thoroughly developed and persuasive insofar that they mark modes or *reading*. The divisions of *doing* offered by critics like Gay and Roger Griffin in recent years—the kind suggested by Sultan's use of the term "non-modernist"—enforce false binaries onto the two integrated ways in which modernism occupied time and space: through history and texts.[v] That Sultan's modes of reading are so formally divided would be troubling if not for the fact that this study reveals the ways in which macro history, personal history, and manuscript history overlap in the formulation of modernist writers, their texts, and, in turn, modernism. The fusion of literary and historical scholarship that produces these mythical divisions presents a thorough—and wholly modernist—rendering of modernism's often simultaneously artistic, cultural, and political artifacts.

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the saint of unbelief: shrike, epistemology, and postmodernism

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Emma Lazarus and the Aporia of Jewish Community
Samantha Cohen

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Modernism's Mid-Life Crisis
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notes

[i] Marjorie Perloff argues for an expanse in the opposite direction in *21st Century Modernism: The "New" Poetics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002).

[ii] Antoinette's execution took place immediately before and in the same vicinity as David's public showing of *Marat à son dernier soupir*. Of the "moment of picture-making," Clark writes, "what marks this moment...off from others (what makes it inaugural) is precisely the fact that contingency rules. Contingency enters the process of picturing. It invades it. There is no other substance out of which paintings can now be made—no givens, no matters, no subject-matters, no forms, no usable pasts" (18). This event, for Clark, marks the advent of modernism.

[iii] Olson, who used the term frequently in the late 1940s, is typically believed to be the first to use it in literary contexts. Earlier uses of the term date as far back as the 1870s, though mostly in artistic and theological contexts. A famous early use of the term comes in 1939 when historian Arnold J. Toynbee writes of a "Post-Modern Age," though this, like most early references, refers more to an epistemic shift in Western consciousness than to an aesthetic or intellectual movement. For an overview on the evolution of the term, see Hans Bertens' introduction to *Approaching Postmodernism*, eds. Douwe Fokkema and Hans Bertens (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1986). Special thanks go to John Lowney for introducing me to this text.

[iv] See Roger Griffin's *Modernism and Fascism: The Sense of Beginning under Mussolini and Hitler* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), in which the author differentiates "epiphanic" from "programmatic" modernism.

[v] Gay's division suggests a kind of ironic interconnectedness: "modernist" v. "anti-modern modernist." The division proposed by Griffin, however, is premised on the idea that programmatic and epiphanic permutations of modernism are mutually exclusive.

[vi] This essay originally appeared in *The Century 25* (1883). It is reprinted in *Emma Lazarus: Selected Poems and Other Writings*, edited by Gregory Eiselein.

[vii] Here Lazarus quotes Gabriel Charmes' 1882 piece entitled "Voyage en Syrie."

[viii] This comes from Herzl's essay, "The Solution of the Jewish Question," which first appeared in the *London Jewish Chronicle* in 1896. It is an article-length synopsis of his first major work, *The Jewish State*, published in the same year.

[ix] This phrase is taken from the epigraph to "In Exile," which Lazarus writes is an excerpt of a letter from a Russian refugee now settled in Texas.

thanks, really.

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