PROJECT MUSE®

Modernist Studies after Modernism

Christian Moraru

symploke, Volume 22, Numbers 1-2, 2014, pp. 303-306 (Review)

Published by University of Nebraska Press

symploke
editor
Jeffrey S. Eklun

AUSTERITY

Volume 18 Numbers 1-4

➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/566846>

MODERNIST STUDIES AFTER MODERNISM¹

CHRISTIAN MORARU

What's in a title? Well, in this case too, everything and then some more: modernisms—note the plural *and* “global” to boot. In other words, the basic contention, variously reiterated across the ten sections of this voluminous, impressively wide-ranging, uniquely insightful, and well-organized survey of modernist aesthetics and aesthetic practices, is twofold. First, in the wake of the global turn in literary and cultural studies, modernism cannot be treated as one any more. And second, the modernist paradigm is not a monolith centered on a few West European and American urban hubs of culture, prestige, and imperial politics such as Paris, Berlin, London, and New York, and on their histories either, but a far more complex phenomenon in time, space, and form, and for whose correct understanding a new descriptive model is required.

As far as I can see, the *Handbook* does not invent but borrows this model. In so doing, it becomes, when compared to previous accounts of modernism, what the Heath anthology is to the Norton (the one before the canonical battles). Predating the *Handbook's* endeavor to pluralize and decenter modernism stylistically, chronologically, and geoculturally—which effort, in turn, is the latest in a series going back roughly to the early 2000s—said model or reading “grid” has been for more than two decades now part and parcel of postmodern studies, on the one hand, and global/new comparative studies, on the other. What Laura Doyle calls in her closing essay the “recharting of the maps and time lines [*sic*] of a world-system of literatures” (678) has, largely speaking, already given spectacularly groundbreaking results in postmodern and postcolonial analysis and more broadly in discussions of the “contemporary” no longer grasped as World War II's aftermath (and thus covering modernism's twilight) but as the post-Cold War era.

It is during the time elapsed since the late 1980s that the prevailing model of recent culture and cultural interpretation gets inadequate to a world-system

¹Review of Mark Wollaeger and Matt Eatough, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Global Modernisms*. New York: Oxford UP, 2012.

whose makeup increasingly foregrounds intertwined features such as the salient shortcomings of the nation-state as the master “aggregation model” of cultural phenomena; the essentially “webbed,” *relational*—transnational, dialogical, fluid, dynamic—nature of a discourse whose quintessential spatiality rises to unprecedented critical prominence; the pluricentric, centripetal-centrifugal circulation of culture, which obtains, scholars realize more and more, not only “vertically” and statically, according to the traditional root scenario, but also “horizontally,” rhizomically, on the move, subterraneous, imperceptible, and intermittent as this move may be; the multidirectional exchanges this process implies on a regional, continental, and global scale; the non-developmental/ non-diffusionalist/ mimetic logic of such exchanges, barterings, and recyclings, which indigenize and originally recast instead Western/North Atlantic culture on the former colonial “periphery” all over the world centuries after metropolitan culture itself had been fueled and decisively shaped by Eastern/Arab/Muslim/colonial influences; following from such a geopolitically and intertextually more inclusive view of cultural production, the pride of place given to, and the interpretive possibilities in turn afforded by, racial, ethnic, and variously subaltern discursive agents, sites, traditions, and rhetorics; the political thrust of such putatively “marginal” interventions; and the problematization of the culture concept itself around a less hierarchical way of construing the low-brow-high-brow tensions and cross-pollinations.

This is the short version of a longer list, and yet, incomplete as it is, it goes to show, I think, that what I am taking about, structurally and historically, is, on one side, something incrementally characteristic of postmodernism since the early 1960s and, on the other side, a reality of culture the accelerated globalization following the end of the Cold War renders ever more conspicuous. In brief, this is the postmodern paradigm of cultural discourse and analysis. Beginning with the 1990s, this paradigm spreads like wildfire, in various adaptations and under a host of different labels, outside postmodernism’s stylistic and temporal turf, “postmodernizing,” if you will, scholarship in many other areas, modernist studies included. The *Handbook* can be thus defined as a symptom of such methodological postmodernization, and Mark Wollaenger seems to acknowledge as much in his introduction (8). This is not to say, of course, that globality (global reach), mobility, and the paradigmatic diversity of style, chronology, and “alternatives” coming on their heels constitute a postmodern monopoly nor that they originate with postmodernism. This is to say, however, that their intensities and extensities in and with the advent of postmodernism—of late postmodernism especially—are historically unparalleled, making up for a cultural or, better still, cross-cultural (“world-systemic”) dominant with a force and with consequences previously unrivaled in the West or elsewhere. One of these consequences is the very analytic revisionism favored by the *Handbook*’s critics.

This is not the first time we learn about modernism’s international character (for postmodernism, this case has been made most systematically

in Bertens and Fokkema's 1997 *International Postmodernism*). We do learn, however, about its global purview. As we do so, we also learn, albeit seldom explicitly, about the disjuncture between a planetary model (the "global") deemed, so simplistically at times, to "homogenize" ("streamline," "Westernize," etc.) and the plethora of modernisms cropping up all over the globalizing world. If, as contributors like Neil Lazarus claim, modernity—seized, I hasten to add, à la Jameson, as irredeemably held hostage by capital—is by and large all of a piece despite the "particularisms" conveniently granted by theorists who want to eat the cake and have it too, then the richness of modernism's instantiations ultimately comes about in a rather loose connection with money, economic rationality, "development," etc. or in a connection in which resistance, opposition, and the like are not empty words. More likely, the relations between modernity and its aesthetics (modernism), on the one hand, and Western and non-Western modernisms, on the other, are far more complex, running the whole gamut between outright rejection and parochial-nationalist-religious entrenchment to mimesis, mimicry, original recycling (not an oxymoron!), and so forth.

Furthermore, as Jahan Ramazani emphasizes in one of the best essays in the *Handbook*, the bottom line is not just that modernist poetics turns to this entire panoply of discursive protocols but that, in so doing, it operates of necessity transnationally, topologically, and interstitially, completing its project both as a non-"totalist" whole and in its individual undertakings according to what Susan Stanford Friedman calls the "circulation model" (503). This model operates dialogically or, to recall Édouard Glissant, relationally, in transit, in a circuit where you need circulation and distance between and inside various localities and where textually thus emerges intertextually. Again, this has been the definitional claim of postmodernism, one that is these days expanded to modernism in an attempt to take it, once for all, in a post-Hugh Kenner era where modernism is not one but many and where this multiplicity is articulated, as the *Handbook's* own main parts seem to suggest, spatially, temporally, and structurally.

As one may imagine, the risks involved in this approach are many. To my mind, the most serious involved in this methodologically "postmodernized" modernism is—ironically enough—the retroactive and homogenizing "modernizing" of entire literary history, before and after modernism's contested "classical" age (the late 1800s-mid-1950s). Where Ramazani's analysis of planetary modernism and its poems historicizes admirably the cosmopolitan circuitry of modernist poetics, Susan Stanford Friedman's notable call for a "modernist studies planetary in scope" (507) privileges discursive strategies that become "cultural dominants" with later, postmodern authors and in that warrant a different classification. "Revision" is one striking example, and even more striking is Friedman's reference to Cha's 1982 *Dictée* on p. 516, where the Korean American author is actually mentioned in relation to postmodernism and yet is considered a modernist illustration. In a previous, 2010 article ("Planetarity: Musing Modernist Studies"), to which Friedman's

present “World Modernism, World Literature, and Comparativity” is ostensibly related, the critic similarly “modernizes” authors and techniques such as Gabriel García Márquez, Arundhati Roy, relationality, and “citational” poesis, which are either postmodern or, as observed earlier, achieve dominant and definitional status under postmodernism, modern precursors like Eliot, Pound, and Joyce notwithstanding. In the 2010 essay too, she talks about the “modernity” of pre-1500 entities such as the Mongol Empire (one that had a devastatingly and demonstrably anti-modern impact throughout Eurasia), which is the kind of critical move that can one make feel nostalgic about less elastic timelines and more modest epistemologies. Friedman’s own re-vision of the 2010 piece in “World Modernism” is more realistic, in fact, and so are most contributions to the *Handbook*, making it an invaluable resource for the serious student of modernism. Well thought-out, researched, cross-referenced, and edited, *Global Modernisms* is a true landmark in a fast-growing and evolving field. No question, the book is something to study patiently and critically. From the “Balkan” modernism provocatively sketched out in Sanja Bahun’s *histoire croisée*-inspired overview to Berber poetry’s dialogue with Mallarmé in Edwige Tamalet Talbayev’s essay to the studies of translation and “vernacular modernisms” in the later chapters, *The Oxford Handbook of Global Modernisms* is as trailblazing as it is provocative.

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA, GREENSBORO