

Modernism between History and Academia

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Bahun, Sanja. *Modernism and Melancholia: Writing as Countermourning*. Oxford: OUP, 2014. 236 pages. ISBN 978-0-19-997795-6. Hb. \$45.00.

Goldstone, Andrew. *Fictions of Autonomy: Modernism from Wilde to de Man*. Oxford: OUP, 2013. 204 pages. ISBN 978-0-19-986112-5. Hb. \$73.00.

The insight that the modernist movement cannot be separated from its canonization by academia and critics has informed recent advances in the discipline, and is one of the structuring devices of two additions to the quickly expanding and diversifying field of Modernism studies: Andrew Goldstone's *Fictions of Autonomy*, and Sanja Bahun's *Modernism and Melancholia*. From its inception, Modernism has eminently relied on its authors' ability to set the terms of their own artistic/textual practices, and to educate the taste of their public; from the late 1940s, its canonization depended on the critical interpretation of texts and theory, and on the interpenetration of the two, as witnessed in the work of crossover artists, such as T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Virginia Woolf, or critics and philosophers, such as Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, Clement Greenberg, Herbert Read, Richard Ellmann, and Hugh Kenner (Rabaté 5-9). Modernism studies have been closely linked, from their beginnings, to post-structuralist theory, in a mutual exploitation of concepts, procedures, and textual practices; as early as 1939, Modernism was recognized to be not only a way of writing but also a way of reading, a critical idiom, with formalist criticism seen as its continuation. New Criticism is, however, only the beginning of the crystallization of an essentially modernist critical practice and idiom, bound up with the (fiction of) aesthetic autonomy, a set of assumptions first propagated by the *fin-de-siècle* art for art's sake movement, according to which literature is independent of the social world of its emergence. The extreme form of autonomy, according to Goldstone's thesis, is the freedom from referentiality, whereby the modern (American) university and institutionalized "High Theory" came to substitute nonreferential literary practices and theories of language for a real-world audience. This general theory of literature's autonomy from reference finds its logical end point in Paul de Man's absolutization of rhetorical reading, and his claim that philosophy shares the condition of literature, insofar as it is dependent on language/figuration: thus, de Man's modernism, "unlike his

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own general principles but like the fictions of other writers . . . reconstructs autonomy as a way literature connects to its historical contexts—despite its resistance to external referentiality” (167-69).

Fictions of Autonomy starts with a series of caveats: most importantly, that with all the foundational, sociologically-informed criticism (Pierre Bourdieu, Bürger, Jed Esty, Rebecca Walkowitz, Douglas Mao, and so forth) unearthing the social, political, and economic relations on which a putatively autonomous aesthetic depends, one has to take the “forms of relative autonomy seriously” (2). It is precisely this pursuit of *relative* aesthetic autonomy as a significant aspect of Modernism’s engagement with the world that leads modernist authors “to seek to transform the social relations of their literary productions” (4). Goldstone’s book explores four versions of aesthetic autonomy in, and through, the work of *fin-de-siècle* (Oscar Wilde, Joris-Karl Huysmans, Villiers de l’Isle-Adam), high modernist writers (Djuna Barnes, James Joyce, Wallace Stevens, Eliot), and theorists (Adorno, de Man): the liberation from the constraints of labor, personality, political community, and linguistic reference.

The servant figures in *fin-de-siècle* aestheticist fiction and drama might seem an odd angle from which to explore the practice of artistic autonomy. Since the very premise of aestheticist fiction is delimiting its concerns from any form of social realism, the figure of the domestic servant—a token of social realities kept at bay—becomes a litmus test for the limits of the dominance of form, of which the epitome is Phipps, the butler of Wilde’s *An Ideal Husband*, “a mask with a manner” (Wilde 291). Through a series of incisive close readings of Wilde and Huysmans, Goldstone points out how their texts hinge on the coincidence of the exigencies of aestheticist dramatic composition with the demands imposed by class structure on domestic life (25); so the acquiescence of Wilde’s butler in his master’s jokes turns into an act of parodic insubordination, since “his formal function of upholding comic machinery and his job of upholding the decorum of artistic life are identical” (27). In this way, aestheticist texts convey a knowledge that they formally try to exclude: their servant figures are traces of a rejected social reality, who mark the limits of aestheticism’s (relative) autonomy, including the gesture of holding up the (cracked) looking-glass. The ending of Huysmans’s *À rebours* [*Against the Grain*], with the servants closing the library door on Des Esseintes—an admission of the aestheticist project’s defeat—thematizes the book’s self-contemplation, also suggesting the dependence on servants of both the master’s and the book’s project, of aestheticist escape from the material world (44).

The chapter dedicated to the modernist doctrine of impersonality brings together an unlikely tandem, Eliot and Adorno, through the interlocking themes of escape from personality, late style, and (biographical, biological) aging. Goldstone shows how Adorno's concept of stylistic lateness, first formulated in the 1934 essay "Beethoven's Late Style," pairs lateness—grounded in facts of personal and biological life—and impersonality as pure, autonomous artistic form. Simultaneously, this concept of lateness is connected to (proto)Modernism, Beethoven's quartets and late piano sonatas being essentially framed as precursors of Schoenberg's Second Viennese School, in linguistic tropes suggestive of Modernism. The same contradictory movement, of simultaneous disengagement and linking, is found through Eliot's poetry and in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," with its stress on the mature artist's mind as being more tuned to the demands of self-effacement. Written in Eliot's thirties, the essay makes the poet's own age and sense of belatedness an integral part of the rejection of personality. As Goldstone points out, musical structures and, in particular, the music of Beethoven play the role of a catalyst in both authors' thinking through the modernist aesthetic. While Adorno's understanding of the composer was articulated against his political exploitation in Germany, Eliot's Beethoven was framed by a Paterian thinking of pure, impersonal form in music, and of the Beethoven cult in Boston's musical coterie, suffused with a transcendental spirituality. Even more revealing is the tracing of Eliot's "late style" from *Gerontion* (1920) back to his earliest poetic attempts, the 1910 "Humouresque," for instance, which sets the pattern of his "last" poems: "if every work is a last work, every work leaves its author's life behind" (89). The confrontation between "significant," that is, mature and ascetic artistic subjectivity, and its mortality, a topos of Adorno's thinking from the early drafts on Beethoven to *Aesthetic Theory*, is staged in Eliot's *Gerontion* as the disappearance and return of the first-person personal pronoun in the imperative "think," in the form of a hovering, persistent (Cartesian) "dried-out cognition in the depersonalized form itself" (85), coming from an indefinitely aged and gradually disembodied voice. Late style for both Eliot and Adorno—akin to the insubordinate servant figures of aestheticism—turns out to be "an effort not of concealment but of disclosure . . . necessary to the pursuit of a relative autonomy for modernist art," a pursuit which presupposes "the self-reflexive representation of the late artwork's relationship to the persona of its maker" (108).

The third form of artistic autonomy discussed is disengagement from (political) community in the form of exile/expatriation, where Goldstone pairs Barnes's "fiercely antiheroic analysis of modernist expatriation" (110) with Joyce. This is one of the book's neuralgic points, since Joyce's case is left

uncomfortably hanging between a pretext to understanding Barnes's thinking of, and through, her own exilic experience, and a discussion of Joycean exile per se, which, however, remains too sketchy to illuminate Joyce's aesthetic. Barnes's *Nightwood* (1936) may well serve the conclusion that the sole foothold for the expatriate writer is the "exhausting, lonely performance of the aesthete role," which precludes any form of political or group allegiance, or solidarity, and by which expatriation as a lifestyle can be transformed into relative aesthetic autonomy (111), but the same can only be affirmed with a sleight of hand about Joyce. Goldstone's interpretation also goes in the face of influential accounts of Barnes's position in Modernism—most importantly, Shari Benstock's, Scott Herring's, and Laura Marcus's attempts to link her style to affirmations of minority sexual identity, or downright feminist-anarchist, anti-fascist affiliations—pointing out how they sidestep the "deeply anticommunitarian" tendency of her oeuvre even within the framework of cosmopolitan/transnational writing (119). To this effect, the description of the circus in the opening of *Nightwood* is read as a self-reflexive commentary on the novel's own self-positioning and technique: a site of "splendid and reeking falsification" (Barnes qtd. in Goldstone 116), where the circus artistes, possessors of spurious titles like the novel's hero, Baron Felix Volkbein, perform their stage identities, the sole identities they have. The putative root for Barnes's uncompromising detachment from any kind of community is found in her own lifestyle: an outsider even in the modernist American expatriate circles, of impoverished background, Barnes supported herself as a journalist and, as someone working both for the avant-garde little magazines and *Vanity Fair*, was, in all respects, "half in and half out of the club" (123); her circumstances, along with her social unease in the milieu of the Steins and Guggenheims, "make Barnes's stylistic investment in autonomy far riskier and socially more meaningful" (122). So does her distinctive sartorial extravagance—in Peggy Guggenheim's words, "rococo"—become consubstantial with her stylistic performance, "the foundation of her claim to be taken seriously as a distinctive modernist writer"; her literary style accrues social significance, "offering a measure of aesthetic autonomy at the price of comfortable group belonging" (123).

Goldstone cites the portrayal of Volkbein as a wandering Jew in *Nightwood*, patterned on conspicuously offensive racial stereotyping, to reveal the text's refusal of any group allegiance. Showing the fallacies of a host of commentators in trying to salvage Barnes's work from the charge of anti-Semitism—most notably, the thesis that the author identifies with all outsiders—he reads the passage together with Barnes's early journalism on the American expatriate milieu, where the same stereotype of cultural mimicry

is used for the American, going against a nativist current in American Modernism. Moreover, he points out how Felix's cosmopolitan aesthete lifestyle, narrated with heightened ironic detachment, becomes a self-reflexive comment on the novel's style itself, and to what extent Felix, the spurious artist, appears "deeply akin to his creator" (126). Here, a parallel with Joyce's critical and probing use of tropes of anti-Semitism might have done service: most notably, with Stephen's singing, in "Ithaca," of an offensive anti-Semitic ballad in Bloom's house, one of the most puzzling scenes in the novel, especially since at the book's beginning, Stephen counters Mr. Deasy's anti-Semitic rant with the often-quoted *non serviam*, "history is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake" (Joyce 2.377). With all attempts to point out how much the anti-Semitic tropes in *Nightwood* coincide with the novel's thematization of its own style—and, by extension, of cosmopolitan expatriation as a lifestyle—as pure affectation and disidentification, a much simpler explanation might seem likely: namely, that cosmopolitan exile did not save Barnes from buying into national characterology, and that, in this respect at least, she had more in common with her nativist fellow American modernists than with Joyce. Conversely, Joyce, who did, occasionally, fall into offensive racial stereotyping in his younger years judging by his 1899 essay on painter Mihály Munkácsy's *Ecce Homo*, certainly learned, in the course of his unglamorous Triestine exile, to cast a cold eye on racial prejudice and to use tropes of anti-Semitism as a scaffolding for his anatomy-cum-critique of nationalism.

If Barnes's achievement was "to create, in the teeth of considerable social obstacles, an autonomous place for herself within the field of literary Modernism" (130), merging her own distinctive lifestyle and literary output, this statement is a lot more problematic about Joyce, whom Barnes, indeed, treats with a healthy dose of (Joycean) irreverence in the *Vanity Fair* interview. For one reason, because Joyce did not fashion a "rococo" public persona in extension of his writing; Stephen Dedalus's Latin Quarter hat, the putative mark of his performance of exilic cosmopolitan affectation in "Proteus," has a counterpoint in Buck Mulligan's hand-me-down shoes and trousers. Similarly, Joyce's authorial irony toward Stephen resists hooking too easily to Barnes's authorial irony toward Volkbein: a mark of the former's radical distancing from a (repatriated) Stephen might be, after all, the offensive ballad he sings to Bloom. All in all, the book yields a slightly updated version of the Ellmann/Kenner exile, with a nonchalant Barnes touch—most memorably, his "strangely spoiled and appropriate teeth" (Barnes qtd. in Goldstone 136)—but aesthetics cannot be insulated from politics, nor are the categories of cosmopolitan/transnational disengagement and intellectual vagrancy

Goldstone operates with watertight. The signature Joycean “aloofness” and penchant to self-parody by no means precludes solidarity—even with as surprising a community as the one of the common reader, according to Declan Kiberd’s *Ulysses and Us*—and its linguistic poetics is also a politics. One problem with the argument that the radical deromanticizing program of Joyce’s texts demonstrates his rigorous aestheticist noncommitment is that Joyce’s texts famously shake off academic certainties, especially if they are articulated on the basis of as few and commented-to-death passages as in *Fictions of Autonomy*.

An anatomy of modernist melancholy

The framings of Modernism, and not alone those that implicitly and elegiacally sound its death-knell, are often situated under the black sun of melancholia—one only has to think of T. J. Clark’s *Farewell of an Idea* (1999), or Gabriel Josipovici’s *What Ever Happened to Modernism* (2010). To date, there are, however, only a few investigations into melancholia and mourning as constitutive of modernist aesthetics. Bahun’s *Modernism and Melancholia* proposes no less than a reframing of this elusive concept as a modernist paradigm. Working with an eclectic methodology that cuts across psychoanalysis, philosophy, aesthetics, anthropology, literary theory, and cultural memory, and, unlike other influential investigations of melancholia in aesthetic practice that predominantly operate across the visual arts and literature of early modernity, Bahun’s work focuses on a trio of metropolitan novels that, at a first glance, seem to share little in common: Andrei Bely’s *Petersburg* (1913), Franz Kafka’s *The Castle* (1926), and Woolf’s *Between the Acts* (1941). The book operates with a definition of melancholia as a time-bound, dual concept, both a discursive matrix that interprets and, ultimately, produces experiential reality, and a cluster of distinctive symptoms bearing the imprint of the historical moment, manifest in artistic performance. Modernist melancholia would be, accordingly, “a social index that, in literature, finds its strategic expression in the problem-reflecting use of language and of formal devices that purport to both artistically instantiate the process of mourning and reveal its ‘failure’” (4).

The book’s anatomy (and archaeology) of melancholia draws on Freud’s World War I essays and “culture” books—especially *Civilization and Its Discontents*—that establish a link between history, melancholia, and sublimation, and on Melanie Klein, Julia Kristeva, and Jacques Lacan’s theorizing of melancholia that emphasize its creative potential. Yet, what gives modernist melancholia its distinctive quality, according to Bahun, is precisely its refusal to be drawn out into mourning and, thus, the healing ensuing from

the work of mourning: modernist literature's "alternative mourning rite" will be characterized by "an unusual tendency to give form to the very impossibility of mourning" (18). Instead of the consolatory, therapeutic function of relief-giving, the literary works displaying this melancholic symptomatology preserve a memorial articulation of loss that is expressive and critical; they "retain (rather than recall) the lost object in all its uncognizability" (8). Their mode of operation is termed "countermourning," on the analogy of Jochen and Esther Gerz's vanishing Holocaust *Gegendenkmal*, countermonument that goes in the face of the societal petrification and reification of (historical) memories. "Countermourning" writing has an active social potential that derives not from representations but from performances of the new content of historical experience, in such a way that "interpretative closure and the affective attitudes of acceptance and resignation (and thus also the affect-activity of consolation) are suspended" (195).

With the pre-empting of normative social rituals of mourning in modernity, dying and death became increasingly medicalized and privatized, resulting in what historian Philippe Ariès terms *la mort ensauvagée* [forbidden/invisible death], an experience dramatically reinforced by the two world wars' technologized warfare and extermination. Under such conditions, literature became one of the most important mourning rites available in, and for, modern society: "Insofar as Modernism is a response to modernization, it finds itself in structurally the same position as mourning in the new age: the modern 'inability to mourn' operates as both a gripping topic and a formal challenge in modernist texts" (18). Modernism's specific difference will be its replacement of reified forms of mourning with experimental, performative expressions, whereby modernist texts, steeped in language skepticism, an—essentially melancholic—awareness of the inadequacy and fallaciousness of their tools and methods of expression, but also of mimesis at large, perform "an impossible mourning, driven by the force of its unattainable 'cure'" (18); such mourning will be at once therapeutic and interminable. So does *Petersburg* spatialize melancholia, staging the shift from psychology-of-character-based representation of melancholia to its avant-garde textual and linguistic performance.

Bahun's thesis declares melancholia to be the "objective correlative" of modernists, with the potential to generate subversive artistic strategies. Thus, she boldly cuts through Adorno's and Habermas's social and aesthetic thinking, the lessons of Hayden White, and the subsequent language turn, which links the modernist will to represent and generate representation with an awareness of the near-impossibility of the task. The sophistication of

Bahun's thinking about, and through, melancholia is most obvious in her claim that the symptomatology of melancholia becomes a structural matrix for a cluster of problems addressed by modernist novels; and, also, by key framings of melancholia and mourning from Kierkegaard through Freud to Benjamin, which display, in their own turn, the signs of melancholic writing and modernist features of writing and thought—most importantly, indeterminacy. Reading Freud's wartime essays via Agamben's *Stanzas*, Bahun points out how the melancholic insistence on absence appears as subversive "unthought" in history: it voices "incompletion, inconclusiveness, lack of homogeneity or consent, and acknowledges semantic/social unappropriability as *conditio sine qua non* of an honest dealing with historical occlusions" (38). Accordingly, the modernist novel will go about inventing its own language, simultaneously both adequate and inadequate, harnessing textual markers of absence, ellipses, and sidestepping semantic connectives; melancholic language also shares with modernist language the penchant for juxtaposition, without providing satisfying relational connection. The "void-sites" in the modernist chronotope and language—best exemplified by *Petersburg*—are markers "for the critical potential of the incomplete" (66), which, at the same time, signal the site of irretrievable absence and the site of (utopian) potential—of the return of the object, or, of conquering object-destructive space.

Another significant property of modernist language is its absorbing of clashing semantic fields in an effort to question inherited models of meaning-making and history-recording, of which the prime example is Kafka's apparently logical, yet divergent linguistic accretion that leads to a "referential desubstantification of the represented world" (67). The strategy identified in Bely's text is that of a proliferation of the most diverse environmental sounds, elevated into onomatopoeia, which is closely connected to (melancholic) asymbolia, as well as putting semantics and the communicative function of language under pressure, and revealing the disarray in the representation of history (68).

Between the Acts, Woolf's fragmentary last novel completed before her suicide, is singled out for its melancholic structure, as a piece that relies on its own impossibility. Read as writing that displays the paradoxical trope of Freud's anticipatory mourning, the foretaste of historical disaster to come, the novel "investigates the ways of coping with the transience of things, which the war has brought into sharp focus" (163). Its countermourning operates along divergent lines: while it protects against future losses, it also points at the danger of their possible containment in mourning. What makes Woolf's last novel a signature text for the multiple crises inscribed in a melancholic

relation to history is its refusal to constitute a complete whole, being made of gaps, fissures, heterogeneous narrative patches that saddle several genres. Bahun takes as her clue a 1941 letter of Woolf's in which she uses for her self-description the image of a "water-rug," together with that of a mongrel dog; this insistence on hybridity is also reflected in the text's shuttling to and fro between narrative, drama, and poetry. The foregrounding of the hybrid nature of literature in this "historically charged operetta" (166) that capitalizes the form of Elizabethan theatre and the topos of *theatrum mundi* is also read in a political key, as Woolf's "perpetually ambivalent" melancholic response to traumatizing history (165). Passages of Bahun's book might suggest that Woolf's text is akin to the hybrid, intermedial Singspiel *Leben? oder Theater?*, with multiple transparent overlays, of painter and writer Charlotte Solomon, completed in a frenzy while hiding from the Nazis in southern France—an experience that Woolf fore-mourned, according to Bahun's thesis. This combination of close reading with transversal theorizing is at its most insightful in revealing the text's "void-sites," confluences of multiple crises: one example is the scene where Isa reads an article that turns out to be about a military gang-rape. The rupturing sentence "that was real"—corroborated by archival evidence, since the rape case was, indeed, reported in *The Times*—is a traumatizing interference of the real that dishevels the methods of interpretation of fictional and historical texts, while also inscribing the trauma of gender violence—intrinsically, Woolf's personal trauma—in the text.

Even more noteworthy is the reading of Woolf's melancholic inscription and disarticulation of (discursive) community as a melancholic whole, since its parts are reconciled only temporally and chimerically. The novel's polyphonic and self-reflexive communal protagonist, "rather a performance than a stable entity" (176), undermines collectivity, first and foremost, the nation; the text's wariness of any form of communal ethos, its "oppositional cosmopolitan politics" (177) goes hand in hand with its (melancholic) refusal of any form of normative, enforced mourning that could homogenize community and/or corroborate national identity. Its agonistic vision of history—likened to Benjamin's *Arcades*—is similarly anatomized in the obstructions, hollowed-out repetitive linguistic elements, and recurring pre-empted signs where, "in an instant fraught with danger, the past and the present converge to disclose the real nature of history" (181). Such instances, like the stoppage over the gang-rape, rescue the defeated from forgetfulness, and bring them to the light of social cognizance and meaning-making. This is also a crucial point, where the matrix of melancholia can become a convergence between aesthetics and ethics, for melancholia resists the pinning down of absent content, its teasing out into presence and semantic definition:

modernist writerly ethics is, therefore, “at its most profound when it refuses semantically to appropriate the ‘absent’ or ‘unrecorded’”—when it “melancholizes” historical content (190).

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