LOOKING BACK:
MODERNISM WAS YESTERDAY

Janet Flanner’s “belated” praise of Josephine Baker’s opening night performance in her re-edited collection of her jazz-era New Yorker columns, the 1972 volume Paris Was Yesterday, performs a supremely modernist gesture in its revisioning of the past in the very act of looking back on it. When as Paris correspondent “Genet” she first reviewed the 1925 La Revue Nègre performance that made Josephine Baker famous, she breezily dismissed the ethnic history of the production’s cast with the same nonchalance she employed to describe its sets: “Covarrubias did the sets, pink drops with cornucopias of hams and watermelons, and the Civil War did the rest, aided by Miss Baker. The music is tuneless and stunningly orchestrated, and the end of the show is dull, but never Miss Baker’s part.”¹ “Genet”’s unfunny act of laughing off slavery and its aftermath was no doubt part of the reason for Flanner’s retraction and addendum, written much later in the introduction to Paris Was Yesterday, which collected the sketches of Paris life she wrote between 1925 and 1939. The “new type of journalistic foreign correspondence” (xix) Flanner helped invent in her fortnightly “Letter from Paris” for the New Yorker looks a lot like modernist literary portraiture. The letters consist mainly of sketches of artistic, literary, and theatrical personalities, as well as an occasional crime story. “Genet”’s style of telling emphasizes the self-conscious eye of the beholder as well as the character of the beheld: “Criticism, to be valid, in my opinion,” she writes, “demanded a certain personal aspect or slant of the writer’s mind” (xx).

However, in the apology for the Baker review she wrote nearly fifty years later, Flanner paradoxically insists on inventing her old self anew, its consciousness cured of its racial insensitivity by the post–Civil Rights
era. “I wrote about it timidly, uncertainly, and like a dullard” (xx), she apologizes, nevertheless insisting that “Josephine Baker . . . remains to me now like a still-fresh vision, sensual, exciting and isolated in my memory today, almost fifty years later.” Having established the fiction of a “fresh vision,” she introduces her memory of Baker as both tribute and eyewitness reportage: “So here follows what I should have written then about her appearance, as a belated tribute” (xx).

This is a remarkable statement on its own, claiming as it does a relationship to the past that is both mediated by the judgment of history and free of it. “Genet”’s/Flanner’s fashioned past and fashioned self are always aware of being read, of being seen. However, like “Hemingway”’s insistent hunt for an authentic self, Flanner’s claim to possess an immediacy of vision nearly fifty years after the fact creates an oscillating self-consciousness that both supports and fails to support the portraitist’s claim that she is drawing from life. In this oscillation one begins to see a shift away from a more stylized and particular self-seeing and toward a more public eye, one attuned to both celebrity and the political values of U.S. culture and counterculture in the wake of the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights movement. Ostensibly in tribute to Baker’s personality and celebrity, but also, one senses, to redress a guilty conscience that her failure to appreciate Baker at the time was due to racist condescension, Flanner does Flanner “doing” Genet once more, describing Baker on stage as if seeing her for the first time:

She made her entry entirely nude except for a pink flamingo feather between her limbs; she was being carried upside down and doing the split on the shoulder of a black giant. Midstage he paused, and with his long fingers holding her basket-wise around the waist, swung her in a slow cartwheel to the stage floor, where she stood, like his magnificent discarded burden, in an instant of complete silence. She was an unforgettable female ebony statue. A scream of salutation spread through the theater. (xx)

“Genet”’s layered, doubled persona that “witnesses” Josephine Baker’s act a half-century later creates a Dorian Gray or Alice B. Toklas kind of self, a self out of time and autonomous as “Genet,” yet at the same time a part of history as Janet Flanner. It is readily apparent that this self is limited even if its intentions are good, and this limitation shuts down the pleasure of the voice occupying its own theatrical performance. The idiosyncratic, stylized particular eye must give way to a public look with—it can be hoped—more evolved social values. Flanner
doing “Genet” still manages to characterize both of the dancers as freakish—though striking—objects, dehumanizing them with her look even as she celebrates them. But Flanner doing “Flanner” intervenes, stopping the eyewitness narrative by insisting “Whatever happened next was unimportant” because “the acute response of the white masculine public” to Baker’s body was proof that for the French, “black was beautiful” (xx). With the interjection of this 1960s slogan, “Genet”’s political redress crumbles once more with the report of “Negro choruses” drunk on fame and champagne on stage, though “nevertheless alive and creative with the integral talent of their race and training” (xxi). The portraitist’s voice here that is the mix of both “Genet” and “Flanner” slyly adds that as Baker’s career “ripened” she appeared in her “famous festoon of bananas,” concluding that “She was the established new American star for Europe” (xxi).

While it can be argued that Flanner/“Genet” makes things worse rather than better by revisiting the scene of Baker’s Paris triumph and reiterating her own well-meaning yet inept racial politics, her act of revision is significant not only in its acknowledgment of former bias on her part, but in the way her own character diminishes itself in its self-conscious faltering. In “doing” Genet once more, she recaptures some of the pleasure of speaking as that person, of hearing herself talking, that characterized the voice of the Paris letters. At the same time, the refashioning of that voice displaces its pleasurable occupation of itself from the personality of the speaker back to the public, and in doing so acknowledges rather than deflects the gaze, in an attempt at an ethics, however clumsy, that her earlier personality failed to embody. Self-scrutiny has necessarily intervened in the pleasure that voice once took in its own playfulness, and it is striking to see the constructedness and the limits of that pleasure exposed here, in a moment of self-consciousness quite different—though not meaningfully different enough—from the one that initially fashioned “Genet.”

But pleasure and ethics do not have to oppose each other, and it is one of the arguments of this book that it is in modernism’s textual and iconic interaction with the dynamics of visual culture that the pleasure modernism takes in itself can be ethical as well. One of the most striking visual portraits we have of Janet Flanner remains the Berenice Abbott photograph of Flanner in white trousers with pinstripes, a pale shirt with French cuffs and cufflinks, a dark overcoat, and Nancy Cunard’s father’s dove-gray top hat, upon which two masks sit, one white, one black. Flanner’s dandified dress, short, graying hair, and theatrical masks all accentuate the dramatic contrasts of black and
white that characterize this print. She looks mannish but stylish, smart, queer, theatrical, and self-conscious. Her eyes are dark and a little sad, her face is starkly white, and her mouth turns up almost sardonically at one corner, like the fool or harlequin of an older time. She is posing, and the masks on her hat suggest several invented and strategic personalities. The fact that this top hat belonged to an international shipping magnate contrasts deliciously with these masks, white on top of black in a kind of racial pecking order, whose elastic straps now circle the hat as the Cunard line circled the globe. These masks not only usurp the hat and redefine it for the purposes of the portrait, but as racial masks they work alongside Flanner’s masculine cross-dressing to undermine the notion of authentic identity in favor of theatrical self-presentation. Cunard’s daughter Nancy scandalized high society with her political work opposing racial injustice and her publication of the sweeping anthology *Negro*. Flanner’s wearing of the hat with its black and white masks stages her alliance with Nancy Cunard in the project of usurping the white wealthy patriarch’s authority, in this case through lesbian appropriation and reinvention of the patriarch’s masculine style.

Today we see this photograph as a photograph of Janet Flanner having fun with her friend Berenice; Janet Flanner, celebrity correspondent, literary personality and critic, and friend of Hemingway; Janet Flanner, left-leaning, Left Bank lesbian and lover of Solita Solano. What we forget, or dismiss as playfulness or portrait convention, is that this is a portrait of Janet Flanner doing and undoing a portrait of Janet Flanner, a making and unmaking of the notion of personality that confronts the viewer with the dynamism of the portrait itself. This is not to say that readers and viewers today do not recognize the performative gestures of modernist portraiture, but that in our historical remove from it, we need to remember that the meta-discursive nature of modernism insists upon pleasure and perversity as it watches itself watching its own artistic inventiveness and innovation. The self-reflexivity of this may lead to the ethical reconsideration of modernist aesthetic pleasure, as it does for Flanner, and—though his ethics takes a conservative rather than progressive turn—Hemingway. But the ethics of self-conscious perversity lie mainly in its refusal of normativity and celebration of stylized self-elaboration and impersonation, rather than in any straightforward social agenda. What intrigues and troubles so many readers of these texts resembles the ambivalence with which many of us view lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and queer culture(s) today, an ambivalence due in large part to the simultaneous invitation and eva-
sion of politics, the interplay of identity, desire, and pleasure, that characterizes both the style of queer “modernist” portraiture and the making, unmaking, and remaking of subjects in erotic communities. The ethical failures of modernist-era artists—Radclyffe Hall’s patronizing racial, class, and sexual chauvinisms; T. S. Eliot’s fascist sympathies; Natalie Barney’s anti-Semitism; Gertrude Stein’s Vichy collaboration—exist alongside the dynamism of its portraiture, a dynamism where the object of looking insists on looking back, one that circulates beauty, sexual desire, and a longing for justice, and often questions the very basis—normative individual identity—upon which so many oppressions are launched. This troubled, doubled look, this insistence on the pleasures of self-consciousness, this bold appropriation of the look of posterity as well as contemporary scrutiny, is what remains compelling about these portraits, and this is why the smile, the pose, the sardonic look with which they confront spectators continues to intrigue us with its suggestion of knowledge, bravado, and pleasure, as these portraits continue to seduce readers, over and over again, back into their queer world.