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978-1-107-40470-0 - Modernism and the Locations of Literary Heritage

Andrea Zemgulys

Excerpt

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Introduction

This is a book about modernism's famously vexed relation to the past: its efforts to break with the past, to alter the past through new traditions, to retell the past in ways transformative of the present. This book, however, is not about just any past, but one that bloomed during the Victorian and Edwardian periods, roughly from 1840 to 1930, and especially from about 1880 to 1930.¹ It is a past best captured by the term "heritage." Heritage is the creation of a past that is patently ideological and (thus) nostalgic, defining of collective and individuated subjects and rationalizing of unsettling social change.² It is a past entirely fitted to the present. The heritage examined here was fitted to the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, sustaining of middle-class, middlebrow, and metropolitan worlds and appealing to both an idealized England and a transnational "English-speaking race." It imagined a fulfilling return home, provided a sense of earned progress, and mapped a stable British Empire. The heritage examined here created the past primarily in *locations* and, furthermore, made especial use of *literature* to do so, translating imaginary settings into writers' footpaths and authors into house-dwelling persons. This study of heritage shows how, in their efforts to rework the past, modernist writers were not alone: they were in the company of innumerable other writers and readers who enacted heritage through museums and memorials, guide-books and studies of "historic" London and "literary" England. Modernists, in this light, were even in the company of tourists.

Modernism and the Locations of Literary Heritage examines how and why heritage, and literary heritage in particular, set the scene for a self-consciously new literature, for modernism in the early twentieth century. It explains the location of modernism – specifically, the writings of E.M. Forster, T.S. Eliot, and Virginia Woolf – in the center of a country made "old."³ It reads modernism in places where, on purpose and by design, the past was made to occupy the present. In its study of such places, *Modernism and the Locations of Literary Heritage* uncovers a vast

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archive of heritage texts and sites, from city council minutes on memorial plaques and private surveys of “old” London, to tourist guidebooks and maps. It brings new attention to myriad volumes from the Victorian and Edwardian period that have been largely overlooked in contemporary scholarship and that helped locate a past for modern Britain. Tracing writers from Chaucer to Hardy in their “original” settings, these volumes describe an interpretive practice then known as “literary geography,” and reveal amateur understandings of what and how readers (British, Anglo-colonial, American) “read and remember.” *Modernism and the Locations of Literary Heritage*, in sum, explores the heritage archive not only as matter for contextualizing literary modernism, but just as significantly, as matter for constructing a history of reading in the modern “English” world.

Though addressing one of modernist studies’ central themes in its study of writers’ relations to the past, *Modernism and the Locations of Literary Heritage* illuminates a context of modernism heretofore unexamined, and for good reason: heritage is a context modernists have trained us to ignore. Modernism has fixed our attention on its use of allusion and its appropriation of older forms alongside other favored aesthetic strategies (such as stream of consciousness, impressionism, imagism, and symbolism). It has therefore presented itself in relation to earlier writers and writing that is apparently unmediated or at least “purely” literary in its mediations. Heritage, by contrast, represented a visibly and even ostentatiously mediated past: it presented earlier writers and their writing in the form of memorial fountains, statuary, and museum houses, and through “practical guides” and illustrated volumes describing the settings of Spenser, Shakespeare, and Dickens. Heritage not only constructed an oppressively crowded and immediately encumbered relation to the past, but it also constructed this relation as though transparent and unproblematic: marking the location of earlier events, deeming it history, framing it by dates, heritage declared the past captured for our inspection. Heritage thus constructed the past wrongly from modernists’ perspectives, and furthermore constructed the wrong past, one middle-class and middlebrow, one appealing to uncritical consumers and reverent “pilgrims.” Heritage was a project Victorian in character and in content and yet visibly present and growing in the early twentieth century; it was therefore unfashionable to the moderns as both a past *and* a contemporary context. By situating Woolf, Eliot, and Forster in relation to a developing project of heritage, I contribute to a growing body of scholarship that examines how modernists did not simply break with “the Victorians” nor cleanly reject middlebrow culture, but necessarily engaged with these as elements of modern life.⁴

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Victorian and Edwardian heritage sited the past through memorials and preserved buildings and through guidebooks and other place-themed texts. Reading self-consciously innovative writers in the context of heritage, I examine the locations of modernism as much as its relation to the past. I examine, in other words, not only modernist articulations of time but also of space. Today, “heritage” evokes images of marble monuments, stately homes, and ancient ruins, and such sites were certainly featured in antiquarian texts, guidebooks, and histories produced in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and they were at times used as settings in modernist works. However, I attend to a different strain of heritage, to pasts less grandly and less remotely situated, captured by modest residential and modern urban sites. *Modernism and the Locations of Literary Heritage* studies a heritage that was made through the living places of the “eminent” dead, of Thomas More and William Shakespeare, Lord Nelson and Isaac Newton, and that found rich ground in the literary dead particularly. Through material markers and published descriptions, whole counties became “Shakespeare’s” or “Wordsworth’s” and entire city neighborhoods “Johnson’s” or “Dickens’s”; particular buildings, houses, and streets became historic for their association with the living activities of the celebrity such as walking, breathing, and gardening, and further including those activities of beloved *imaginary* characters. Landscapes and views both “natural” and far from home, I argue, were increasingly presented as domesticated – tamed by writers’ daily meanderings, oriented around homes, and reassuringly English. Additionally and relatedly, *Modernism and the Locations of Literary Heritage* studies a heritage made through modern city streets and buildings that were not immediately understood to be historic. This heritage fashioned a London that was to its very “mud” the site of the past, and it broadened the purview of “historic” to include not only quotidian and common scenes “peopled” by celebrity and literary characters, but also modern structures dating from the seventeenth century to the beginning of the nineteenth century. England was thereby made “literary” and London was thereby made newly “old” at the turn of the century: each are examined in the first part of this book, and used to set the scene for the second, for my study of modernism in location. I locate Virginia Woolf in museums made of “great” writers’ houses in country and city; E.M. Forster in a “literary and historic” Chelsea; and T.S. Eliot in parish churches of London’s City, relatively modern sites then being revalued as extraordinary and preservation-worthy. (As this range of sites indicates, this book is titled “the locations of literary heritage” because its focus is principally, though not exclusively, literary heritage. The heritage studied in this volume, in contrast to the

country and antiquarian heritage just now described, and for reasons detailed later, could well be labeled “metropolitan heritage.”)

By locating modernism in newly historic living places and city scenes, *Modernism and the Locations of Literary Heritage* reads against our trained sights in another way: heritage represents a past wrong to modernism in its locations as it is wrong to modernism in its mediating and middling character. For, I locate modernism in the wrong city. Modernist scholars and students prefer a different London than the one heritage builds: we prefer a London constituted by motorcars, hurried pedestrians, patently new buildings and streets, and characterized by renovating if not alienating change. Woolf, Forster, and Eliot certainly have encouraged this preference in us by most vividly portraying London in this way. Heritage, by contrast, imaged a London of memorialized houses and preserved churches, “celebrated dead persons,” streets made familiar by history and literature, and characterized by reassuring continuity and nostalgia rather than by stimulating change.⁵ “Literary and historic” London, I argue, was far from these modernists’ ideal of a city that makes for good art, but it set conditions for their literary experiments regardless. Most of the writers’ house-museums Woolf studied were in London, and her most extensive essay on the topic appeared as part of a series on “the London Scene”; it is the courts of Johnson’s Fleet Street and the townhouses of Carlyle’s Chelsea that dramatically stage discovery of “impersonality” and her transition from Edwardian convention to “Georgian” innovation (in *Orlando* and *Night and Day*, respectively). Chelsea and its historic “associations” enable an anomalous moment of appreciation for designed urban space in E.M. Forster’s *Howards End*, one that notably satisfies the novel’s modernist ambitions. And old-becoming-historic churches both suggest and set T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*’s innovations as much as do the City’s bridges and traffic flow.

Modernism and the Locations of Literary Heritage, in other words, writes a *geography* of literary modernism, asking how our understanding of a famously deracinated, dislocated literature changes when we read it in place, and especially when we read it in a place strikingly contrary to its own sensibilities. It is a geography in which material space is not a determining condition, but subject to the meanings made of it by literary and other kinds of texts (a space made “place,” represented and temporarily defined); conversely, it is a work of literary criticism in which space and place matter, setting conditions that make possible imaginative texts, but that are unevenly acknowledged or recognized by those texts and their writers. In this effort, I have been influenced by the work

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numerous geographers and spatial theorists such as Denis Cosgrove, Stephen Daniels, Felix Driver, Mona Domosh, David Gilbert, David Harvey, Fredric Jameson, and Allan Pred, as well as the oft-invoked Bachelard, Lefebvre, De Certeau, and Foucault.⁶ And I take special inspiration from cultural historians who have carefully examined the dynamic relations of modern cities and their literatures, especially Peter Fritzsche, Sharon Marcus, and Judith Walkowitz.⁷

Modernism, as Raymond Williams among others argued, is the product of “the metropolis,” of great cities like London and Paris where international artists converged, where novelty flourished and the avant-garde prospered, and where alienation gave way to the liberating potential of art. What additionally made the metropolis the site of early twentieth-century modernism was its long-standing and institutionalized cultural tradition, its “academies and museums and their orthodoxies.”⁸ The heritage examined in this book, I argue, was just such a metropolitan institution, though one maintained by rather humble house museums and ephemeral guidebooks rather than by centuries-old academies. In its range of sites and texts, heritage did present “orthodoxy” against which these modernists reacted: for Woolf, it ossified gendered understandings of literature and required a critical renovation, and for Forster, it represented a memorialized past best superseded. For Eliot, by contrast, heritage was positively suggestive for its *unorthodoxies*, its disregard for private property (for Church and City Corporation claims on their buildings) and its thinking both “beyond” and “within” time. However discordant with the city of alienating change for which modernists have trained our sights, heritage was part of London’s fabric for these writers, and offered grounds for reworking their relation to the past. And however much criticized or disdained, heritage did have its attributes for these writers: models of readerly pleasure and writerly process, for instance, and a sense of place and time. Reading modernist literature in its engagement with heritage sites and texts reveals how it elaborately figured and narrated, how it negotiated with a past (mis)located in the present.

Wrong past, wrong location, and finally, wrong crowd. Heritage further presents an unlikely context for understanding modernism because it was associated with tourism and tourists. The located past examined in this book was created through the work of patrician memorial trusts, government committees, studious biographers and historians, and through the work of guidebook writers and the support of visitors to these sites. Heritage developed “on the tourist track” even though its texts are peppered with anti-tourism – with a disdain for tourists as supposedly

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simple-minded, consuming, and unread. Despite high-minded advocates and altogether modest claims, heritage was associated with tourism and its trappings, with grossly false construction of the past, with packaging rather than preservation. It is partly because of this association that the modernist links to heritage have been hidden from our view: Woolf and Eliot expressly disdain tourists, and teach us not to perceive them as engaging in tourism. However, I understand tourism differently. Tourism is the act of visiting places formally or informally framed as “sights,” places publicly oriented (“visitable,” accessible) if not actually public. Tourism is an act mediated by guidebooks and guides, maps and wall texts, *and* “great” literature. Tourism is practiced casually and concertedly, by both local residents and traveling non-residents. If not highly intellectual, tourism is not dumb. As the geographer David Gilbert has compellingly argued, tourism texts should be understood to present even “deep” knowledges of place. Acknowledging tourism as more than mindless consumption and as at times a local activity brings into view innumerable persons, places, and texts that are not represented by the more respected phenomena of “travel” or “journeying.” It allows us to see even our fiercely intellectual, London-residing modernists as occasional tourists.⁹

Forster, Eliot, and Woolf are thus not obvious in their engagement with the heritage examined by this book, and they are not uniform. I attend most carefully to Woolf’s development as a critic and writer because she was most directly engaged with the heritage presented in this study *across* many minor texts and over three decades of writing. By contrast, Eliot’s and Forster’s writings significantly intersect with this heritage *within* single major texts from their early careers. For that reason, their chapters are limited to analyses of *The Waste Land* and *Howards End*, respectively. These works, alongside Woolf’s *Night and Day*, illustrate how heritage set conditions for modernism’s early, ambitious, and even idealist writing of the city and its art. I analyze these works, in other words, in settings preservative of the past to reveal their experiments with space and time. And I bring into foreground a “Bloomsbury” (to use the term loosely, see fn. 4) thoughtfully and progressively engaged with mainstream cultures of literary and historical understanding. I briefly address these writers’ late-career interest in a more recognizable English heritage – a heritage stocked with country great houses and antique landscapes – in the book’s conclusion.

Modernism and the Locations of Literary Heritage examines the development of heritage as a background for understanding literary modernism, and additionally, as itself a significant and telling project of modernity.

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This book shows how heritage, and literary heritage in particular, helped evolve geographical and social imaginaries of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Heritage constructed a past wanted in the late Victorian and Edwardian present: a past reassuring of an English metropolitan identity in the midst of global circuits of economic and cultural capital, and a past reassuring of continuity in the midst of increasingly conspicuous modernization and socio-material change. In explaining the modernity of heritage, I thereby also tell a story of London's turn-of-the-twentieth-century modernization, not through the building of railways and telegraph wires, but instead through the construction of residential commemoration plaques, writers' museums, and antique-themed projects that were component to "improving" London. I argue that "literary and historic London" crystallized as a space because of redevelopment projects at the turn of the twentieth century, such as that which demolished neighborhoods around Fleet Street and the theater district of Drury Lane. "Literary and historic London" was nostalgic and idealizing of stability because it was imbricated with material and social instability, part of rather than apart from a London of new technologies, new persons, and new problems. I furthermore analyze the meanings and uses of commemoration plaques in London, what became known as "blue plaques." Unobtrusive and cheap, modest and domestic in figuration and reference, such memorials have become altogether ubiquitous in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and are as eloquent of city space as the spectacular monuments that have until now occupied scholarly attention.

In its modern and urban themes, *Modernism and the Locations of Literary Heritage* also carefully explores a pressing interest in cultural studies today, how heritage – an ideological, nostalgic, and often conservative, response to modernity – is put to double use as "memory," as a dialogical, critical, and open-ended recollection of the past. In pursuing the complex of heritage and memory, I draw insight from the works of Walter Benjamin as well as a wide range of scholars who have explored the politics of heritage and memory in both Britain and London (such as Christine Boyer, Michael Crang, Robert Hewison, Peter Mandler, Raphael Samuel, and Patrick Wright).¹⁰ In attending to the bourgeois appeal of heritage, I take cue from scholars like Alison Light and David Matless, who have aimed to redress a scholarly neglect of cultural conservatism in England, a set of tastes and ideals superficially devoid of politics and oriented around stasis and hierarchy.¹¹ However, this book also studies instances in which heritage emerged out of progressive political agendas, most significantly in the work of the London

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County Council. *Modernism and the Locations of Literary Heritage*'s most singular contribution to this scholarship comes by way of its concentrated study of literary heritage. In chapters on England as well as on London (Chapters 2 and 3), I probe the unstable and yet vitalizing intersection of collective and individuated memory that displays heritage's protean politics, an intersection that literary heritage makes manifest in its figuration of readers who "read and remember."

Recent years have witnessed a small but growing field focused on the "afterlife" of literature that tourism represents (in volumes by Dydia DeLyser, Hans Christian Anderson and Mike Robinson, and Nicola Watson, most notably).¹² *Modernism and the Locations of Literary Heritage* contributes to this branch of cultural and literary studies by tracing Woolf's acts of literary tourism and her writing of them in both essays and novels. (To be clear, Eliot's acts of tourism were not literary, and Forster's relation to literary heritage is only indirectly by way of tourism.) It further contributes to this branch by studying two literary heritage projects additional to that of tourism: memorialization and what was known by 1904 as "literary geography," an interpretative practice of reading literature in place.¹³ This study documents a growing interest in locating creative origins, in mapping and describing the scenes of a writer's inspiration and composition. It shows that, in its craving for "original" scenes, literary heritage craved particularly *English* scenes. *Modernism and the Locations of Literary Heritage* thus finds in the heritage archive a rich source for the study of a metropolitan English imaginary, and like other scholars of this phenomenon (such as Ian Baucom, Robert Colls, Jed Esty, Krishnan Kumar, and Katie Trumpener), I emphasize its subtle strangeness.¹⁴ In the case of heritage, I emphasize Literary England's multinational constituency: the literary past was perceived as the property of England and its peoples both by those who could claim England by birth and by US Americans who claimed England by cultural affiliation. And I emphasize how literary heritage was metropolitan in character even in its country village settings: the thatched cottages and woodland scenes that pervaded heritage texts and constituted many of its sites projected England and (eventually) London as imperial home and center for global audiences.

Just as importantly, *Modernism and the Locations of Literary Heritage* finds in the heritage archive a history of reading, a record of shifting tastes in authors and authority. In its craving for "original" scenes, literary heritage not only made a Literary England, but also made the "imagination" rational and observable, "the author" an imitable likeness and palpable human, and literature the work of good women and "great

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men.” Literary heritage is oriented around domesticity, recreation, and personality; it reflects a culture of industry, social aspiration, and secularized Christianity. For all these reasons, the texts and sites of literary heritage represent understandings of literature and normative social values familiar to scholars of the Victorian and Edwardian periods. Heritage represents understandings and values that are altogether *commonplace*, and (I argue) significant for their ordinariness rather than trivial. Heritage shows just how literature was recalled, reinterpreted, and reenacted by readers to make and make sense of the modern English world. At the same time, literary heritage glimpses readerly fantasies wishfully *uncommon*: literary geography limns readers embodying of themselves and their authors, dreaming of a relation between reader and author that is intimate and even exclusive. Literary heritage, I argue, promotes a fantastic sense of privacy in readers while at the same time publicizing literature, locating it in visitable sites and declaring it a shared legacy. Literary heritage both appeals to and disappoints solitary, private subjects, and as it comes into its heyday in the later nineteenth century, efforts to distinguish better readers from lesser tourists – to re-create solitude – appropriately come to a pitch. On nearly all these points, Virginia Woolf took notice of literary heritage: my final, “consummate” chapter therefore explores not only how heritage set the scene for Woolf’s turn to modernist “vision,” but also how heritage set the scene for her developing critique of personality and the culture of “great men.”

Modernism and the Locations of Literary Heritage, in brief, both historicizes and practices literary geography, explaining Victorian and Edwardian efforts to locate the literary and cultural past, and locating modernism in places shaped by these efforts. It reads the literature that “made it new” in a country and city made newly old, illuminating modernism’s experimental ambitions against a background unlikely and underexplored. It uses the “there and then” of heritage, in Allan Pred’s phrasing, to bring into sight modernism’s “here and now.”

In the twenty-first century, literary heritage continues to thrive, and modernist writers are now its subjects rather than its critics. Literary heritage positively flowered, however, at the turn of the twentieth century, when its various projects were viewed as novel, timely, and even urgently necessary representations of the cultural past. How, why, and where literary heritage had its heyday is the subject on which Part One of this study begins.

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