Through Fields of Cacophonous Modern Masters

James Baldwin and New Critical Modernism

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IN A WORK that predated even his own proto-modernist poetry, Charles Baudelaire, whom T. S. Eliot called “the greatest exemplar in modern poetry of any language” (426), produced in his Salon de 1846 a pre-emptive prescription for a productive and positive engagement between modern art and the city. “La vie parisienne,” he declared, “est féconde en sujets poétiques et merveilleux. Le merveilleux nous enveloppe et nous abreuve comme l’atmosphère; mais nous le voyons pas” (Euvres, 496).1 The role that Baudelaire saw for the modern artist, as he had argued in the Salon de 1845, lay in discovering the forms by which the shock and disruption of urban life could be redeemed for art: “Celui-là sera le peintre,” he wrote, “qui saura arracher à la vie actuelle son côté épique, et nous faire voir et comprendre, avec de la couleur ou du dessin, combien nous sommes grands et poétiques dans nos cravates et nos bottes vernies” (407).2 While Baudelaire’s subsequent poetry, however, and many strains of twentieth-century modernism embraced the life of the city, modernism has often been caricatured as an art of despair and disillusionment especially remarkable for its laments about the horrors of urban life. As Desmond Harding notes in Writing the City: Urban Visions & Literary Modernism, “a consensus emerged” in the early twentieth century “of the city as a menacing force beyond the capacity of human experience to control or even sometimes comprehend” (13). The text that would become the paradigm of English modernism—“T. S. Eliot’s excoriation of the
cultural and spiritual topos of London in *The Waste Land*—the ‘unreal city’ of modernity” (13)—enshrined, Harding argues, this modernist antipathy for the urban.

While Harding’s work—which considers writers such as Joyce and Dos Passos in order to recover a positive strain of modernist urban thought, or the “possibilities [the city] provides as a site of liberation from the very forces that would seem to crush the individual” (13)—is representative of a new strain in modernist scholarship, it does little to address the role that previous scholarship played in enforcing the increasingly discredited conception of modernism as a city-loathing art form. Indeed, as modernism’s origins in a redemptive Baudelairean poetics suggest—and as the very fact that Harding speaks emerged largely from the institutions which arose in the modernist period to account for and interpret contemporary art, rather than from that art itself. This is a view strongly supported by James Baldwin’s peculiarly and periodically modernist 1962 novel *Another Country*. Indeed it is a text whose denunciations of modernism’s anti-urban bias demand a parallel investigation of its author’s ambivalent relationship with the New Criticism, that unabashedly city-phobic and conspicuously Eliot-centered school of criticism that popularized not only the conception of modernism as a form directed against the urban, but also popularized modernism itself. In *Another Country*, Baldwin both vehemently attacks and helplessly reproduces the New Critical conception of modernism, one that attracted him as an aesthetic means of countering the effects of industrialization and urbanization, but also one which, for this very reason, failed to develop a redemptive discourse on the city.

After nearly four hundred pages in a naturalist mode, *Another Country* switches abruptly in Book Three into an idiom that recognizably and polemically engages with modernism. It is a switch signalled initially by its portentous title—“Toward Bethlehem,” an allusion to the slouching figure in Yeats’s “The Second Coming”—but perhaps most obviously and most self-consciously by the visit paid by Eric and Cass to the Museum of Modern Art. Though it remains unclear whether he does so in his own voice or through those of his characters, Baldwin presents in this MoMA scene the specific grounds for his denunciation of modernist art. As Cass and Eric meet to commiserate over Richard’s discovery of their affair, the scene is described as follows:

They reached the first of a labyrinthine series of rooms, shifting and cracking with groups of people, with bright paintings above and around them,
and stretching into the far distance, like tombstones with unreadable inscriptions. The people moved in waves, like tourists in a foreign graveyard. Occasionally, a single mourner, dreaming of some vanished relationship, stood alone in adoration or revery before a massive memorial. (402)

At the level of the aesthetic, modern art is dismissed here as garish (“bright paintings”), lifeless (“tombstones”), and—though the critique of the container (the MoMA) and its contents becomes somewhat confused—as monolithic and alienating (“labyrinthine”; “stretching into the far distance”). It is not merely the quality of the signifier itself that comes under attack in this passage, however, but also the absence of its relationship to any signified. Inscrutable, confusing, and “unreadable,” the modernist paintings described in this scene are pure, unreferential surface. As such, the paintings are not merely symbols of death—“tombstones”—but are themselves dead symbols: tombstones whose markings can’t be made out. Analogous to Walter’s Benjamin’s analysis in the *Trauerspiel* of allegory as “in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things” (178), works of modern art become in this scene “ruins”: not merely gazed upon by mourners, they are mourning in their very mode of representation. Signposts of unsuccessful representations pointing in vain at their putative signifieds—mere sites of “vanished relationships”—they become utterly detached from the real, purely abstract, and thus merely (and paradoxically for such a “garish” style) aesthetic.

While presenting a similar critique, a passage further on in the MoMA scene reveals also *Another Country*’s complicity with the modernist mode it is so intent on denouncing. Following Cass’s initial description of her conversation with Richard, the scene is described thus:

They passed not far from a weary guard, who looked blinded and dazzled, as though he had never been able to escape the light. Before them was a large and violent canvas in greens and reds and blacks, in blocks and circles, in daggerlike exclamation; it took a flying leap, as it were, from the wall, poised for the spectator’s eyeballs; and at the same time it seemed to stretch endlessly and adoringly in on itself, reaching back into an unspeakable chaos. It was aggressively and superbly uncharming and unreadable, and might have been painted by a lonely and bloodthirsty tyrant, who had been cheated of his victims. (405)

Here, in amplified form, are the scene’s principal arguments against modernism. An ugly, abstract, brashly colored, violent and “daggerlike” art form, it succeeds neither in pleasing its audience aesthetically nor in awakening their
critical intelligence; instead it leaves them—like the hapless guard who spends his days in its baffling proximity—"blinded and dazzled." Failing to establish any representational connections with the world beyond the museum, moreover, it becomes involuted, self-referential, and also self-satisfied, stretching "endlessly and adoringly in on itself." This very critique, however, could just as easily be applied to Book Three of Another Country itself. While it is possible to read this passage as the free-indirect discourse musings of Cass rather than as the direct pronouncement of the Baldwinian narrator, its analysis of modernist aesthetics cannot be entirely detached from a book that begins in a representational mode just as violent, garish, and disorienting as the painting on the wall. Indeed, this denunciation of modernist self-referentiality is at same time paradoxically a reference to the book’s own recognizably modernist aesthetic. That it is unclear who is speaking in this passage only heightens, in ways that further disorient its reader, the passage’s hints of self-parody.

Much like the MoMA paintings that attract the narrator’s ire further in, Book Three begins decisively detached from the real in a disorienting, garishly rendered dream-space filled with jarring symbols in need of decoding. The content of Vivaldo’s dream reads as a clumsily rendered allegory: he is running in the rain towards a high wall topped with broken glass which, once ascended, is revealed as dividing a cold, nightmarish landscape from a pastoral space. On one side is Rufus; on the other is Ida. If the final meaning of the dream-allegory is ultimately irresolvable, its general sense is quite clear. The passage serves to introduce the novel’s most conspicuous scene of male homosexuality: that between Vivaldo and Eric. And though a first reading—unaware of the impending context—might not reveal the depth of the imagery, a second shows the scene to be a sort of proleptic phallic dystopia: Vivaldo is torn by “thorns and nettles”; the broken glass takes the form of “sharp points standing straight up, like spears”; the rain falls in “long, cruel, gleaming shafts.” Observing the interplay of rain and glass, Vivaldo feels “an answering rearing in his own body . . . such as he might have felt for a moment had there been the movement and power of a horse beneath him” (381); when he falls onto “the rearing, uplifting glass,” he “[feels] again the random, voluptuous tug” (382). Even to the dreamer, however, this homosexual content remains hidden behind a frustrating veil of modernist figuration. Vivaldo, much like the reader, is “blinded by the rain beating down” (381) and troubled by his failing comprehension (“He had forgotten—what? how to escape or how to defeat his enemy” [382]). More specifically, he complains—much like the reader seeking to recover from the insistently bleak Another Country some positive commentary on the liberatory character of homosexual love—that whatever redemptive kernel might
exist in the dream remains obscure to him: he is “made sick by the certainty that he had forgotten—forgotten—what? some secret, some duty that would save him” (381).

While this dream-sequence arguably functions as an implicit critique of modernism, then—exposing how its difficult symbolism, disorientations of narrative, and garish style blunt its political content—it is also a viable target of its own objections. Indeed, while realism struggles to reassert itself within the ensuing detailed and explicit account of the lovemaking of Vivaldo and Eric (384), the narrative seems to reduce homosexuality itself to a parodic symbol of its own modernist representations. As he and Eric lie with “the hand of each on the sex of the other,” for example, Vivaldo offers a description of homosexuality-as-tautology: “It was strangely and insistently double-edged, it was like making love in the midst of mirrors, or it was like death by drowning. But it was also like music, the highest, sweetest, loneliest reeds, and it was like the rain” (385). Like the modernist monstrosities that “stretch endlessly and adoringly in on themselves,” homosexuality itself becomes in this description a death-like closed loop: a figure of involution and disengagement. And if the “But” clause seems to offer a positive counterpoint, the closing reference to the “rain”—a dominant motif in Book Three—deflates it forcefully. For as in Vivaldo’s dream, the rain that falls throughout the chapter serves as yet another self-reflexive figure of the distorting, obfuscating, ontologically confusing nature of modernist form. Describing Eric’s preparations to meet Cass at the MoMA, Baldwin notes, “He forgot about going to the store, and merely watched the rain, comforted by the anonymity and the violence—this violence was also peace. [. . . T]he speeding rain distorted, blurred, blunted, all the familiar outlines of the walls, windows, doors, parked cars, lamp posts, hydrants, trees” (393). A violent, abstract, and anonymous veil that obscures the meaning and the urban setting of Baldwin’s novel, the rain presents a further manifestation of Another Country’s self-loathing modernism.

Though it is centered on notions of self-containment, the pointed ambivalence of Another Country’s engagement with modernism is one with a history. It is a history dating back, in fact, to Baldwin’s earliest publication, his 1949 essay “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” where he champions modernism as a political aesthetic preferable to the target of his polemic, Wrightian naturalist protest fiction. According to Baldwin’s essay, the problem with protest novels is that rather than offering a credible challenge to a racist, homophobic society, they play into its hands by tacitly accepting its assumptions. In his analysis of Uncle Tom’s Cabin, for instance, he argues that in attempting to counter the stereotype of black men as savage, angry, and hyper-sexual,
Stowe simply inverts it. Beholden to a racist society for the terms of her rebuttal, she produces a picture of black men as false and one-dimensional as that of her rivals: “She must cover their intimidating nakedness,” Baldwin argues, and “robe them in white, the garments of salvation . . . Tom, therefore, her only black man, has been robbed of his humanity and divested of his sex” (14). Baldwin argues that this situation is internalized in the character of Bigger Thomas from Richard Wright’s *Native Son*. Bigger too has accepted the racist simplification of his character, and through his efforts to disprove it succeeds only in reinforcing it. “Bigger’s tragedy,” Baldwin says, “is not that he is cold or black or hungry, not even that he is American, black; but that he has accepted a theology that denies him life, that he admits the possibility of his being sub-human and feels constrained, therefore, to battle for his humanity according to those brutal criteria bequeathed him at his birth” (18). Protest novels, in other words, fight caricatures with caricatures: they resort to the same simplifications of black/white, straight/gay, human/subhuman against which they purport to “protest.”

Baldwin’s essay sees such simplifying modes of thought as the mastercause of racism, and attributes them to industrialized, urban modernity. If, as Baldwin argues, “It must be remembered that the oppressed and the oppressor are bound together within the same society; that they accept the same criteria, they share the same beliefs, they both alike depend on the same reality” (17), he is quite specific in identifying which society and which beliefs they share. It is, he argues, “our glittering, mechanical, inescapable civilization which has put to death our freedom” (15):

> We have, as it seems to me, in this most mechanical and interlocking of civilizations, attempted to lop this creature [the Human] down to the status of a time-saving invention. He is not, after all, already a member of a Society or a Group or a deplorable conundrum to be explained by Science. He is—and how old-fashioned the words sound!—something more than that, something resolutely indefinable, unpredictable. In overlooking, denying, evading his complexity—which is nothing more than the disquieting complexity of ourselves—we are diminished and we perish; only within this web of ambiguity, paradox, this hunger, danger, darkness, can we find at once ourselves and the power that will free us from ourselves. (12–13)

The impetus to reduce a complex and ambiguous creature to a finite set of traits is one that is not only shared by the racist, the homophobe, and the protest novelist, but one which is at the root of a mechanized, positivist, industrial economy. As a result, the naturalist, realist protest novel is generi-
cally anathema to the project of true protest. “What is today parroted as [the novelist’s] Responsibility,” Baldwin observes,

which seems to me to mean that he must make the formal declaration that he is involved in, and affected by, the lives of other people and to say something improving about this somewhat self-evident fact—is, when he believes it, his corruption and our loss; moreover, it is rooted in, interlocked with, and intensifies this same mechanization. (13)

Baldwin’s decidedly political solution to the problem of the naturalist protest novel, then, is one of form rather than of content. As he argues later in the essay,

One is told to put first things first, the good of society coming before niceties of style or characterization. Even if this were incontestable—for what exactly is the “good” of society?—it argues an insuperable confusion, since literature and sociology are not one and the same; it is impossible to discuss them as if they were. (15)

To reject the oppressor’s mechanistic reality—“his terror of the human being” and “determination to cut him down to size” (13)—means for Baldwin to draw upon what is unique to literary language and to exploit its resources of paradox, ambiguity, and obscurity in order to challenge that reality’s most fundamental assumptions. In other words, it means to write in the difficult, inscrutable mode so strongly critiqued in Book Three of Another Country: modernism.

To endorse an aesthetic of “ambiguity” and “paradox” in the year 1949 was not, of course, to go out on a very precarious limb, nor was it to endorse a peculiar conception of modernism. Indeed, coming at the end of the decade in which critics such as John Crowe Ransom, Robert Penn Warren, and Allen Tate carried out a somewhat hostile takeover of American English departments, Baldwin’s prescriptions read almost as doctrinaire New Criticism. But while the New Criticism—whose methods are most often seen as deliberately apolitical, ahistorical, and conservative—would seem to make strange bedfellows with a black gay writer who, despite his rejection of the naturalist protest novel, nevertheless did so from genuine political motivation, there is nonetheless much commonality of purpose between them. Though it is often forgotten, the New Criticism in fact began as a political movement. All three of these New Critics—Ransom, Warren, and Tate—were committed Southern Agrarians, and each had published an
article in the 1930 manifesto I’ll Take My Stand. As that collection’s intro-
duction states, the book’s purpose was to “support a Southern way of life
against what may be called the American or prevailing way,” and its argu-
ment was predicated on the simple opposition “Agrarian versus Industrial”
(ix). Believing, as Baldwin did, that scientific rationalism and industrial cap-
talism were to blame for an increasingly mechanized and dehumanizing
modern society, the Agrarians argued for a return to a pre-capitalist, farm-
based economy. As the introduction to I’ll Take My Stand makes clear, their
appeal was directly political: “If a community, or a section, or a race, or an
age, is groaning under industrialism, and well aware that it is an evil dispen-
sation, it must find a way to throw it off. To think that this cannot be done
is pusillanimous” (xx). Not succeeding in their efforts to elect agrarian sena-
tors and representatives, however—and reluctant to be charged with pusilla-
nimity—Ransom, Warren, and Tate decided upon a different strategy rooted
in literary criticism.

The three-point hermeneutic program laid out in the prefatory “Letter to
the Teacher” from the New Critics’ 1938 polemical textbook Understanding
Poetry stands as an unlikely call to arms:

1. Emphasis should be kept on the poem as a poem.
2. The treatment should always be concrete and inductive.
3. A poem should always be treated as an organic system of relationships,
   and the poetic quality should never be understood as inhering in one or
   more factors taken in isolation. (Brooks and Warren, ix)

While precepts such as these have generally been taken—and indeed have
functioned in practice—as conservative, apolitical, and ahistorical, recent
criticism such as Mark Jancovich’s The Cultural Politics of New Criticism
has worked to recover the genuinely subversive intentions behind them. For
readers like Jancovich, the insistence of the New Critical methodology that
attention be focused on the language of a poem could be seen as “radical”
because the New Critics believed that poetic language—ironic, paradoxical,
ambiguous, not resolvable to any scientific or mechanical “truth,” and thus
“organic”—presented an implicit challenge to the rationalistic bases of
the capitalist economy. As Allen Tate argued in his 1940 essay “The Present
Function of Criticism,” literary criticism as it was being practiced—in his
arguably reductive account, historical scholarship and source-hunting which
paid little attention to the language of poetry itself—was complicit in the
industrial economy:
These attitudes of scholarship are the attitudes of the *haute bourgeoisie* that support it in the great universities; it is now commonplace to observe that the uncreative money culture of modern times tolerates the historical routine of the scholars. The routine is “safe,” and it shares with the predatory social process at large a naturalistic basis. (201–2)

The New Critics were thus drawn to the difficult, fragmentary, arguably anti-rational work of the modernists, which in their reading of it became deliberately and radically anti-bourgeois, anti-capitalist, and thus paradoxically *anti-modern*. As Tate argued in another essay, “Modern Poetry,” such work “resisted the strong political pressures which ask the poet to ‘communicate’ to passively conditioned persons what a servile society expects them to feel”; and by expressing itself in “rhythms and insights that one has not already heard and known” (217), it promoted an ambiguity- and paradox-attuned “mode of perception” in the reader that served as prophylactic against the mechanistic, black-and-white world view of capitalism. To a writer like Baldwin interested in challenging the epistemological underpinnings of racism and homophobia, New Critical modernism thus represented a surprisingly coherent political strategy.

Of course, there were a number of serious problems with Baldwin’s espousal of a New Critical aesthetic. For all their shared opposition to industrial capitalism, the interests of a black gay city-dweller and a group of Southern Agrarians were bound to diverge. A particularly salient point of departure was that the pre-capitalist society to which the New Critics hoped to return America was substantially identical with the slave-based economy of the Old South. *I’ll Take My Stand* indeed included a defense of racial segregation, Robert Penn Warren’s “The Briar Patch,” and laments such as Frank Lawrence Owsley’s that abolition and the attendant “loss of nearly $2,000,000,000 invested in slaves” turned the South ruinously over to “the three millions of former slaves, some of whom could still remember the taste of human flesh” (62). As might be expected, then, there was vigorous opposition to New Critical modernism as a politically viable black aesthetic during the Civil Rights era, and this opposition was based heavily on its perceived racism. In his 1963 “Black Boys and Native Sons,” for example, Irving Howe cast Baldwin’s rejection of naturalism as both premature and immature. In the context of arguing that *Another Country* represented a return to naturalism, he argued that between 1949 and 1962 “Baldwin [had lived] through some of the experiences that had goaded Richard Wright into rage and driven him into exile” (100). This maturation process, Howe argued, produced a
realization that “to write simply about ‘Negro experience’ with the aesthetic distance urged by the critics of the fifties, [was] a psychological impossibility, for plight and protest [were] inseparable from that experience” (114). It was not Baldwin himself but Ralph Ellison, however, who received the harshest attacks for his perceived complicity with New Criticism. Howe, for example, called Ellison “‘literary’ to a fault” (112). In a 1970 article in Black World, Ernest Kaiser, noting the Southern and racist origins of Ellison’s adoptive movement and characterizing its practitioners as “art for art’s sakers in the extreme” (1), said “the creative writing called for by the New Critics” was “unemotional, uncommitted and uninvolved in the people’s problems” (1). It thus failed utterly, he argued, in its putative anti-capitalist program: “It is the antithesis,” he said, “of progressive writing and art committed to and concerned with the people’s problems and struggles” (1).

Written in this cold, apolitical mode, Invisible Man stood for Kaiser as a “nightmarish, escapist; surreal, non-social protest, existential novel” (2). As Addison Gayle, Jr., noted in the introduction to his 1971 collection The Black Aesthetic, “A critical methodology has no relevance to the black community unless it aids men in becoming better than they are”: “such an element,” he concluded, “has been sorely lacking in the critical canons handed down from the academies by the Aristotelian Critics, the Practical Critics and Formalist Critics, and the New Critics.” By the time of his 1975 The Way of the New World, Gayle called the formalism of New Criticism a strategy for eviscerating the subversive content of black art. “To evaluate the life and culture of black people,” he wrote,

it is necessary that one live the black experience in a world where substance is more important than form, where the social takes precedence over the aesthetic, where each act, gesture, and movement is political, and where continual rebellion separates the robot from the revolutionary. (Qtd. in Gates, 65)

Gayle’s statement stands as evidence of the vanished credibility by the mid-seventies of Baldwin’s 1949 belief in the inseparability of aesthetics, form, and social change.

Baldwin’s own rejection of New Critical modernism in Book Three of Another Country, however, is based upon a different element. It is neither the racism of the New Criticism nor the perceived conflict between formalism and black emancipation that he attacks in the MoMA scene, but rather the New Criticism’s anti-urban bias. The Southern Agrarian opposition to industrialism, to science, to machines, and to “progress” itself, was, one must remember, also an opposition to the spatial locus of these modern ills: the
city. As John Crowe Ransom made clear in his contribution to I’ll Take My Stand, “Reconstructed but Unregenerate,” that volume’s “Agrarian versus Industrial” opposition could also be written as “Rural versus Urban.” Looking to the South itself, he charged its cities with complicity with “American,” as opposed to “Southern,” values and located defiance in the countryside: “The urban South, with its heavy importation of regular American ways and regular American citizens, has nearly capitulated to [industrial] novelties. It is the village South and the rural South which supply the resistance” (20). Calling his fellow Southerners to armed violent conflict against Northern forces, he maintained that “it will be well to seize upon and advertise certain Northern industrial communities as horrible examples of life we detest—not failing to point out the human catastrophe which occurs when a Southern village or rural community becomes the cheap labor of a miserable factory system” (23).

As he formulated it in his appeal to conservatives all across the nation to rise up against the encroaching catastrophe of industrialism, “The unifying effective bond between these geographically diverse elements of public opinion will be the clean-cut policy that the rural life of America must be defended, and the world made safe for the farmers” (25). As Ransom made emphatically clear in these passages, the New Critical critique of industrial capitalism exhibited and reflected a spatial as well as racial bias. It could dismiss modernity and its metropolitan centre because its analysis was carried out from the putatively pure, pastoral, agrarian South. But while the New Critics had a distinct space from which to launch their attacks on New York, Baldwin, as a black Northern urban writer, was not only unlikely to see the Old South in the same nostalgic light as they were, but also actually lived in the city against which they railed.

Given the spatial problematic of the New Criticism, it is significant that Baldwin stages his rejection of modernism in the distinctive space of the museum. First, this is important because the institution which mediates between art and the public is denounced as forcefully as the art itself. Indeed, much as the New Critical appropriation of modernist art as anti-urban and anti-industrial became inseparable from the concept of “modernism” itself, so too in Baldwin’s rendering does the institutional container become indistinguishable from the artwork it contains. Like the art that “blinds and dazzles” visitors to the museum, the museum itself is described as a “cold, dazzling place” (402); where the art “[stretches] endlessly and adoringly in on itself”; the museum exhibits a similar spatial mise-en-abîme, consisting of “a labyrinthine series of rooms” (402). In one of his most characteristically muscular examples of modernist prose, Baldwin writes that Cass and Eric
continued their frightening promenade though the icy and angular jungle. The colors on the walls blared at them—like frozen music; he had the feeling that these rooms would never cease folding in on each other, that this labyrinth was eternal. And a sorrow entered him for Cass stronger than any love he had ever felt for her. She stood as erect as a soldier, moving straight ahead, and no bigger, as they said in the South, than a minute. (404)

As abstract, unreadable, violent, and inescapable as the art on the walls, the museum also becomes here a figure of political disinterest and stagnation. Converting all movement and rhythm into stasis—both the “frozen music” of the exhibited artwork and the spatializing clichés of Eric’s language (“no bigger than a minute”)—the only action the museum permits is that of the vortex, slowly spiraling and folding in on itself.

Forming this synecdochial relationship with the art it contains, the MoMA is significant secondly because it provides an entry into the twentieth-century debate about the proper role of the museum in relation to the industrial city. In *Museums and American Cultural Life*, Stephen Conn reads the “extraordinary institution building” that characterized the period 1876–1926 as responding to the same twin impetuses as those of the New Criticism: “Americans erected imposing edifices of many kinds,” he writes, “At one level a part of,” and “at another a reaction to the dislocation brought about by rapid industrialization and urbanization” (9). In his analysis of the art museum in particular, Conn reads Philadelphia’s Pennsylvania Museum against New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art as embodying a struggle between notably different visions of the museum’s role in reacting to urbanization. The Pennsylvania Museum, he argues, took after London’s South Kensington Museum and oriented itself as a school and a force for managing the rise of industry. Taking an active role in the city’s economy as both a laboratory for the improvement of industrial design and “a place where all city residents . . . might learn lessons to be put later to productive use” (203), the museum was for Philadelphians “an indirect way to increase the value of industrial production in the city’s factories” (200). The Met, on the other hand, was modeled on the Louvre, and was characterized by its paradoxical rejection of industry and the urban. Though linked to the industrial economy by the vast fortunes of its founders and donors, and though complicit in promoting a “culture of acquisitiveness” through its department-store-like displays of treasured objects, Conn argues that the Met positioned itself as a “place of ritual” set apart from the forces of mechanical reproduction: “the objects inside continued to retain their ‘aura’” (194). The Met-style rejection of modernity, Conn argues, won out over the Pennsylvania Museum’s efforts
to deal positively with it: “The ‘losers’ . . . were those who envisioned a different kind of art museum, one . . . which would be not merely a cultural antidote to the vulgar materialism of the late-nineteenth-century world, but an uplifting part of that world” (193). Like the New Criticism that voiced its polemic against industrial capitalism from the perspective of the South, the art museum in New York construed itself as a space detached from and opposing the life of the city.

In this context, the MoMA presents an interesting case, initially envisioning its role as one of involvement with the industrial economy but transforming over time from a laboratory into an archive. Founded in November of 1929—by no means a bright time for the modern economy—the MoMA nevertheless took its roles as those of “establishing and maintaining in the City of New York, a museum of modern art, encouraging and developing the study of modern arts and the application of said arts to manufacture and practical life, and furnishing popular instruction” (qtd. in Alexander, 69). For Hilton Kramer, this South Kensington–style mandate was best carried out by Alfred Hamilton Barr, first director of the MoMA. Under Barr’s influence, Kramer argues, “what governed the museum’s outlook from its earliest days was a vision that attempted to effect a kind of grand synthesis of modernist aestheticism and the technology of industrialism” (422). Influenced by the rejection of aesthetic hierarchies at the Bauhaus, where “a poster might be equal to a painting, a factory or a housing project as much to be esteemed as a great work of sculpture,” Barr nonetheless divorced this Bauhaus perspective from its radical politics. The “great success” of the Barr-directed MoMA, Kramer argues, was that “the aesthetic that originated at the Bauhaus and other avant-garde groups [was] stripped of its social ideology and turned into the reigning taste of the cultural marketplace” (422). For critics like Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach, this deliberate depoliticization made the MoMA complicit with “the ideology of late capitalism.” While such a policy engaged the museum in a relationship with the city and with industry, they argue, it was a relationship of simple submission, and the MoMA became “a monument to individualism, understood as subjective freedom” (485). As the “modern” art within its walls ceased to be “contemporary,” however, and came increasingly to represent an art-historical period, Kramer argues that the MoMA’s role was forced to change entirely. In 1984, the year in which Kramer wrote, the choice was between “MoMA as historical archive and MoMA as a living artistic force” (424). The MoMA’s only choice, Kramer argued, was to sever its direct productive engagement with the city and to adopt an outlook “of art-historical formalism”—effectively to sever the tie of its paintings to the contemporary world surrounding them, to detach the
signifier from the signified, to turn modernism into a historical and aesthetic phenomenon: to accept modernism, in the most pessimistic formulation, as a ruin.

In Baldwin’s 1962 text, this severance of city from artwork is already well underway, though his presentation is somewhat contradictory. On the one hand, the space of the museum—cold, labyrinthine, self-enfolded—is criticized as the apolitical and aloof, “sacred and sterile” (401), preserve of polite society. When Eric first steps into the MoMA, “The museum was crowded, full of the stale, Sunday museum stink, aggravated, now, by the damp. He came through the doors behind a great cloud of windy, rainy, broad-beamed ladies; and they formed, before him, a large, loud, rocking wall, as they shook their umbrellas and themselves and repeated to each other, in their triumphant voices, how awful the weather was” (401).

Employing once again the imagery established in Book Three’s opening dream sequence, in this passage Eric runs up against the barrier of triviality that separates the MoMA from its urban context. The lone force of transit between inside and out is the paradoxically “windy” wall of the “broad-beamed ladies”: the undifferentiated mass of unthinking politeness which comes and goes, to pun on a favorite poem of the New Critics, talking of Picasso. On the other hand, Baldwin seems also to dismiss the MoMA as an institution too beholden to the mass public. The scene of the denunciation is set, after all, on a Sunday: the one day of the week that a factory worker would be able to visit an art gallery, and a day on which the Met agreed to open only after what came to be known as the “overalls controversy” (Conn, 204). There is a distinct narratorial distaste, moreover, not only for the small crowd of the ladies, but also for the public at large, who “[move] in waves, like tourists in a foreign graveyard” with what Baldwin describes sarcastically as a “democratic gaiety” (402). When Eric finally manages to pass into the museum, it is paradoxically through the sinister interaction of these two competing forces: “People now came crushing in through the doors behind him, and their greater pressure spat him past the ladies” (401).

Baldwin’s frustration, however, is not with the presence of the public in the MoMA—not with the fact that they’re looking at the art—but with the fact that it can mean nothing for them in this context. His concern is with the urban public’s blind acceptance of an aesthetic antipathetic to their interests:

Three young men and two young girls, scrubbed and milky, gleaming with their passion for improvement and the ease with which they moved among abstractions, were surrendering their tickets and passing through the barriers.
Others were on the steps, going down, coming up, stationary, peering at each other like half-blinded birds and setting up a hideous whirr, as of flying feathers and boastful wings. (401)

If the “improvement” they seek is more substantive than the “status” that draws the ladies to the MoMA, these young people have come to the wrong place. Already comfortable with the “abstractions” of modernist form, no longer faced with the shock of a contemporary phenomenon but rather in the presence of Kramer’s canonized “art-historical formalism,” the MoMA’s guests are reduced to the sort of mechanized slavery from which Baldwin in 1949 believed modernism would save its audience: once inside the museum, they too become mindless puppets, following whatever pre-determined paths the MoMA’s hallways offer. If they sought an aesthetic capable of reaching beyond the museum’s walls and effecting positive change in the city, they get instead the despair of a modernism paradoxically displayed only to mourn and reject the urban. Showing herself an adept New Critical reader of modernism, Cass looks at the aforementioned “large and violent canvas in greens and reds and blacks” and tells Eric almost immediately, “I’m beginning to think . . . that growing just means learning more and more about anguish. That poison becomes your diet” (405). In a passage that cannot escape the tint of meta-commentary, Cass responds wearily to Eric’s question, “You think that there isn’t any hope for us?”: “Hope?” The word seemed to bang from wall to wall. ‘Hope? No, I don’t think there’s any hope. We’re too empty here’—her eyes took in the Sunday crowd—‘too empty—here” (406).

“Here,” amidst the claustrophobic echoes of the Museum of Modern Art, and “here,” in Baldwin’s modernism-denouncing-yet-modernist Book Three, modernism stages its own defeat.

Again evincing complicity with the aesthetic it attacks, Another Country ends by enacting exactly that which it criticizes, producing a bitterly ironic New Critical modernist representation of the city. The final chapter of Book Three and of Another Country begins with Yves’s airplane approaching New York:

The sun struck, on steel, on bronze, on stone, on glass, on the gray water far beneath them, on the turret tops and flashing windshields of crawling cars, on the incredible highways, stretching and snarling and turning for mile upon mile upon mile, on the houses, square and high, low and gabled, and on their howling antennae, on the sparse, weak trees, and on those towers, in the distance, of the city of New York. (432)
The insistent alliterations on harsh “s” and “z” sounds (“sun,” “struck,” “steel,” “bronze,” “stone,” “glass”) combined with the passage’s hard, cold, and sharp imagery of “steel,” “turret tops,” “flashing windshields,” and “howling antennae,” produce a tableau as verbally violent and alienating as the most garish abstract canvas. The city’s “incredible highways,” which stretch vortex-like “snarling and turning for mile upon mile upon mile,” baffle the comprehension. From the air, the city is an abstraction, populated not by people but by anthropomorphized metonyms: “crawling cars.” Fittingly, then, Another Country, a book that succeeds in identifying the problem with its own aesthetic mode but remains powerless to address it, concludes on a note of resigned and indignant sarcasm: “and he,” the innocent and unknowing foreigner Yves, “strode through the barriers, more high-hearted than he had even been as a child, into that city which the people from heaven had made their home” (436).

Notes

1. “The life of our city is rich in poetic and marvellous subjects. We are enveloped and steeped as though in an atmosphere of the marvellous; but we do not notice it” (The Mirror of Art, 129).

2. “The painter, the true painter for whom we are looking, will be he who can snatch its epic quality from the life of today and make us see and understand, with brush or with pencil, how great and poetic we are in our cravats and our patent-leather boots” (The Mirror of Art, 38).

3. David A. Davis in “Climbing Out of ‘The Briar Patch’: Robert Penn Warren and the Divided Conscience of Segregation” places the article in relation to Warren’s later repudiation of his support for segregation and active involvement in civil rights activism. He offers the somewhat pat conclusion, “As a young man, Warren fell victim to misplaced values, but he eventually found the vision and the courage to face his heritage and the public and to overcome the split in his own conscience” (120).

Bibliography


