
Nostalgia for Novelty

The Modernist Novel: A Critical Introduction, by Stephen Kern.

Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2011. 253 pp. \$27.99

Reviewed by Jonathan Pitcher, Bennington College

Despite its subtitle, this book is a paean to modernism, and has even inherited certain traits from its object of study. Trenchantly protective, propped up by Freud, Bergson, Heidegger, Nietzsche, and Bakhtin, Stephen Kern reasserts the impact of the “formal innovations” (1, 2, 7), individualism, becoming, “authenticity” (91), “skepticism about authorial command” (128), “unresolved endings” (147), “polyphony” (179), “heteroglossia” (185), “pluralism” (200), the “always now” (101) or “simply being there” (147) of all those “*moments bienheureux*” (103), and the inevitably thwarted quest for “the thing itself before it has been made anything” (172), adrift amidst the phantasmagoric cities with their ingenious science and “ontological discontinuity” (109). Exactly how latent such subversion is or was hitherto may be disputed, of course, but via a curiously hoary twist the movement is reduced to a rather short list of authors including Conrad, Proust, Ford, Stein, Woolf, Joyce, Kafka, and Faulkner, and to the years 1900 to 1940 (1), which allows for a dichotomous critique of more manifest “artificial constructions” (92) or “master narratives” such as courtship, family, religion, imperialism, nationalism, and liberalism, and indeed of anyone writing outside of Kern’s aesthetic and temporal autarky, since such re-contextualization “compromises its status as a historically distinct period” (7) and would amount to “slighting works of exceptional quality” (7). Rubén Darío’s prior *modernismo* is never mentioned. Realism, repeatedly thrashed, is pegged from 1840 to 1900. Such viable precursors as *Don Quixote*, *Tristram Shandy*, *Jacques the Fatalist*, and *Frankenstein* are all binned in the opening pages, and there is precious little consideration of successors, for this is the politics of the literary velvet rope, and if you’re not “stunning” (109), “bewildering” (114), “bizarre” (144), “frightening” (148) or “daring” (158) enough, then your name’s not on the list and you’re not getting in. As Kern himself infers, *pace* Pound, “it did not matter what it was as long as it was

new” (5), or as long as Dickens, the overbearing parent, “would have thought he had lost his mind” (3).

As a result of such *parti pris* barring of outsiders, the ontology, at least from within, is not only continuous, but self-perpetuating, almost impervious to criticism, and periodically sanctioned in perhaps overly consistent terms: “... human existence ... endlessly moves away from its lost past and toward its uncertain future, always tempted to flee from the responsibility of endlessly defining itself that is required by its freedom” (24). This paradigmatic devaluing of linear time, of history, typical of all of modernity’s supposed ruptures, dictates “an endless search for origins in the erratically shifting stretches of the past” (139) which in turn ensures “a product of endless self-renewal” (41) in the present, “endlessly repeating past failures” (117) in an “ever-renewed circle” (60). The nature of the origin in question is deliberately vague, referenced as “a more primordial instinct” (117) or “some primal relation that had been suppressed in modern society” (145) or “darkness in the Congo” (197) as and when the need arises, since fleshing it out would imply the closure of the interminable cycles, an entelechy, when the repetition itself is now a virtue, if virtue were anything more than a meaningless cipher. On one of the few occasions when Kern is prompted to name a source, in the wake of Picasso’s *Les demoiselles d’Avignon*, he is in danger of providing a counter-history or master narrative to the ones now cyclically erased, and even of re-fetishizing the other: “Modernists saw African ‘primitivism’ as an exotic paradise of spontaneity and directness.... *Demoiselles* ... celebrated the bold distortions, inventive contours, and directness of African aesthetics” (72). The fits of epiphanic amnesia also ensure “necessarily unimportant” (48) plots that fixate on “the trivia of existence” (56), and, again typically though more hyperbolically, a “democratization of politics and society” (56), which has long been one of the theory’s paradoxes, given that it tends to be paraded by the intelligentsia as a sophisticated process of unknowing, just as it is here, along with a bucolic aura of leveling, of transparency, while excluding any form of collective or indeed coherent memory. There are no doubt connections between the above and, say, reality TV shows, not least in the extent of either genre’s relationship to reality, but, as Kern often and quite viably points out, modernists “made readers work harder” (156), thus shoring up his high-end version against any future democratizing, lest it be superseded in kind.

More practically, such protestations of difference quickly become oppressive in the case of realism. The book’s *modus operandi* is to firm up a binary division between the two movements, generally in a rather simplistic tone that is more Roger Hargreaves than Marcel Proust: “Realist characters take different jobs but in so doing maintain their personal identity, while in modernist novels such changes can be symptomatic of a fundamental instability in character” (32). On a single page, we are told that “Realist urban space is continuous” (96), that “In the realist novel characters navigate urban space continuously” (96), and that “Buildings and cities in realist novels stay put” (96). All broadly true, perhaps, but such recurrent introductions or realignments happen over 150 times, thereby swallowing more than two-thirds of the book, and one would be forgiven for thinking that this is Kern’s primary contribution, that modernism

was in fact not realism, which is at best captious and at worst something that the target audience would surely have some awareness of already, hence the different names. This unnecessarily eristic comparison, aside from limiting modernism's purview to that of a reaction, also means that the argumentation must intermittently though increasingly morph, backtracking through a series of exceptions to include more nuanced readings, differences of degree rather than kind. As Kern knows in his less dogmatic moments, rather than randomly materializing from the void, "free indirect discourse ... had been used by Goethe, Austen, Büchner, Dickens, Thackeray, Eliot, Flaubert, and Zola" (85); "Realists experimented with stream of consciousness" (87), "varied chronology" (113), ironic distance (131), "multiple narrators" (179); according to Bakhtin, heteroglossia "is evident throughout the history of literature" (191); "Already in 1852, Flaubert registered his intention to resist strong plotting and write a novel 'about nothing'" (66); *Middlemarch* (1872) interrogates "the values that establish meaning" (211), "acknowledging this uncertainty and the cultural fragmentation underlying it" (211); "George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* (1876) challenges ... the possibility of a true beginning" (127); Henry James's "The Art of Fiction" (1884) is "a precursor of modernism" (46); and Woolf herself "celebrated the 'inconclusive' stories of Anton Chekhov" (139), all of which could have been incorporated without the immediate, censoring "buts" that are compelled to stress modernism's more emphatic, superior manipulation of the above herein. Furthermore, if we take Kern at his word and assume that the pervasive "exceptional quality" (7) of his brand of modernism has indeed democratized our world, then the conventional notion that "Realist novels are more readily intelligible on the first reading" (130), presumably along with any and all less exceptional novels that are absent from the study (Waugh, predictably, given the ideology, goes unmentioned, though he is in both good and plentiful company), regurgitated here to the point of supererogation, should be upended, since our post-modernist sensibility would only find their speciously analeptic values more confusing.

The restoration on offer here, however, is merely a rather nebulous malaise, one tinged with melancholia in the majority of the novels and yet re-presented as a flailing positivity. Kern seems trapped between writing a *vade mecum* and a critique, which means that the broadly expository is sporadically overturned by moments of philosophical incision or political whimsy, as confirmed by such comments as "The depth of Freud's psychoanalytic investigations is suggested by the sheer length of his long case histories" (108), as if that were enough, when one would hope that it would be corroborated by their actual depth. The *quid pro quo* for giving up on history as "remote and unavailable" (111), for "liberating the long-suppressed human spirit from oppression by familial, national, capitalist, and religious institutions" (168), not least among them "a slave morality that started with the Jews and culminated in Christianity" (203) but stretching to "feminist campaigning for political and economic rights" (166), is to receive Freud's aforementioned length, Nietzsche's "lightning bolts that say Yes and laugh Yes" (105), an "increasing estrangement from the world" (200), art (particularly collage [176-78]), "Hierarchies of creative accomplishment" (77), a war that "secularized life at the highest levels of power" (19) and a period when "Fascist Italy, Nazi Germany, and Soviet Russia moved

against conventional religious institutions” (19). That’s the best-case scenario, if we accept that modernism was successful in its “reworking of the master narratives that attempted to hold that society together with such single authoritative voices as a paterfamilias, mayor, judge, corporate head, president, king, or god” (195), yet are these not at least some of the same, very real authorities today? As Kern himself counsels, modernism’s “purpose is to transcend codes rather than negate them” (38), which means that rather than condemning the purportedly artificial constructions to the abyss, the latter was simply transcended by the constructions themselves, which leaves modernism in a netherworld, betwixt and between, an unruly, carping teenager who can nonetheless be handled by the parental system, and may even be unwittingly contributing to its future. World War I “killed [Wyndham] Lewis’ inclination to produce abstract literature as well as art” (170), and although “Woolf detested the politicians who fumbled into the war, the bureaucrats who financed it, and the officers who waged it, ... she still acknowledged, at least for her protagonist Clarissa Dalloway and a group of Londoners, the deep need to restore national wholeness in the postwar period, symbolized by monarchs back on their thrones” (207). There is no point in resenting the continued existence of liberalism as a “‘New Liberalism’ sustained by economic interests such as free trade and urban consumers and committed to the expansion of the regulatory and welfare state” (18), when its ontology resembles and has out-subverted your own. Yes, “Master narratives make sense of experience for large numbers of people” (9), and perhaps Kern’s recommended erasure is “an undertaking that most people fail to engage in” (25), but despite the implication the majority is not inherently wrong purely by dint of its majority. In other words, along with Cambridge University Press and Ohio State, modernism both was and is very much part of a master narrative, regardless of which any attempt to rehabilitate novelty as novelty seems contradictory from the off.

Illustrator of *Wine in Peace and War*

In Search of Rex Whistler: His Life & His Work (1905-44), by Hugh and Mirabel Cecil.

London and New York: Frances Lincoln Ltd, 2012. 272 pp. £40/\$60

Reviewed by Jeffrey Manley

Rex Whistler was a painter, decorator, and stage designer. He was Evelyn Waugh’s contemporary, and their careers are comparable. Both were upper-middle-class boys who went to minor public schools. At Oxford and the Slade School, Waugh and Whistler met upper-class friends, and both used connections to climb, Whistler perhaps more successfully. Whistler made no attempt to write professionally, but Waugh illustrated some of his own books. Whistler was an accomplished illustrator of *Gulliver’s Travels* and Hans Christian Andersen’s *Fairy Tales*. Like Waugh, he also designed dust wrappers.

Waugh and Whistler met at least once, in 1942 at a drunken Christmas party on the Longleat Estate in Wiltshire. Waugh mentions this meeting in his *Letters* (164-65); if Whistler left any record, it has not been noticed by his biographers. Both were friends with Duff and