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978-1-107-02247-8 - Modernist Futures: Innovation and Inheritance in the Contemporary Novel

David James

Excerpt

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Introduction: Contemporary fiction and the promise of modernism

Any artistic project can be made to seem incomplete. Unrealised aspirations and unresolved arguments could describe why movements are remembered just as well as the finished masterworks for which they're renowned. But if stories of incompleteness are there ready to be told, how do we go about telling them without ignoring anachronism and without relying on critical contrivance to prove claims for continuity? What does it really mean to consider that a given movement may also have a replenished moment, a phase of re-emergence – in another time, for another culture – through which its promise obtains renewed pertinence? Inevitably it's hard to view a period retrospectively and not review it at the same time, when enticed to see just how temporally elastic its parameters might be. Tempting as they are to fuel, though, debates about reperiodisation have a tendency to run their course through arguments of fleeting consequence; in modernism's case, that tale of continuance more compellingly unfolds when our work on revising paradigms is enriched by a closer look at creative practices. Providing such enrichment, Toni Morrison suggests that the 'ideal situation is to take from the past and apply it to the future'.¹ We would be hard pressed to think of a more audacious writer, one who, we might assume, has no truck with tradition. For surely Morrison's singularity sums up her freedom from inheritance, epitomising her irreverence toward any model that's not of her own making. Yet more than three decades later, Morrison's claim speaks to writers who variously partake in that 'ideal situation', and who find in it forms of imaginative praxis – forms that 'take from' modernism the potential for extending what fiction can do.

Precisely how and why modernist commitments, principles and aesthetics continue to inform the contemporary novel is the concern of this book. It brings together writers from a particular generation, whose careers have developed beyond the trends and traits of postmodernism, and who have drawn instead on modernism's legacy in the very process of fulfilling new formal, ethical and political objectives. Yet what does it mean to

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speak of modernism's continuance in the first place? Is it not the case that to argue for the persistence of recognisably modernist goals is surely something of a contradiction in itself, because to associate modernism with this talk of recuperation sounds quite opposed to the language of rupture on which so many vanguards of the early twentieth century staked their reputations? Surely the basic premise of any *modernism* is, effectively, a demand: writers should forego all things vestigial or inherited in order to propel their methods forward and to produce art that reaches for alternative horizons. If this is the case, and if that demand is satisfied, how will we know what millennial modernisms look like when and if they arise? Will they be found in fiction that expresses 'a cultural shift' away from the high-modernist 'worship of form', as Urmila Seshagiri calls it, or instead in writers who make new interventions that at once extend aesthetic aims pioneered by early-twentieth-century fiction while challenging our critical expectations of what newness involves? Many of the answers to these questions will depend on whether we think the act of paying homage to modernism necessarily boils down to 'a literary moment as significant for what it departs from as for what it moves toward'.² Justified though these queries and caveats are, they forget modernism's own dialectical relation to tradition: fiction today partakes of an interaction between innovation and inheritance that is entirely consonant with what modernists themselves were doing more than a century ago, an interaction that enables writers to work *with* their lineage in the process of attempting new experiments with form.

So far, so convivial; at least that is how it seems in light of the more predictably antagonistic accounts of literary influence that have shaped our understanding of how writers pick up from and overtake their precursors. In this book, I draw attention to the way contemporary novelists forge less hostile or anxious lines of communication with the modernist tradition. The cultivation of this conviviality is something that Morrison herself encourages in the previously mentioned assertion, as she indicates the utility of the literary past for future ambitions. It is also a prospect that Raymond Williams entertained in *The Politics of Modernism*; although here, as we would expect from Williams, those interactions of past and present are couched in sociocultural rather than in stylistic or compositional terms:

If we are to break out of the non-historical fixity of *post*-modernism, then we must search out and counterpose an alternative tradition taken from the neglected works left in the wide margin of the century, a tradition which may address itself not to this by now exploitable because quite inhuman rewriting of the past but, for all our sakes, to a modern *future* in which community may be imagined again.³

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In light of his argument that modernism has ‘achieved comfortable integration into the new international capitalism’, we could read Williams as confirming the idea that modernism has passed – what seemed so artistically radical is now culturally reified. Not only does he imply that it is a phase in literary history that can only be viewed in retrospect, its legacies addressed only via the prefix *post*; Williams is also keen to ‘remind us that the innovations of what is called Modernism have become the new but fixed forms of our present moment’.⁴ What role, then, does modernism play in a ‘modern *future*’? The answer is more implicit, or inadvertent, in Williams’s perorating comments. It is here that we need to read against the grain of his reconstruction of the fate of modernism’s revolutionary protocols, painting as he does a picture of the project’s exhaustion and its subsequent absorption into a ‘comfortable’ order of consumption. In other words, Williams would undoubtedly be wary of recuperating modernism as a contemporary concept, for it represents – in its early-twentieth-century manifestation – such a ‘highly selective field’;⁵ his very terms, however, point beyond the rather fossilised version of institutional modernism that he frames. The implication is that we should ‘counterpose’ the assumptions that have ‘fixed the moment of Modernism’, because it is a fixity that is produced by the canonising ‘machinery of selective tradition’, whose categories may be inadequate for specifying how a new generation of writers are conversing with that tradition on more open-ended terms and, in so doing, exemplifying modernism’s indispensability.⁶ What might remain most pertinent about Williams’s argument, therefore, could be precisely what runs athwart the twinned impulses of his critique: firstly, to uncover modernism’s complicity in emergent forms of capitalist production; and, secondly, to call for a scholarly reinvestment in the neglected work of (regional) writers who have hitherto been excluded by the (metropolitan) sensibilities of high modernism.⁷ Read counter-intuitively, Williams’s intervention contains within itself an invitation, as it gestures to the viability of thinking about modernism’s continued vitality, to the possibility of realising how it might be ‘imagined again’ after the vapidness of postmodernism.⁸ We can accept such an invitation, providing we make the very distinction that Williams himself elides, one that would allow us to distinguish modernism as a ‘selective’ institutional construction, from modernism as the scene of an unfinished argument about the novel’s critical and formal potentiality. Why some of the most audacious novelists have stepped into that scene in recent years is one of the questions motivating this book, as I consider how the relation between craft and critique in late-twentieth-century fiction corresponds with how ‘the *social form* of modernism’ in its earlier twentieth-century contexts, as Mark McGurl

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notes, was ‘at once activated by and made manifest in the innovative *aesthetic forms* of the art-novel itself’.⁹ If I take seriously Williams’s notion about the way ‘tradition’ can ‘address itself’ to ‘a modern *future*’, I also take it to the next analytical level – and into a new historical epoch – by turning to novelists who have furthered modernist resources in order to meet fresh expectations about the purposes of literary experiment.

This study thus pursues the consequences of modernism’s regeneration in contemporary fiction along two interrelated trajectories: the compositional and the political. The former indicates an attention to technique that shares Liam McIlvanney and Ray Ryan’s contention that ‘we are emerging from a period of heavily theoretical criticism and that, as a result, what might be called the novelness of novels is coming back into focus’.¹⁰ This should not suggest that theoretical positions don’t contribute to or facilitate the insights of this book. It implies instead that a closer scrutiny of the compositional elements of contemporary writing is required if we are to differentiate with any precision the strategies of writers whose affinities with modernism can be as complex and contradictory as they are explicit and self-conscious. Only then can we begin to explore at the levels of technique and context alike the reasons *why* modernist impulses remain so politically enabling for writers who have responded – as my six central writers do – to the material conditions that shape racial, sexual and social identification or injustice. This approach assumes that the particularities of form are therefore central, rather than incidental, to our estimation of contemporary fiction’s involvement in ethical and political realms. In turn, that assumption helps us to counter the sense in which ‘cultural critique’, as Janice Radway has warned, ‘typically attempts to make sense of the situation at the time of writing by relating it to past canons and rarely seeks to trace emergent, gradually building effects over time’,¹¹ precisely because it also counters the idea that ‘past canons’ should remain our primary reference-point when we speak about artistic inheritance. As we shall see, a less programmatic account becomes available for the relation between literary innovation and cultural critique when we look more closely at contemporary writers’ dynamic, if sometimes rebellious, conversations with the past in their process of developing ‘emergent’ narrative practices.

Any ‘modernism after modernism’, as Derek Attridge has put it, ‘necessarily involves a reworking of modernism’s methods, since nothing could be less modernist than a repetition of previous modes, however disruptive they were in their time’.¹² Running centrally throughout this book is my ambition to chart the creative motivations, thematic consequences and

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formal possibilities yielded by that process of reworking, but also to show why each of the very different novelists I consider should want to rework modernism in the first place. To explore why it matters that writers today re-evaluate modernist impulses and deploy them as their own, we need to join critics who, as Amy Hungerford wittily puts it, ‘are not confined to those hefty postmodern slabs that formerly sat on syllabi as proof of the difficulty, and thus the worth, of contemporary writing in the academy’.¹³ The goal of *Modernist Futures* is thus twofold: to propose alternative ways of thinking diachronically about the purpose of experimentation in contemporary fiction, and also, by doing so, to combine late-twentieth-century literary history with the commitments of close reading. Methodologically speaking, I try to be sensitive to the genealogical back-stories of the novel today – without recourse to that more familiar tale of postwar narrative as hedged in by ‘hefty postmodern slabs’ – even as I concentrate on the more local formal and affective properties that make particular novelists unique.

This is hardly an unprecedented move, nor is it the sole preserve of those who study the novel. Voices from art history, philosophy and aesthetics are joining the chorus that proclaims ‘the premise that modernism is over is false’.¹⁴ To substantiate this assertion – or to point out the disciplinary and hermeneutical consequences of refuting that ‘premise’ – J. M. Bernstein makes two further claims on behalf of modernism’s continuity, claims that complement the notion I will be working with in this book: the *promise* of modernism has yet to be fully realised. The first of Bernstein’s claims takes the form of an instruction to criticism itself, as he insists that we need to find modes of identifying how artists and writers have perpetuated that ‘restless insistence on the transgression of past judgments in the new’.¹⁵ His second and related claim is on behalf of modernism’s currency, such that we need to find new ways of speaking about modernist practices *in* the present, rather than from the retrospective vantage point enabled *by* the present. Not simply an argument for extending modernism beyond its received period boundaries, it also addresses modernism as a set of persisting resources, rather than as a collection of historical artefacts. If the ‘task of aesthetics’, writes Bernstein, ‘is to vindicate modernist art’s *own* claim to mattering’, then this is because modernism itself should be seen as a ‘form of art that survives through a reiterated presentation of itself’ and that also becomes the very ‘stakes’ of artistic practice and ‘aesthetics in general’.¹⁶ What Bernstein is implying, as I see it, is that we have been asking the wrong questions. The key issue is not whether modernist continuities exist, but how far, and at what price, modernism’s extension into

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the procedures of contemporary literary or visual art has been obscured by critics who take the bygone vivacity of modernism for granted.

Bernstein raises an important series of metacritical issues, some of which will be explored in this Introduction. If the following chapters linger to some extent on the particularities of how novelists transcribe modernist innovations, I will take the opportunity here to step back somewhat from the writers in question, in order to clarify strands that connect their work and to point out some of the ways we are invited to approach them. In so doing, I not only intend to highlight unexpected correspondences between their creative aims, but also to reflect on how the very subject of contemporary literature's modernist 'heritage' relates to the disciplinary aims of the New Modernist Studies. Such implications for craft and criticism alike are highlighted throughout this study, and they enable me to account for interrelations within and between chapters more substantively than national or stylistic distinctions might imply. In turn, although this book expends much of its energy on exploring *how* modernist aesthetics resurface in contemporary fiction, of no less importance is the issue of *why* writers today extend such approaches to form in the first place – and what that might entail for our evolving critical practices.

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However they evolve, though, such practices are often freighted with suppositions. One might be led to suppose, for example, that a consideration of modernism's salience for contemporary fiction inevitably reinstates critical formalism over ideologically driven interpretations, as though turning from social effects to stylistic expressions were the only means of getting back in touch with the 'novelness of novels' today. Granted, 'the conjuring of "form" and "aesthetics"', as Samuel Otter has remarked, 'discloses a variety of intellectual and emotional responses, spurred by a perceived indifference to verbal complexity, literary agency, textual explication (rather than critique), artistic wholes (rather than symptomatic parts), and readerly pleasures'.¹⁷ The role of formally inspired readings in an approach to the political efficacy of the novel is only as vexed as the disciplinary tales we choose to retell about the pitfalls of close reading and its clashes with cultural analysis. Instead of re-inscribing such incompatibilities, one ought to be able to imagine 'less determined relationships between the formal and the historical and perspectives that might avoid the intoxicating cycle of antagonism or backlash', as Otter describes it, 'in which "form" and "history" are pitted against one another' – a story of

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methodological conflict that ‘may no longer be (and may never have been) tenable’.¹⁸ Sharing this scepticism about the perceived irreconcilability of craft and context in critical practice, throughout this book I adopt the premise that questions of form are indissolubly linked to questions concerning how fiction confronts the material world through its imaginative simulation of how that world is sensed and known. It is a premise that also concurs with Attridge’s contention that ‘[w]hatever else the “modernist” text may be doing (and all literary texts function as a number of things besides literature), it is, through its form, which is to say through its staging of human meanings and intentions, a challenge that goes to the heart of the ethical and political’.¹⁹ As these two pathways – the compositional and the politico-ethical – intersect in *Modernist Futures*, they address the issue of how we negotiate alternative directions for approaching modernism’s persistence and recrudescence in contemporary fiction. We should observe such continuities from a writerly standpoint (in terms of the way they affect and reform the creative agendas of late-twentieth- and twenty-first-century novelists); yet I also trace their repercussions from an interpretive and literary-historical standpoint, so as to show why modernist aesthetics are not only compatible with, but are also actively opening up, new avenues for the novel’s cultural interventions. As Rebecca Walkowitz has acknowledged, ‘modernist strategies can be adapted for various political enterprises, as can critical attitudes’,²⁰ and the six novelists considered in this book give a flavour of just how variously those adaptations occur. Certain shared commitments, however, can be discerned in ways that justify my selection of these writers; but in order to discern them, we first need to bring together a sufficiently agile definition of what *modernism* actually means before we consider what it does for novelists today.

In her study of the relevance of modernist methods for contemporary cosmopolitan fiction, Walkowitz defines modernism as ‘involv[ing] strategies that respond to and engage with the experience of modernity’,²¹ drawing on Foucault’s account of modernism as a ‘consciousness’ of modern life, ‘a type of philosophical interrogation – one that simultaneously problematizes man’s relation to the present, man’s historical mode of being, and the constitution of the self as an autonomous subject’.²² While this kind of interrogation is certainly one that concerns the writers I consider in this book, it doesn’t provide a full range of answers to the question of why writers today are recalibrating modernist strategies to deal with the lived experience of *postmodernity*, compelling us as they do to explore whether it’s more preferable to characterise modernism with the logic of continuity instead of rupture. To say that modernism should be seen, as

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Susan Stanford Friedman does, primarily ‘as the structural principle of radical rupture – wherever, whenever, and in whatever forms it might occur’,²³ is to reinstate a conflation of innovation with dissent that would simply not be recognised by writers who build on modernism’s formal and critical potential. Models of rupture are familiar enough in accounts of early-twentieth-century literary experimentalism; they are models I want to complicate, though, not least because the rupturing of generic or linguistic conventions has not always guaranteed or aspired to politically progressive ends.²⁴ Chapter 1 thus establishes the conceptual and historical parameters within which we can utilise a more dialectical sense of the connection in fiction between inventiveness and literary heritage, a dialectic that informs the readings I then go on to perform in subsequent chapters. By gauging the political valences of this interaction of inheritance and innovation, I question, as Timothy Brennan has done, ‘the idea that *rupture* rather than continuity is the sign of historical change’. Brennan remarks that ‘[t]his radical incantation of rupture – borrowed from the literary avant-gardes and a particular kind of modernism (Pound and Woolf rather than Eliot and Yeats) – is, in fact, conservative. For, if nothing else, the apparent calm of insisting on the flow and repeatability of tradition, as opposed to the Copernican shifts of the supposed year zero of the new, provides a mental landscape in which social transformation can actually be imagined’.²⁵ While the novelists considered in this study are scarcely unquestioning in their approach to ‘the flow and repeatability of tradition’, neither do they see that departing from what Milan Kundera calls ‘the inherited path’ along which writers move inventively in conversation with artistic precedents is inherently radical; instead, such writers combine acts of homage *with* fresh ‘developments in modernist literary style’ that, as Walkowitz has eloquently shown, may ‘coincide with new ways of thinking about political critique’.²⁶ Modernist methods thus enable contemporary novelists to remap that ‘mental landscape’ where transformative contexts of social interaction, political assessment and ethical accountability can be envisioned.

Exploring *how* writers perform that process of imaginative remapping may not yield a startlingly new account of fiction’s well-documented capacity for empathic projection and involvement, a capacity aptly summarised by Jonathan Franzen. Though he is, broadly speaking, a realist writer who would probably be reticent about being aligned with the modernist inheritance, Franzen pinpoints, nonetheless, precisely what is significant about certain modes of narration in contemporary fiction that couldn’t be identified as anything other than modernist. For he insists that ‘the novel

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is the greatest art form when it comes to forging a connection between the intensely interior and personal and the larger social reality'.²⁷ Pursuing this connection in fiction now prompts us to rethink the way we describe what is important (still) about some of the most familiar and exhaustively analysed innovations in twentieth-century writing. For example, if the novelists I examine in this book continue one of the hallmark aims of modernist fiction – to evoke interior subjectivity by simulating the effect of impressions, whether sustained or incoherent, to which subjects emotionally and intellectually respond – they also invite us to reconsider the supposedly inward orientation of that aim. In responding to modernism's experimental models of mentation, contemporary writers reveal the potential for modernist fiction to be more than simply a laboratory for examining consciousness as a hermetic domain. Instead, they incorporate techniques for showing how mental experiences are shaped by material circumstances, how protagonists' psychological states adapt to and are mutually pervaded by the social realms they navigate – revealing their working definition of the modernist novel as a medium for connecting interiority and accountability, braiding the description of characters' innermost reflections into the fabric of worldly situations.

This much may be familiar to readers of J. M. Coetzee, Milan Kundera, Ian McEwan, Toni Morrison, Michael Ondaatje and Philip Roth. Their fictions have often thematised whether in traumatic or enabling ways the relation between mind and world, perception and action, while testing the compatibility between the cultivation of personal agency and the demands of ethical responsibility. What remains to be answered, however, is the question of *why* these writers have chosen – creatively yet purposively – to extend modernist resources in representing their characters' phenomenal encounters with sociocultural environments and conflicts. This question matters to *Modernist Futures* not only because it lays the foundation for many of my interpretive aims and claims, but also because it justifies my corpus, a corpus drawn from a specific generation of novelists who began writing in the heyday of postmodernism and whose careers developed in its wake. After living through an age when self-referentiality as a creative compulsion reigned supreme, these figures are particularly concerned with exploring how the immediacy of inward experience relates to the interpersonal facets of social accountability. As they respond to an era typified by the fiction's parodic self-inspection, such writers reintegrate the novel's alternative capacities for interior and exterior forms of engagement – relating the potency of its simulation of emotive perceptions to the pertinence of its treatment of material realities.

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It is thanks to the postmodern, then, that modernism has any future at all. Part of the purpose of this Introduction is to explain in literary-historical terms why that might be so, showing how those writers selected for the following five chapters reinvigorate modernist aesthetics in response to politically abortive metafiction. How we define that response, together with how we grasp what it is about modernist narrative that remains important for contemporary writers, will therefore depend on the kind of story we choose to tell about the development of postwar fiction – if indeed we choose to describe it in developmental terms in the first place. Some thirty years ago, Leslie Fiedler intimated the need for alternative accounts of modernism's reception at a time when fiction seemed more concerned with rescinding than with accepting whatever gifts were bestowed by earlier twentieth-century innovators. He noted, for instance, that '[t]hough a novelist like John Barth is clearly indebted to the example of James Joyce, he uses Joycean techniques not developmentally but terminally'.²⁸ This dissolution of modernism also announced the dismemberment of postmodernism's very enterprise, as metafiction turned in ever-tighter circles of self-interrogation. 'In light of this', reflects Fiedler,

I was convinced for a long time that what was really dead in our culture was not the conventional novel at all, but *only* the kind of anticonventional long fiction which asked of the reader a constant awareness of its own artifice – and a concomitant admiration of the virtuosity of its artificer *as* artificer, as well as his ingenuity in making the death of the genre he purports to write its central subject. Clearly, it seems to me, such terminal fiction could not be written over and over without becoming an intolerable bore to its writers as well as its readers. But, alas, under the aegis of 'post-modernism', it has continued to be practiced to the very verge of the twenty-first century – and is still read by a tiny audience of a very special kind, whose nature can only be understood in terms of a radical change in the way long fictions have come to be consumed since the 1950s.²⁹

The problem with this rather gloomy picture of postmodernism's destruction of the novel, and its critical absorption by an academy home to its own receptive but 'tiny audience of a very special kind', is that it forestalls the prospect of ever getting modernism *back into* that picture on the 'verge of the twenty-first century'. One of my contentions in this book is that contemporary writers are not only challenging any neat progression from modernist writing to the 'terminal fiction' of recent decades; they are also compelling us to wonder whether our understandings of how novelists now regard the politics of modernist forms have been built upon literary-historical charts that no longer seem accurate. To put it another way, in order to explore what writers now expect to achieve by reincorporating modernist techniques, we need to ask whether our conception of