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Comparative Literary History

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“COMPARATIVE
LITERARY
HISTORY”
Michael J. Griffin II

*Modernist Futures: Innovation
and Inheritance in the*

Contemporary Novel by David
James. Cambridge: Cambridge
University Press, 2012. Pp. 223.
\$95.00 cloth.

The scope of David James’s new study, *Modernist Futures*, begins with a poignant question of interest to those scholars invested in both literary history and criticism: “What does it really mean to consider that any 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?” (1). To begin this inquiry, James suggests redefining the terminal point of literary modernism. James does not view the postwar period or the rise of postmodern experimentation as the last boundary of modernism. Instead, James demonstrates how contemporary novelists, through their complex relationship to modernism and literary inheritance, have become the successors of modernism, suggesting that the project of modernism is not yet finished, thereby offering his readers an example of what “long modernism” may look like (418).¹ His contribution thus addresses the charge set forth by Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz in “The New Modernist Studies”—that is, to map the “expansive tendency” of modernism as it moves outward in “temporal, spatial, and vertical directions” in creating its canon (737).² Whereas Mao and Walkowitz’s own survey of this expansion problematically neglects the temporal, the work done by James recuperates this elision;

Modernist Futures clearly articulates how literary historians and scholars in both New Modernist studies and contemporary literature can advance their own critical practices by examining the parallels between modernism and contemporary fiction. The comparative nature of this study suggests a rethinking of literary history as James considers how and why “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” (2). James names these authors as the successors of modernism: Philip Roth, Milan Kundera, Michael Ondaatje, J. M. Coetzee, Ian McEwan, and Toni Morrison.

To justify this selection, James introduces a concept called “the ethics of reading” through which he seeks to “pinpoint writers whose reinvestment in modernism has enabled them to rethink the very role that rhetorical reflexivity might play in narratives that provoke our ethical engagement” (18). How these novelists stylistically and thematically engage with topics of sexual violence, racial injustice, and political oppression becomes one vehicle that James uses to articulate the responsibility that the novel and its readers have to the world at large, and thus

unites these chosen authors. Rather than turning toward the postmodern era’s overreliance on irony, parody, or nonlinear page design to create self-reflection, these contemporary novelists “reinvigorate the novel’s capacity to engage with changing socio-political environments” by returning to modernist forms of self-interrogation (99). The following claim, made in reference to McEwan, illustrates this ethics of reading: “He not only raises ethical questions diegetically, by pursuing the consequences of characters’ moral errors of judgment, but also on a hermeneutic level, as he invites readers at once to contemplate their own expectations of fiction itself as a moral medium and to speculate about the nature of authorial accountability” (144). Of course, this critical maneuver only enhances what also unites these authors, which is their own critical work on modernism, thus complicating notions of literary heritage. While it may be anathema to suggest that the contemporary novelist can be also classified as modernist, since that very movement established itself through its own rupture from tradition and its revolution of literary forms and style, James fashions a link between the two by demonstrating the complexity of a notion such as inheritance, leaving open the question of whether modernist inheritance is embraced consistently and knowingly by the contemporary novelist.

In a critical work that investigates innovation, it is refreshing to see James putting into practice such a model. Never is this more transparent than in his chapter “‘The perfect state for a novel:’ Michael Ondaatje’s Cubist Imagination.” By investigating cubism in relation to Ondaatje’s novels, he demonstrates that a modernist inheritance is not necessarily a literary one (65–72). James revives the concept of spatial form to show how cubism “enables alternative modes of seeing to carry out certain kinds of politico-ethical work, revealing Ondaatje to be doing more than aestheticising the act of observation” (70). Specifically, Hana’s bouts of retrospection in *The English Patient* (1992) and Anil’s descriptions of the Sri Lankan setting in *Anil’s Ghosts* (2000) are stellar examples of how Ondaatje uses cubist preoccupations with multiperspectivism, structure, and volume to innovate narrative form (84–92). James’s insightful close readings of Ondaatje’s texts demonstrate how an attention to form in contemporary fiction can reveal a preoccupation with modernist style and methods. Though the relationship between the sister arts—writing and painting—has been examined in modernism, James brings an analysis of the interarts relationship into the criticism of contemporary writing. To consider how an aesthetic movement from modernism such as cubism has an afterlife in the contemporary moment means

to reevaluate how Ondaatje, and by extension other writers, draw upon modernist aesthetic movements to challenge narrative form.

Although inheritance can be articulated as a one-to-one relationship, *Modernist Futures* rarely falls back on this pedestrian model. Instead, its close readings often convey a more complex relationship between contemporary novelists and their heritage. Thus, James says of McEwan that “his affiliation to literary modernism is one that he both acknowledges and denies: sometimes adopting, at other times parodying, the sentiments and strategies that early-twentieth-century experimenters sought to advance” (136), while also claiming that “Coetzee has responded dynamically to modernism in ways that resemble disobedience more than reverence, stringently avoiding pastiche” (96). These two contrasting reactions to modernism demonstrated by McEwan and Coetzee not only suggest differing models of literary inheritance, but also how that very notion complicates an understanding of influence and the transmission of a literary heritage. The chapters on McEwan and Coetzee, like the one on Ondaatje, also evoke aesthetic movements, impressionism and minimalism, respectively, as sources of influence, though in these chapters James situates them within a literary rather than a visual counterpart. James mines the critical scholarship on

modernist figures, specifically Ford Maddox Ford and Samuel Beckett, to discuss how minimalist style impacts Coetzee's prose across his works—from *Dusklands* (1974) to *Youth* (2002). By using this triangular dynamic, James can examine how the novel becomes a site of change, recuperating loss and provoking readers to an awareness of how the inward experience of reading can create wider social change. "The conundrums of perception and judgment that lay at the heart of literary impressionism" are clearly summoned by the works of McEwan, of which James gives particular attention to *Atonement* (2001) and *Saturday* (2005) (136). James maintains through his analysis that the generic instability of McEwan's writing suggests a further affinity for modernism, and he seizes this categorical quality to discuss how the earlier period often finds its way into McEwan's practice, as McEwan's fiction clearly draws upon practitioners of impressionism such as Ford Maddox Ford, Joseph Conrad, and Virginia Woolf.

The transnational and temporal juxtapositions created in the other two chapters of *Modernist Futures* also offer up rich sites for exploring how modernism has been resurrected in the contemporary moment. A chapter on Philip Roth and Milan Kundera continues on with the work set forth in the introduction by articulating how innovation in narrative does not

have to sacrifice understanding and incorporating influence. Within this comparative reading, James fashions a reading of voice, focalization, and character to show how experimentation does not mean a repudiation of prior authors and text but rather a richer understanding of how contemporary novelists craft their own trajectory through modernist influence rather than in spite of it. The concluding chapter on Toni Morrison, a rich and dense analysis of what has been dubbed the "Morrison trilogy" by Justine Tally—*Beloved* (1987), *Jazz* (1992), and *Paradise* (1997)—examines how her challenges to the "reading protocol," to borrow from Leonard Diepeveen as James does, testify to her inroads into formal innovation and narrative.³ These instances highlight the "intensity and ethical importance" of reader participation in the construction of the novel because they transform the intensely personal experience of reading into one that encourages social change (181–83). Here, James deepens a critical understanding of Morrison in relation to William Faulkner and Virginia Woolf, two authors continually evoked when Morrison's fiction is discussed. Drawing extensively upon her essays and interview, this chapter observes how Morrison's identity is intimately invested in an understanding of modernist influence, history, and an aesthetics of virtue.

James's scholarship in *Modernist Futures* clearly offers new ways of thinking about inheritance and innovation in contemporary novels as well as rethinking literary history. However, the one area in which his scholarship seems not to intervene is in terms of the *vertical* direction of New Modernist studies as articulated by Mao and Walkowitz. The hypercanonical nature of this project, with its Anglo-American and Western European focus, unfortunately overlooks many peripheral writers and subjects. James situates the modernist project through figures from Conrad to Beckett, and his chosen canon of contemporary writers are either Nobel laureates or ones consistently rumored to receive the award. How would adopting writers less familiarly associated with modernism like Sylvia Townsend Warner, Elizabeth Taylor, or Henry Green transform a definition of modernism? Similarly, why not locate the modernist legacy in the contemporary fiction of Alan Hollinghurst, Lionel Shriver, Lorrie Moore, or Michael Cunningham? Setting aside these questions, however, James presents literary scholars and interested academics with a useful and much-needed study of contemporary literature. *Modernist Futures* not only helps to shape a burgeoning field of literary study shaped by a temporal moment but advances critical work done on the key figures it examines. James excavates the annals of the modernist

archive to examine why a renewed sense of the modernist project subsists in creative and critical works today. The care and attention he pays to sources, specifically the fiction itself and author interviews, is beyond reproach as he casts a wide net to cover various avenues of criticism used to inform the scholarly work he achieves. In order to articulate a new understanding of modernism and the contemporary, *Modernist Futures* brings together two historically situated moments through their engagement with the turn inward and with experimentation. The appeal of *Modernist Futures* is sure to be long-lasting as scholars continue to debate modernism's influence and as the canon of contemporary writers continues to evolve.

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NOTES

1. Amy Hungerford, "On the Period Formerly Known as Contemporary," *American Literary History* 20, nos. 1–2 (2008): 410–19.
2. Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz, "The New Modernist Studies," *PMLA* 123, no. 3 (2008): 737–48.
3. Justine Tally, "The Morrison trilogy," in *The Cambridge Companion to Toni Morrison*, ed. Justine Tally, Cambridge Companions to Literature (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 75–91.