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Source: *New Literary History*, Vol. 23, No. 3, History, Politics, and Culture (Summer, 1992), pp. 675-690

Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/469225>

Accessed: 02/06/2009 14:13

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# The Politics of Modernist Form

Marianne DeKoven

## I. Debates

THE LATELY REVIVED debates over the political implications of modernist form are motivated, I would argue, by the urgent question of whether or not we can attribute political efficacy to what many of us see as the most important formal modes of twentieth-century art. A simple political question, then, informs these complex ideological debates: Is modernist form oppositional, or does it reflect and support, either inadvertently or intentionally, the cultural and political status quo?<sup>1</sup> The modernists themselves were highly self-conscious concerning the cultural and social implications of their “new” aesthetic practices, and the polemics they initiated have been extended by many of this century’s most influential Western aesthetic theorists, from a widely diverse range of historical-cultural-ideological positions.

Some of these debates are famous, at least within Marxist intellectual circles: Brecht versus Lukács, Benjamin versus Adorno, Habermas versus Lyotard.<sup>2</sup> To those unfamiliar with these debates, I think it suffices, for the purposes of this essay, to identify rather baldly the two generally opposing ideological positions: Lukács, the most influential Marxist antimodernist (the terms *anti-* and *promodernist* are a shorthand I use here to designate, respectively, those who argue that the political implications of modernist form are negative and those who argue that they are positive), proclaimed nineteenth-century realism a model for all politically progressive art, condemning modernism, realism’s antithesis, as a symptom of late-capitalist reification, alienation, decadence, elitism, fetishism (this condemnation has been most influentially revived, recently, by Jameson in *The Political Unconscious*).<sup>3</sup> Brecht, Benjamin, Adorno, Habermas have argued variously—including against one another—on the other side, in favor of the progressive potential of certain kinds of modernist form (the debate between Benjamin and Adorno concerned *which* kinds) to defamiliarize (to use the Russian Formalist term) the “reality,” or socially constructed cultural order, which

bourgeois capitalism would have us believe inevitable or natural. Among the Frankfurt School theoreticians, Marcuse is the least ambivalent, most programmatic defender of the progressive political implications of modernist formal innovation. In *The Aesthetic Dimension*, he argues that formal innovation is revolutionary because it is premised on a mode of subjectivity and a reality principle inimical to and beyond those of bourgeois capitalist society. "Art cannot change the world," he says, "but it can contribute to changing the consciousness and drives of the men and women who could change the world."<sup>4</sup> More recently, Edward Said, while refraining from so vast a claim, links nineteenth-century realist narrative to the structures of authority that support imperialism, bourgeois class hegemony, and the male-dominated family, suggesting that modernist disruptions of realist narrative can also represent, and perhaps function as, disruptions of those structures of authority.<sup>5</sup>

Feminist theorists and critics have recently extended the boundaries of the debate and shifted its terms. Some American feminist critics, concerned particularly with the historical positioning and literary contributions of women writers, focus on resuscitating undervalued work by women modernists.<sup>6</sup> Asserting the stature of these works is an end in itself; it also contributes to establishing a tradition (or antitradition) of female modernism, defined either as separate from or as intermingled with canonical, male-dominated modernism. This tradition of female modernism is sometimes seen as both aesthetically and politically more progressive than "male modernism," which is characterized as misogynist in its representations of women and in its practitioners' treatment of the women modernists, and also as politically hierarchical, elitist, and nostalgic for feudal authority. American feminist literary-historical analysis also focuses, as I will here, on the importance of women modernists' unacknowledged contributions to the development of modernism, or, elsewhere, on the male modernists' deliberate suppression of women writers.<sup>7</sup>

Other feminist arguments, however, agree with Marxist promodernist arguments that at least some types of modernist formal innovation, independent of the gender of the signature or the overt politics of the texts which employ them, have progressive or revolutionary implications, since those forms inscribe in culture modes that can be considered feminine or antipatriarchal (I say "other feminist arguments" rather than "other feminists" because some feminists—including myself—make both kinds of arguments).<sup>8</sup> These arguments contend (again, as with the Marxists, from varying points of view, with varying emphases, and, perhaps most important, with

varying and varyingly emphatic reservations) that modernist form's disruptions of hierarchical syntax, of consistent, unitary point of view, of realist representation, linear time and plot, and of the bounded, coherent self separated from and in mastery of an objectified outer world, its subjectivist epistemology, its foregrounding of the pre-Oedipal or aural features of language, its formal decenteredness, indeterminacy, multiplicity, and fragmentation are very much in accord with a feminine aesthetic or Cixousian *écriture féminine*. As Rachel Blau DuPlessis says, "literature by women, in its ethical and moral position, resembles the equally nonhegemonic modernism in its subversive critique of culture."<sup>9</sup> And Julia Kristeva, the most influential feminist promodernist theoretician, claims that "in a culture where the speaking subjects are conceived of as masters of their speech, they have what is called a 'phallic' position. The fragmentation of language in a text calls into question the very posture of this mastery."<sup>10</sup>

The specific issues engaged within the general framework of these debates are remarkably consistent across a historical and ideological spectrum as broad as twentieth-century Western cultural history itself, and they remain the focus of contemporary polemics for and against modernist form.<sup>11</sup> Not surprisingly, these issues have been and continue to be framed differently according to the varying ideologies, concerns, historical situations, and aesthetic or theoretical vocabularies informing any given articulation. Nonetheless, and, I hope, without doing violence to those differences or falling prey to ahistorical essentialism, I think it is possible to offer brief summaries of the key recurring issues in these debates (this grouping together of positive and negative formulations of each issue is intended to reflect my sense that the debates have concerned the political import of modernist forms, not their nature).

Antimodernists generally consider the fragmentation and disjunctiveness so broadly characteristic of modernist form a capitulation to nihilistic political despair concerning the possibility of representing a unified interpretive synthesis of the life of modern society. Promodernists consider the same phenomenon montage or polysemy: form that is nonlinear, decentered or open and therefore antihierarchical and antiphallgocentric. Such form is seen as subversive because it challenges or undoes the linear, monologic, hierarchical perceptual and aesthetic modes of the dominant culture. What antimodernists consider aestheticization, again a nihilistic retreat from art's mimetic political responsibility, promodernists consider artistic integrity, a self-reflexivity that is quite the opposite of sterile because it represents the only possible salvation in a society

saturated or otherwise entirely dominated by hegemonic culture (here the Anglo-American modernists, the Frankfurt School, and the feminist avant garde interestingly converge).

A related problem for antimodernists is reification or fetishism: the displacement of the human onto inanimate or synecdochical objects (for nonfeminist Marxists, this case is made best by the correlation between the surrealist *objet trouvé* and the position of the object in consumer culture; for feminists, by the parallel with the cult of the phallus). The promodernist account of this phenomenon considers it an attack on Enlightenment (and therefore bourgeois and patriarchal) humanism and individualism, seeing in aesthetic programs ranging from Pound's imagism or vorticism, Eliot's objective correlative, Ortega's dehumanization, and the anti-humanism of the *nouveau roman* an alternative to the order of the Father, that construction with the individual bourgeois white male at its head or center which is the premise of gender, class, and race hierarchies.

Alienation, a concomitant of reification for antimodernists and a crucial term for Marxists, damns modernism as capitulation to or passive reflection of one of the central conditions of labor under capitalism. For promodernists, alienation, again associated with the attack on humanist individualism, becomes the Russian Formalist "defamiliarization" or the Brechtian "alienation effect" or "distan-tiation"—a means of instituting critical distance from the illusionist realist forms that make us think the social and cultural status quo is natural and inevitable.

Antimodernists find solipsism, excessive subjectivity, and artistic egomania in a wide range of modernist forms (expressionism, *roman fleuve*, surrealism, antirealist narrative in general), seeing them as a reflection of a distorted, culturally pathological emphasis on the individual psyche and, again, a retreat from the life of society. For promodernists, these represent not exaggerated individualism but perceptual relativism, a mode of psychological and epistemological verisimilitude that challenges the dualism of subject and object, the latter entirely knowable and dominated by the former. That subject-object dualism is, again, seen as the basis of all hierarchically structured political oppression.

The Anglo-American modernists are commonly charged with obscurantism, with overuse of an erudition which is traditionally a male educational prerogative, with an allusive difficulty smacking of elitism. For promodernists these modes represent a subversive complexity, a refusal of the facile, "easy" transparency of male-gaze-dominated, illusionist realism (again, this transparency reinforces

hegemonic cultural ideology). In the promodernist view, difficulty is a vanguard cultural practice designed to change consciousness, forcing it in the direction of the complex critical thought which is necessary to repudiate the oppressive status quo, and to forge an appropriate literary language which would no longer be corrupted by service to the "master narratives."

As is probably (though not intentionally) apparent from my tone, my own political-aesthetic sympathies are promodernist. Nonetheless, I would like to argue here that positions for as well as positions against necessarily reduce the complex political-cultural-historical provenance of modernist formal innovation. The preceding summary was, in fact, an attempt to demystify the recurring debate over the politics of modernist form, revealing the dialectical relatedness of positions that define themselves as mutually exclusive. The debate over the politics of modernist form, like modernist form itself, inhabits and perhaps defines the space of unresolved contradiction or unsynthesized dialectic which, as I will argue, makes modernist form exemplary of the best hope for aesthetic politics in our time.

## II. History

These assertions, like modernism itself, can be located historically. The debate over the politics of modernist form has not persisted unabated throughout the twentieth century. Like much else, it went underground in America in the late forties, fifties, and early sixties. Even in the late sixties, there was virtually no official interest in the subject in an American academy still entirely dominated by the New Critics. (When I tried, in 1969, to write my senior honors thesis on the detectability of fascism in T. S. Eliot's form, I was told that I could if I really wanted to, and if I didn't mind risking a lower grade, but why not write instead about something truly important. I ended by writing, what else, a stylistic analysis, a close reading of *Murder in the Cathedral* which subordinated the question of the politics of form to the truly important question, its own politics still well concealed, of whether or not the structure of the play is indeed organically unified.) The climate within the academy has changed in the last two decades. Those of us who were discouraged from making connections between politics and form have now come of age, and, though we can hardly think of ourselves as a dominant voice, at least some of us are in a position to pursue the interests we acquired in the late sixties, thereby making ourselves

and our students the “PC” *bête-noir* of neo-con America.

As always, history can help to restore a complexity forfeited to ideology, a complexity that must characterize the assessment of the politics of modernist form that I hope to achieve here. It is particularly helpful to attend to the history of gender in modernism. Despite the evident patrilineality of what has become the high modernist canon, to consider one important chunk of the history and politics of modernist reception, the literary wombs of women writers were just as important to the birth of modernism as the seminal ink of the modernist founding fathers. James, Yeats, Pound, Eliot, Joyce are credited not with giving birth to modernism—that metaphor itself would change, and is intended to change, the picture—but with *inventing* modernism: the figure of “invention” locates modernism within the discourse of “male” technology. In fact, in his Introduction to that important, influential work on American modernism, *A Homemade World*, Hugh Kenner aligns the Wright Brothers and their “Dedalian deed on the North Carolina shore” with Joyce and his invocation to the “Old Father, Old Artificer,” locating them, along with technological modernity, at the mythically originary moment of modernism.<sup>12</sup> But a formal analysis looking for the right things finds powerful evidence that, in texts such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1891), Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* (1899), and Gertrude Stein’s *Three Lives* (1903–06), previously buried texts which have become crucial to the evolving *feminist* canon, women writers “invented” modernist form, “discovered” it “independently,” to switch to the also frequently invoked scientific metaphor, *at just the same time* that men did.

*Three Lives*, composed at the same time as early versions of *Portrait of the Artist*, has just as valid a claim to modernist “origination.” With its fluid, obtuse narration, detached, ironic tone, impressionist as well as spatial temporal structures, and disruptions of conventional diction and syntax, *Three Lives* is both just as characteristic and just as uncharacteristic, or innovative, as any other work in the modernist fictional canon. Fully a decade earlier, *The Yellow Wallpaper* prefigures Kafka and the surrealists, with its deranged first person narration and its use of dream structure as an ordering principle. *The Awakening* employs several of the formal strategies of high modernism, such as ambiguous, shifting narrative stance, density and foregrounding of imagery, and repetitive, incantatory language.

Why, then, haven’t these novels been considered originary modernist works; why has modernism been canonized in the American academy as male? For the same reasons that it has also been canonized as white and reactionary. The forties and fifties, when that can-

onization occurred, was a time, as we know, of violent reaction here against both feminism and progressive politics. It was a time when *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* were read as an effort on the part of a pitiable pair of isolated Yorkshire girls, frustrated spinsters, to quell the "masculine élan of the universe."<sup>13</sup> It was also the time of the triumph in our discipline of the New Critics, who not only established the modernist canon as male and white, but also valorized, at the expense of the progressive implications of its forms, modernism's reactionary features: hierarchical, totalizing myth, externally imposed order, ahistoricity, deadlocked irony, the idea of "well-wrought," perfectly balanced form not only as an end in itself but as the only interesting end of art. Those characteristics do not constitute some transhistorical, essentialist modernism. They are not what modernism "is." Rather, they are a version of modernism that, in history, as a result of unpredestined outcomes of very real cultural-political struggles, modernism has become.

This version of modernism, still almost entirely predominant despite the ostensible overthrow of its promulgators, suppresses, by means of its no-longer transparent ideology, not only the facts that women writers were just as instrumental in the production of modernist form as male writers, and that a crucial episode in American modernism, the Harlem Renaissance, was black, but also that modernism's affiliation with the political left predates, even in America, its absorption into the grainy fields of Southern agrarian reaction.<sup>14</sup> (I say "even in America" because we are used to acknowledging a tradition of at least attempted linkage of leftist politics and modernist form in Europe, especially in surrealism, even if we insist on viewing that linkage as illusory, misguided, ephemeral, or impossible.)

Modernism lived in New York before it moved to the Bible Belt. As we see in Leslie Fishbein's *Rebels in Bohemia*, for example, modernist formal innovation had been cultivated in the teens by Village radicals associated with *The Masses*.<sup>15</sup> In the pre-anti-Stalinist thirties, some of the next generation of New York radicals such as Edmund Wilson and the *Partisan Review* writers attempted to forge links between Marxist politics and modernist form. Though always cognizant of modernism's reactionary, ahistorical, and apolitical components, those critics were interested in both the modernist damnation of the bourgeoisie and in the progressive potential of modernist formal innovation.

As Daniel Aaron points out in *Writers on the Left*, the founding *Partisan Review* critics, unlike the older generation of American literary Communists, felt no unbridgeable gulf between Marxism and modernism. In the interest of recovering a piece of history

generally elided by both New Critical and Marxist ideology, it is worth quoting Aaron at some length:

Writing in 1934, William Phillips . . . carefully distinguished his own "proletarian generation" from his immediate literary forebears. The latter he defined as the "exiles" and "*transition group*" (Hemingway, Cowley, Tate, and company) and the "few confident pioneers" (Freeman, Gold, Kunitz) . . .

The literary Marxists had been the guides and teachers of the young radicals throughout the dry years. But "the strain and exigencies of pioneering," Phillips thought, "kept them from assimilating the literary spirit of the twenties," which for good or ill was part of the literary heritage of the young radicals. Although his own proletarian group, he said, was tied up in some way with the Communist Party or the labor movement, its literary fathers were writers like Joyce and Eliot (from whose influence not even the most revolutionary writers were immune).<sup>16</sup>

However, even though leftist intellectual interest in modernism never quite died in America, maintaining its life most notably in the person of Irving Howe, it was not the left intelligentsia but the New Critics who won the literary war of the thirties (see Aaron for a detailed account of this seldom discussed episode in our literary history). The triumph of New Critical modernism has made it appear blunt, banal, and gauche to discuss modernist writing as a critique of twentieth-century society—to approach it, in fact, as anything other than the altar of linguistic and intellectual complexity in search of transcendent formal unity. It fell to the victorious New Critics, with the cooperation of the pieces of modernism itself indisputably in harmony with their project, to inscribe modernism in academia, the canon, and literary history as the retrograde phenomenon—sexist, racist, elitist, fascist, even "royalist"—that has become so easy to condemn.

### III. The Politics of Modernist Form

By complicating this starkly dualistic attack on those never to be sufficiently appreciated whipping boys, the New Critics, and their coconspirators, the reactionary white male Anglo-American modernists, I hope to formulate a characterization of modernist form adequate to an assessment of its political significance. I will begin with an alternative to Jameson's reading of Conrad's style, and therefore of modernist form in general. At the opening of his brilliant chapter on Conrad in *The Political Unconscious*, Jameson

quotes, as I will, an early passage of *Lord Jim*: “His station was in the fore-top, and often from there he looked down, with the contempt of a man destined to shine in the midst of dangers, at the peaceful multitude of roofs cut in two by the brown tide of the stream, while scattered on the outskirts of the surrounding plain the factory chimneys rose perpendicular against a grimy sky, each slender like a pencil, and belching out smoke like a volcano.”<sup>17</sup>

Jameson claims that he sees Conrad as a transitional figure of what he calls “nascent modernism,” where history and the world, though displaced and marginalized, are not yet entirely repressed, as they will be in what he calls “the more fully achieved and institutionalized modernisms of the canon” (210). However, Jameson’s actual reading of this passage puts Conrad squarely in that canon. He finds in it evidence of “the impulse of Conrad’s sentences to transform such realities (the realities of society’s life under late capitalism) into impressions” (210). Jameson continues: “These distant factory spires may be considered the equivalent for Jim and, in this novelistic project, for Conrad, of the great Proustian glimpses of the steeples of Martinville” (210–11). The connection to Proust seems to me to obliterate, at least for this moment of the argument, Jameson’s distinction between Conrad’s “nascent modernism” and the “fully achieved and institutionalized modernisms of the canon.” Even though he attempts to maintain the distinction by means of a parenthetical remark in which he points to “the one obvious qualification that the latter [Proust’s steeples] are already sheer impression” (211) and therefore require no “aesthetic transformation” (211), Jameson represents Conrad’s style here, I think correctly, as fully modernist.

What Jameson omits from his analysis of Conrad’s passage, and therefore from his characterization of modernist form, is what I would call its unique and ineluctable *sous-rature*, its unresolved contradictoriness or unsynthesized dialecticality. Conrad is not Jim, any more than he is Marlow (note how Jameson, in equating Conrad with Jim “in this novelistic project,” does away with precisely the distinction most important to modernist form), and yet it is from Jim’s or Marlow’s point of view that Conrad writes. It is modernist form that allows Conrad to refuse not history, not the “realities” of life under imperialist, misogynist late capitalism, but to refuse epistemological determinacy. It is *from Jim’s point of view* that, to use Jameson’s term again, “realities” become impressions. Jim, not Conrad, has his station “in the fore-top,” from which he can “look down, with the contempt of a man destined to shine in the midst of dangers”: the irony of the tone here is characteristic and crucial.

The novel is about to show us just how little Jim “shines,” just how “grimy” he becomes “in the midst of dangers”: Jim’s failure to assist his fellow students on the training ship in an actual rescue immediately follows the sequence Jameson quotes, and it is precisely the “griminess” of the skipper of the Patna that Jim obsessively dissociates himself from but that the novel insists taints him.

It is from this extremely problematical perch “in the fore-top” that Jim redeems the “grimy” material world by converting it into the “shining” impression. Jim never learns what the novel, via Stein, so emphatically shows us: that beetles must be collected (another destabilizing figure in its ironic representation of reification) along with butterflies. If repressed, they return in the lethal form of Gentleman Brown. Conrad clearly separates himself not only from Jim’s “fore-top” point of view, but from the “impressions” he gets there: the escapist, megalomaniacal fantasy idealizations it allows Jim to substitute for life in the world.

Moreover, in those impressions themselves we can see Conrad’s representation of the fragility and explosive instability of Jim’s *unself-critically* impressionist point of view. The factory chimneys are “slender like a pencil,” pointing to the fragility of the pencil that converts, through simile, a smokestack into a pencil, a full-bodied phallic “reality” into “slender” effeminate writing. The smokestacks are also “belching out smoke like a volcano.” First we note the wonderful disparity, the impossibility, of fragile pencils belching out smoke like volcanoes: the power of self-referential *modernist* writing to represent, through self-erasure, the irreducibility of a “reality” whose explosive force would be effaced, not revealed, by a *realist* use of language that has it masquerade as transparent. By itself that particular contradiction undercuts Jim’s rewriting of industrial reality as harmlessly lovely “artistic” impression. But beyond that, the connotations of barely contained, potentially monstrously destructive violence in the image of the volcano near eruption speak of the representation in Conrad, and, I would argue, in all modernist writing, of precisely the impossibility, the ludicrousness, and the danger of converting deadly history into harmless (or transcendent) art.

Modernist form, again, continually puts itself, including its own self-consciousness, under erasure. Eliot has Prufrock represent himself with an effete fatalism, but at the same time undercuts that representation with an angry contempt for it: the “ragged claws” tear the smooth, ironic urbanity of “I have seen them all already, seen them all”; the crucified insect “pinned and wriggling on the wall,” who angrily and with harsh, staccato consonants wonders how

it will “spit out all the butt ends of [its] days and ways,” radically disrupts “the taking of a toast and tea.” The representation and its own negation coexist in the text in an oscillating simultaneity, an unresolved contradiction; not an “ambiguity,” “paradox,” or “tension” resolved or contained by “organically unified” form, as the New Critics have it, but something entirely different: a coexistent doubleness that is resolved nowhere—that is reinforced in rather than eased of its contradictoriness by the radically disjunctive *modernist* form of the poem.

I italicize “modernist,” as I did in the discussion of the *Lord Jim* passage, in order to emphasize the distinction between the deconstructive version of all (literary) writing, which finds unresolved contradiction everywhere, and my thesis here concerning the foregrounded, self-conscious self-erasure (*sous-rature*) of modernist writing. Deconstruction finds, and in fact perhaps prefers to find, unresolved contradiction in texts that offer or construct themselves as noncontradictory or consistent. I am arguing that modernist writing offers, constructs, in fact defines itself as radically inconsistent—literally, self-contradictory—though not incoherent: incoherence is the province of avant garde experimentalism and some postmodernism.<sup>18</sup>

Even in Proust, whom Jameson cites with justification as the ultimate impressionist or high modernist (in order to incriminate Conrad through guilt by association), the representation of late-capitalist bourgeois social history, which is clearly one of Proust’s central narrative intentions, puts into question, or under erasure, Marcel’s self-transfiguration, by means of the madeleine and the uneven flagstones—the eucharist and altar of the religion of literary impressionism—from the realm of moribund history to the sphere of immortal Time(lessness). Again, let me make my position clear: I am not arguing that Marcel’s transcendent impressionism is discredited. Rather, the text *self-consciously* juxtaposes that impressionism with its own contradiction. While passages might be cited, particularly the very end of *The Past Recaptured*, demonstrating Proust’s (because Marcel’s) wholehearted endorsement of the impressionist religion, it is just as important to remember that Proust is not Marcel as it is to remember that Conrad is not Jim (or, for stricter parallelism, not Marlow). Also, it is clear elsewhere, throughout the text, that Proust *uses* Marcel’s penchant for rapturous idealization—the tone in which the famous impressionist sequences, including Martinville and the final movement of the text, are written—to provide ironic contrast to the text’s toughminded comic-grotesque representations of the rottenness and impending demise of the French aristocracy

and upper middle class. The text represents that demise as desirable as well as inevitable, at the same time that it participates in Marcel's acolytic worship of the Guermantes and the Faubourg Saint-Germain.

Most definitions and descriptions of modernism resort to tropes which bespeak an aesthetic of *sous-rature*, tropes such as the famous irony, tension, ambiguity, and paradox of the New Criticism. I would argue that those tropes dehistoricize the modernist aesthetic situation, essentializing it as the condition of all (great) literature. Empson's "seventh type of ambiguity" is perhaps the ultimate formulation of that aesthetic: "An example of the seventh type of ambiguity . . . occurs when the two meanings of the word, the two values of the ambiguity, are the two opposite meanings defined by the context, so that the total effect is to show a fundamental division in the writer's mind."<sup>19</sup> F. Scott Fitzgerald claimed that "(t)he test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function";<sup>20</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty described "Cézanne's doubt" as, in part, his "aiming for reality while denying himself the means to attain it."<sup>21</sup>

So far I have cited, as textual evidence of the aesthetic of *sous-rature*—the unsynthesized dialectic or unresolved contradiction that characterizes modernist form—Conrad, Eliot, Proust. It is not necessary to stay so securely within the canon to find such evidence; moreover, one of my purposes here is to participate in the current rethinking of "canon," arguing at the least for an opening of the "modernism" produced by New Critical ideology to the full heterogeneity of the modernism that historical analysis can recover. To return to my claim for *The Awakening* as an originary modernist work, for example, Edna Pontellier stands in precisely the same relation to Chopin and her narrator that Jim does to Conrad and Marlow: a relation of irresolvable and continuous oscillation between identification and distance, approval and disapproval, endorsement and repudiation. By the end of the novel, Edna is simultaneously a figure of feminist affirmation and of feminist despair, as swimming "far out where no woman has swum before" is, literally, suicide.

Differently beyond the pale (as it were) of canonical modernism, Zora Neale Hurston, in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, while affirming the autonomy and strength of black culture in general, of black women in particular, and of the feminine narrative voice, in the face of murderously repressive racism and sexism, refuses to choose black conclusively over white, or female over male. In the courtroom scene which is the climax of the novel, Janey is surrounded by a sympathetic group of white women, protected from the black men who, in an eruption of male bonding, despise her for shooting Tea

Cake in self-defense, insisting on believing her guilty of murder: "And the white women cried and stood around her like a protecting wall and the Negroes, with heads hung down, shuffled out and away."<sup>22</sup>

The painful implications of that scene are quickly undercut. The narrator provides Janey with a rationalization of the behavior of Tea Cake's friends. Janey makes the first gesture of reconciliation, but the men relent easily and apologize to her, drawing her back within the warm circle of black culture at Tea Cake's funeral: "Sop and his friends had tried to hurt her but she knew it was because they loved Tea Cake and didn't understand. So she sent Sop word and to all the others through him. So the day of the funeral they came with shame and apology in their faces" (281).

However, that circle is not always a reliable defense against racism, any more than either Tea Cake's relatively egalitarian love for Janey or her nurturing friendships with other women is a reliable defense against sexism. Earlier in the novel, Tea Cake beats Janey in a fit of jealousy of Mrs. Turner's brother. Janey is innocent. Mrs. Turner is a racist light-skinned black woman who identifies with whites and hates Tea Cake for his dark skin. Mrs. Turner's racism, which Hurston develops in episodes of her attempts at sisterly bonding with Janey, is repellent, but Tea Cake's violently macho response to it is equally so, to the reader if not to Janey. The point is not simply that black men sometimes oppress black women, or that racism sometimes infects sisterhood, but that Hurston simultaneously chooses and refuses to choose black over white, female over male. She carefully plots episodes which contradict but do not overturn the dominant polemical thrust of the novel.

Virginia Woolf ends *To the Lighthouse*, just as Lily Briscoe finishes her painting, with a very famous "line there, in the centre," a line of simultaneous separation and union: separation and union of the postwar present and the Victorian-Edwardian past, separation and union of disillusioned adulthood and idealized childhood, separation and union of freedom and connection, of life and death, affirmation and despair, creation and destruction, separation and union of mother and daughter (Mrs. Ramsay and Lily), of male and female (Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay).<sup>23</sup> It would be impossible, and a serious distortion of the text, to claim that Woolf resolves any of those dualisms in favor of one term over the other. Instead, the text represents precisely the modernist moment of simultaneity, of dualism which seeks neither a unitary resolution (one term over the other) nor a transcendent third term, a dialectical synthesis, but rather a "both/and" which, from within dualism, imagines an al-

ternative to it—not an obliteration or replacement of dualism (I would argue that all modes of doing away with dualism are ultimately versions of dialectical synthesis) but an alternative to it which maintains difference while denying hierarchy.

Julia Kristeva, describing an ideal cultural order of gender, has called it an “impossible dialectic” (“time,” “identity,” and “history” in the following are culturally masculine, the obverse of each is culturally feminine): “a constant alternation between time and its ‘truth,’ identity and its loss, history and the timeless, signless, extra-phenomenal things that produce it. An impossible dialectic: a permanent alternation: never the one without the other.”<sup>24</sup> Modernist form represents, not in the mythologized matrilinear Chinese past or utopian avant garde/feminist future projected by Kristeva but in historical twentieth-century time, this impossible dialectic. Would it be an emulation of modernist nostalgia, or another version of Kristeva’s utopianism, to suggest that we use this impossible dialectic, this aesthetic of *sous-rature* which maintains difference while denying hierarchy, as a model, an inspiration modern history has actually provided, for our efforts at overcoming the seemingly hopeless polarizations that characterize contemporary cultural-political life without resorting to ideas of apocalyptic rupture or leveling?

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#### NOTES

1 For an expansion of the argument of this essay, see my *Rich and Strange: Gender, History, Modernism* (Princeton, 1991). I am discussing modernism here in its stricter or Anglo-American sense, bounded approximately by 1890 and World War II (as defined, for example, by Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane in their influential *Modernism* [Harmondsworth, 1976], though their terminating year is 1930) rather than in its broader or continental sense, which, designated *modernity* as often as *modernism*, encompasses not only the twentieth century up to the present but also romanticism, symbolism, and sometimes the Enlightenment. I limit myself to the Anglo-American version of modernism because I do not think the salient characteristics of modernist form that concern me here, most notably what I will call the aesthetic of *sous-rature*, characterize the postmodernism of the post-World War II era.

The politics informing this essay are generally leftist-feminist. When I refer to *oppositional* writing, I have in mind writing that works to subvert patriarchal and/or bourgeois capitalist cultural formations.

Finally, the term *form* itself, because of its critical history, might require some comment. I believe that the work of the New Critics in making us *see*, as Conrad might say, the riches yielded by intense study—close reading, in fact—of literary form remains invaluable.

2 For an excellent summary and analysis of the Frankfurt School debates, see Eugene Lunn, *Marxism and Modernism: An Historical Study of Lukács, Brecht, Benjamin*

and Adorno (Berkeley, 1982). For documents in those debates, see *Aesthetics and Politics*, ed. Perry Anderson et al. (London, 1977). For the debate between Habermas and Lyotard, see Jürgen Habermas, "The French Path to Postmodernity," *New German Critique*, 33 (1984), 79–102; and Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, tr. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, 1984).

3 See Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel* (Boston, 1962) and *Studies in European Realism* (New York, 1964). See also Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, 1981); hereafter cited in text.

4 Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics* (Boston, 1978), pp. 32–33.

5 See Edward Said, *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (Baltimore, 1975).

6 There are too many disparate works in this category to allow a summary in a bibliographical footnote. I would refer the interested reader to the "Selected Bibliographies" of modernist women writers in *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women*, ed. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (New York, 1985).

7 See Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century*, 3 vols. (New Haven, 1987), I, for the most sharply focused, comprehensive treatment of the separate female modernist canon and of problems of male modernist misogyny.

8 The most powerful arguments in this camp have been made by Virginia Woolf, explicitly in *A Room of One's Own* (New York, 1929), implicitly in "Modern Fiction," in *The Common Reader*, 2 vols. (New York, 1925), I, and in "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," in *The Captain's Death Bed and Other Essays* (New York, 1950). See also, for example, Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers* (Bloomington, Ind., 1985); Margaret Homans, "'Her Very Own Howl': The Ambiguities of Representation in Recent Women's Fiction," *SIGNS*, 9 (1983), 186–205; Alice Jardine, *Gynesis: Configurations of Woman and Modernity* (Ithaca, 1985); E. Ann Kaplan, *Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera* (New York, 1983); Julia Kristeva, *About Chinese Women*, tr. Anita Barrows (London, 1977); Laura Mulvey, "Feminism, Film and the Avant-Garde," in *Women Writing and Writing About Women*, ed. Mary Jacobus (London, 1979); and Anaïs Nin, *The Novel of the Future* (New York, 1970).

9 Rachel Blau DuPlessis and the Members of Workshop 9, "For the Etruscans: Sexual Difference and Artistic Production—The Debate Over a Female Aesthetic," in *The Future of Difference*, ed. Hester Eisenstein and Alice Jardine (Boston, 1980), p. 150.

10 Julia Kristeva, "Oscillation Between Power and Denial," in *New French Feminisms*, ed. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron, tr. Marilyn A. August (Amherst, 1980), p. 165.

11 For some contemporary contributions to this debate in addition to those of Jameson, Habermas, and Lyotard, see esp. Perry Anderson, "Modernity and Revolution," and Marshall Berman, "The Signs in the Street," both in *New Left Review*, 144 (1984), 96–113 and 114–23; also Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington, 1986); Bruce Robbins, "Modernism in History, Modernism in Power," in *Modernism Reconsidered* (Cambridge, Mass., 1983); and the entire issue of *Cultural Critique*, 5 (1986–87): "Modernity and Modernism, Postmodernity and Postmodernism."

12 Hugh Kenner, *A Homemade World: The American Modernist Writers* (New York, 1975), pp. xi–xviii. See also Kenner's *The Mechanic Muse* (New York, 1986).

13 Richard Chase, "The Brontës, or Myth Domesticated," in *Forms of Modern Fiction*, ed. William V. O'Connor (Minneapolis, 1948), pp. 102–13.

14 See Houston A. Baker, *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chicago, 1987).

- 15 Leslie Fishbein, *Rebels in Bohemia: The Radicals of the Masses, 1911–17* (Chapel Hill, 1982).
- 16 Daniel Aaron, *Writers on the Left* (New York, 1961), 271–72.
- 17 Joseph Conrad, *Lord Jim* (1900), ed. Thomas C. Moser (New York, 1968).
- 18 See Marianne DeKoven, *A Different Language: Gertrude Stein's Experimental Writing* (Madison, 1983).
- 19 William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (New York, 1947), p. 192.
- 20 F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Crack-Up*, ed. Edmund Wilson (New York, 1945), p. 69.
- 21 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Cézanne's Doubt," in *Sense and Non-sense*, tr. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Patricia Allen Dreyfus (Evanston, 1964), p. 12.
- 22 Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937; rpt. Urbana, Ill., 1978), pp. 279–80; hereafter cited in text.
- 23 Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (New York, 1927), p. 310.
- 24 Julia Kristeva, *About Chinese Women*, p. 38.