

MAREN TOVA LINETT

Modernist women's literature: an introduction

“New fields are opening and new laborers are working in them,” proclaimed Charlotte Perkins Gilman in 1911.¹ In the early years of the twentieth century, practitioners of the arts saw a world of expanding possibilities. Gilman’s metaphor, simultaneously nostalgic for rural authenticity and energized by modern productivity, captures a moment of self-conscious transition during which writers and artists sought to break with tradition and open “new fields” of artistic endeavor. Indeed Gilman (1860–1935) and her younger British contemporary Virginia Woolf (1882–1941) each wrote about the new ways fiction could represent life. Gilman wrote that “[t]he art of fiction is being re-born in these days. Life is discovered to be longer, wider, deeper, richer, than these monotonous players of one tune would have us believe.”² Woolf said much the same thing, if in more poetic language, when she wrote that “[l]ife is not a series of gig-lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end . . . We are not pleading merely for courage and sincerity; we are suggesting that the proper stuff of fiction is a little other than custom would have us believe it.”³

The stress both writers placed on what others would “have us believe” shows a shared resistance to convention, an impatience with the *modus operandi* of workmanlike writers – attitudes that mark the modernist period. The American poet Wallace Stevens similarly described a process of shifting the “proper stuff” of literary art in “Of Modern Poetry”: “The poem of the mind in the act of finding / What will suffice. It has not always had / To find: the scene was set; it repeated what / Was in the script.”⁴ T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound too demanded newness in literature. Eliot wrote that for a new work of art “to conform merely would be for the new work not really to conform at all; it would not be new, and would therefore not be a work of art.”⁵ And Pound famously advocated that artists “make it new.”⁶ Women modernists joined their male counterparts in working toward this goal.

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But beyond the predictable inertia of convention, Woolf and Gilman saw an additional hindrance to their quest to “make it new.” What Woolf later called “sex-consciousness” was interfering with modernism’s experiment; gender was inhibiting art. And so both writers advocated transcending sex, achieving an androgyny that would allow one’s art to flow “unimpeded.” Gilman wrote, “The true artist transcends his sex, or her sex. If this is not the case, the art suffers.”⁷ Woolf agreed: “it is fatal for anyone who writes to think of their sex. It is fatal to be a man or woman pure and simple; one must be woman-manly or man-womanly . . . And fatal is no figure of speech; for anything written with that conscious bias is doomed to death. It ceases to be fertilized.”⁸

Modernist literature, then, had to be daring, to break with convention and show life as its falling atoms were experienced rather than as it was conventionally recorded. It had to be androgynous, so that consciousness of sex did not weigh down the work of art. Gilman and Woolf further agreed that modernism needed to execute its daring not only in terms of form but also in terms of content: it had to write about women in new ways, particularly by placing the deserved significance upon relationships among women. Gilman noted that “[t]he humanizing of woman of itself opens . . . distinctly fresh fields of fiction. [For example,] the inter-relation of women with women – a thing we could never write about before because we never had it before: except in harems and convents.”⁹ And Woolf described a contemporary novel that focused on the relations between two women working in a laboratory: “For if Chloe likes Olivia and Mary Carmichael knows how to express it she will light a torch in that vast chamber where nobody has yet been.”¹⁰ Relationships among women were only one chamber newly lit; women’s lives generally – their relationships to their work, to their rural or urban landscapes, to philosophy, to religion, to politics – needed imaginative expression.

British novelist Dorothy Richardson (1873–1957) joined her contemporaries in pointing out how challenging it was to portray women’s lives. In an essay called “Women and the Future,” she wrote, “how difficult it is, even for the least prejudiced, to *think* the feminine past, to escape the images that throng the mind from the centuries of masculine expressiveness on the eternal theme: expressiveness that has so rarely reached beyond the portrayal of woman, whether Madonna, Diana, or Helen, in her moments of relationship to the world as it is known to men.”¹¹ If anything unites the women authors of the modernist period, it is this desire to reach beyond such masculine portrayals of women.

One particularly masculine image of a woman, Diego Velázquez’s painting *The Toilet of Venus* (c. 1650) became a symbol of women’s resistance to patriarchal norms when (as Sowon Park describes in her chapter of this

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Companion on activism) it was slashed by the suffragist Mary Richardson in 1914. Richardson damaged the painting to protest the rearrest of fellow suffragist Emmeline Pankhurst. In the painting, known as the *Rokeby Venus*, Venus reclines on a luxuriously draped settee, nude, with her back to us; she gazes at her face in a mirror held by Cupid. Lynda Nead notes that the choice of this particular painting, which was brought to England by the Duke of Wellington in 1806, and a hundred years later purchased by the National Art Collections Fund for the National Gallery, seems inevitable: “‘The Rokeby Venus,’ hailed as a paragon of female beauty, an exemplar of the female nude, a national treasure and worth a fortune – surely this combination of values and meanings distinguished it from other works in the Gallery, including other female nudes.”¹² Richardson’s strike was a direct attack on the patriarchal and nationalistic ideals embodied in the painting and its history. But the painting is also of a woman considering her reflection – that is, reflecting upon her own image. That the mirror is held by Cupid indicates that in the image Venus sees, she is defined according to the heterosexual romance plot: she sees herself in relation “to the world as it is known to men.” Moreover, the fact that Cupid is Venus’ son suggests that her image is important insofar as it is reflected back to her by her male offspring. She has served as a vessel to carry the son, and takes her meaning from his existence and from his view of her. And so Richardson’s attack on the painting was also a protest against woman’s view of herself in Cupid’s mirror. Her act enjoins women to see themselves differently, neither as objectified players in the romance plot nor as mothers of sons merely. Modernist writers were tackling this very problem: how women might find ways to view themselves outside the parameters of patriarchy. The damage to the *Rokeby Venus* can serve as an appropriate starting point, then, not only for militant suffragism, but for modernist women’s reinvention of what it meant to be, or to become, a woman.

The striking parallels in the commentary of such dissimilar writers as Woolf and Gilman, and implicitly in such acts as Mary Richardson’s destruction of the painting, suggest a thread of shared concerns and goals encircling the diverse field of transatlantic women’s modernism. *The Cambridge Companion to Modernist Women Writers* aims to introduce readers to this body of work by considering both its common efforts to labor in the “fresh fields” of Gilman’s ideal and its great variety of methods for so doing. Until feminist criticism was institutionalized in the 1980s, modernist women writers – when they were taught or written about at all – were viewed as lesser, feminine counterparts of male modernists such as Pound, Eliot, James Joyce, and Joseph Conrad. In understandable reaction to women’s marginalization and assimilation, feminist criticism in the 1980s and 1990s overemphasized two related aspects of modernist women’s writing: its difference

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from male modernist writing and its comparably laudable political stances. More recent criticism has begun to recognize the common historical, literary, and political contexts surrounding both male and female modernist work, study the complex relationship between women writers and reactionary politics, and credit women writers with formative roles in inventing literary modernism. This *Companion* contributes to such a nuanced account by seeking to understand women's modernism in its own terms. It does not excessively compare women's modernism to men's, but neither does it shy away from acknowledging areas in which women's modernism does speak back to, or simply speak to, modernism practiced by men.

One of the most important influences on women's lives during this period was of course the First World War. In *The Great War and Women's Consciousness*, Claire Tylee writes:

Although it is not clear quite what effect the First World War had on British women's consciousness and the movement for women's rights in Britain, it is clear that this is a matter of supreme importance to the history of women, and thus to the proper understanding of British society. It would not be absurd to argue that the creation of women's citizenship in 1918 (and its extension in 1928) was at least as important a determinant of modern consciousness as the Battle of the Somme. What is curious is that many women who lived through that period saw the War itself as overriding their interest in women's suffrage. With the War came the opportunity for them to achieve what they had struggled for: entry to what had been seen before as male centres of power.¹³

Such opportunity may have contributed to the decision by leaders of women's suffrage organizations in Britain and the United States to suspend their campaigns of militancy when the war began. Tylee describes the atmosphere of excitement that coexisted with anxiety about the war: "If we look at journalism and diaries of the period, we can see that the war represented an opportunity for 'adventure' for many women. They used it to escape domestic restrictions, to get 'out of the cage.'" ¹⁴ The war made it possible for many middle- and upper-class women who longed for adventure to find it; they could join Voluntary Aid Detachments and nurse wounded soldiers or drive ambulances. And it made it possible for many working women to move into better-paying jobs. Approximately 200,000 women moved from domestic labor into the munitions industry, for example, for shorter (though still long!) hours and better pay.¹⁵

Gail Braybon describes the situation for women's employment after people accepted that women were going to take the place of men who were away at the front:

the rush of women into engineering and explosives began in the autumn of 1915 and by 1916 there was actually a shortage of female labour in the textile and

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clothing trades, as women moved into more lucrative munitions work. This rapid expansion in munitions continued in 1916 and 1917, and women also increasingly replaced men in private, non-munitions industries, like grain milling, sugar refining, brewing, building, surface mining, and shipyards.¹⁶

Although this expansion began slowly, during the war more than 1.5 million English women joined the ranks of paid workers, and were able, as the above passage shows, to perform a variety of kinds of work which before the war would not have been available to them.

The press on both sides of the Atlantic was full of stories about women workers that, in spite of their inaccuracies, created an aura of excitement and change around conceptions of women's status. In an essay entitled "Women and the War," Braybon notes that English newspapers regularly discussed women's newfound self-confidence, questioned whether women would reject domestic duties after the war, and speculated that women's suffrage would be granted in response to women's wartime service.¹⁷ There is some evidence that the changes brought to women by the war were far-ranging and largely positive. Having done useful wartime work often permanently changed women's evaluations of their own powers, even if that work was temporary. In her book-length study, Braybon quotes labor historian Mary Macarthur writing in 1918: "Of all the changes worked by the war none has been greater than the change in the status and position of women: and yet it is not so much that woman herself has changed, as that man's conception of her has changed."¹⁸

In her discussions of the 1920s, however, Braybon shows that in fact men's attitudes toward women's status did not change in the dramatic ways it was supposed. "[M]any commentators, then and now, have been cynical about the praise heaped on women by the press and the wartime propaganda machine, pointing out that women were still paid less than men, that their working conditions were often appalling, that there remained many areas of work from which they were excluded completely, and that it proved impossible for women to hold onto their wartime jobs when peace returned."¹⁹ Tylee makes a similar point, noting that "within ten years after the War [engineering and transport] jobs were predominantly male again."²⁰ The 1920s, as it turned out, saw a backlash against women working. Were they to take jobs from wounded former soldiers? Ought they not return to the home and bear children to replace the young men lost in the war, to shore up the nation's health and pride?

Although the war did change many women's lives for the better, at least by giving them confidence in their newfound abilities, in some ways it reinforced ideas about men's and women's separate spheres. Tylee argues that:

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the War emphasized an essential difference between men and women. Women were not combatants. [...] Even independent, adventurous women like Cicely Hamilton and Rose Macaulay expressed a humiliated sense of their own inferiority at being non-combatant burdens on the male part of the population. While the War permitted women to do all sorts of things which had been regarded as strictly masculine before the War, it required of men a more extreme form of masculine activity which was prohibited even to men in peacetime: not merely physical violence, but savage murder in battle. The war re-asserted gender distinctions that women had been contesting: women were frail and had to be defended by strong protectors, who were prepared to kill or die on their behalf.²¹

In this sense the war could be said to have impeded, rather than furthered, the women's movement. The sense of humiliation evident in Hamilton and Macaulay is a key aspect of women's responses to war, one that has been overlooked until recently. According to Suzanne Raitt, "[f]or many women, especially older women who had no children to look after, and were beyond the age where they could be recruited for war service, the war heightened their feelings of uselessness."²² Raitt explores the British novelist, suffragist, and critic May Sinclair's humiliation at being extraneous, arguing that Sinclair's case demonstrates that "femininity is repeatedly experienced and represented as shame at times of social and cultural crisis."²³ So, although many women felt liberated by the war, many also felt superfluous; and many felt both of these in succession. In her chapter in this volume, Patricia Juliana Smith describes a short story by Radclyffe Hall in which an ambulance driver watches from a Calais quay while her vehicle is towed onto a ship bound for England after the war, taking with it her short-lived sense of purpose. This story encapsulates the social and emotional roller-coaster the war created for many women who were brought "out of the cage" into public life, but a few years later asked to step politely back in.

The upheaval created by the war was one important factor in the larger atmosphere of change that marked the modernist period. Scholars have also looked to changes in philosophy, psychology, science, technology, and mass culture to explain the emphasis on innovation, the idea that the postwar years in particular made a radical break from the previous century's stodginess and conservative mentality. And there were developments within given arts that seemed to emerge independently of technological change. In his important study *The Culture of Time and Space*, Stephen Kern explains the complex causality of the changes in the way people experienced time and space:

Some cultural developments were directly inspired by new technology. James Joyce was fascinated by the cinema, and in *Ulysses* he attempted to recreate in

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words the montage techniques used by early filmmakers . . . Many conceptions of time and space, however, were altered independently of technology, in response to pressures within various genres and disciplines. Paul Cézanne revolutionized the treatment of space in art as he concentrated on the eternal form of *Mont Sainte-Victoire* and the arrangement of bottles and apples in his still lifes . . . The thematic similarity between developments inspired by technology and those independent of it suggests that a cultural revolution of the broadest scope was taking place, one that involved essential structures of human experience and basic forms of human expression.²⁴

Such an atmosphere of cultural revolution can be seen in a 1918 review of Dorothy Richardson's *Pilgrimage* (1915–1967) by May Sinclair. In this review, Sinclair discusses Richardson's experimental narrative technique in the context of larger philosophic questions. She begins by questioning the categories into which criticism places literary art:

I do not know whether this article is or is not going to be a criticism, for so soon as I begin to think what I shall say I find myself criticizing criticism, wondering what is the matter with it . . . Only a live criticism can deal appropriately with a live art. And it seems to me that the first step towards life is to throw off the philosophic cant of the nineteenth century. I don't mean that there is no philosophy of Art, or that if there has been there is to be no more of it; I mean that it is absurd to go on talking about realism and idealism, or objective and subjective art, as if the philosophies were sticking where they stood in the eighties.²⁵

Sinclair – following J. B. Beresford's assessment – describes Richardson's method as a “plunge” into reality, a plunge so deep that it undermines the distinction between objective and subjective narration. “For this and this alone is the way things happen. What we used to call the ‘objective’ method is a method of after-thought, of spectacular reflection.” A narrative method that seems objective and realistic, Sinclair points out, is really a construct, a convention through which we can describe “reality” retrospectively. That Richardson's method of portraying “the way things happen” is also a construct, Sinclair does not admit. Her desire to make criticism come alive by throwing off the shackles of nineteenth-century philosophy is a characteristically modernist move; like the literary works about which she is writing, her essay adopts a radical tone, insists that it is taking part in a definitive break with past literature, criticism, and philosophy. The word “live” was a signal term for modernist writers, many of whom viewed literary works of the recent past as mummified, with (to use Richardson's words from another context) “no depth of life in them, mere husks.”²⁶

Sinclair's review also brings to light some important facets of modernist literary invention. First, it makes clear the inherent link between specific

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formal experiments – for example with limiting point of view – and a blurring of literary categories which made it impossible to decide whether a work should be labeled realism or idealism. That is, it highlights the extent to which, like Cézanne’s almost inadvertent revolutionizing of space in painting, modernism’s generic inventiveness was a function of technical decisions on a much narrower level. Second, Sinclair’s review shows how this experimentation was bound up with contemporary philosophical concerns about, as Andrew Ramsay puts it in *To the Lighthouse*, “subject and object and the nature of reality.” The extreme first-person point of view Richardson uses in *Pilgrimage* is patently subjective, but Sinclair reads the result as more objective than the allegedly objective, prior realism. Indeed, Richardson describes her writing as a “feminine equivalent” to the “current masculine realism,” implying that she aims at some form of objectivity. The collapse of the formerly stable distinction between objectivity and subjectivity in literature echoed a similar destabilization in contemporary philosophy, which was in turn reinforced by discoveries in the physical sciences popularized by scientists such as Arthur Eddington and James Jeans. Eddington’s widely read *The Nature of the Physical World* (1928), for example, brought the meaning of reality into question by explaining Einstein’s theory of relativity and considering the implications for everyday life of the fact that material objects are composed of atoms and can be penetrated by x-rays.²⁷

Early twentieth-century writers were informed about these developments through the work of popular scientists, through newspapers, and often through lectures sponsored by universities or intellectual societies in London or New York. In Dorothy Richardson’s *Deadlock* (1921), one of the “novel-chapters” that make up *Pilgrimage*, Miriam Henderson attends a university extension lecture by the Cambridge philosopher J. M. E. McTaggart. McTaggart was a real-life Hegel scholar who presented a series of lectures from 1899 to 1914 that were later published as *Introduction to the Study of Philosophy*; Richardson was working from a printed syllabus when she wrote this section of the novel.²⁸ In the lecture Miriam attends, McTaggart questions the ability of pre-Einsteinian science, which he describes as concerning itself only with surfaces, to account for the mysterious character of matter. Miriam learns that there is no single, stable explanation for the complexity of the universe; she is “relieved to find that science is only half true” when it comes to “the study of the ultimate nature of reality.”²⁹ Gertrude Stein may mean something similar when she remarks that “The nineteenth century believed in science but the twentieth century does not.”³⁰ Science, that is, no longer seemed scientific, if by “scientific” one meant observable, empirical, objective certainty.

A lecture similarly representative of the intellectual fare of the time was entitled “Bergson’s Theory of Knowledge and Einstein’s Theory of Relativity,”

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delivered by Professor Wildon Carr at the Lyceum Club of London in November 1924. Carr treats Bergson and Einstein as initiators of “the extraordinary revolution in the fundamental conceptions of philosophy and science which marks the first quarter of this twentieth century.” Their theories together “show two aspects of the change, the one its subjective, the other its objective aspect.” After contextualizing Bergson’s work as a reaction against the positivism of nineteenth-century science, Carr summarizes Bergson’s theory of the human intellect: “It does not reveal things as they are, but it frames the actions which serve us in our life activity. It frames the changing, stream of existence, making it assume the staid forms of spatial things. It geometrizes space and it spatializes time.”³¹ Turning to Einstein, Carr points out that according to Einstein’s theory of relativity, “[e]very observer of nature measuring phenomena takes a frame of reference and whatever frame he chooses it must be for him a system at rest. Thus just as we saw in Bergson’s theory when we considered the subjective factor, or mind, or intellect, so in Einstein’s theory when we consider the objective factor, the world, or universe, we have nothing absolute to refer to.” He concludes that objectivity has given way, in modern times, to a pervasive subjectivity. “Einstein has brought us back to the concept of nature as a system, and Bergson has given us the concept of our intellect as itself a product of creative evolution. On each side, mind and nature, the idea of the absolute – absolute knowledge of absolute reality – has given place to the principle of relativity.”³² Relativity, that is, had many implications: it cast doubt upon the solidity of matter in the universe, but also upon distinctions that had bolstered philosophical and literary inquiry.

Freudian psychology was of course another vital force undermining the idea of objectivity and impelling modernist probings into the mysterious. Freud’s ideas made their way quickly to the English-speaking world, with several professional societies being founded in England and the United States in the early years of the twentieth century.³³ In the 1920s, Freud’s collected works were translated by Alix and James Strachey and published by the Woolfs’ Hogarth Press. In her psychoanalytic study of Woolf, Elizabeth Abel describes the cultural impact of psychoanalysis, citing Bronislaw Malinowski’s comment that “psycho-analysis has had within the last ten years [1917–27] a truly meteoric rise in popular favor. It has exercised a growing influence over contemporary literature, science, and art.”³⁴ And Abel also quotes the poet Bryher, who claimed, “You could not have escaped Freud in the literary world of the early twenties. Freud! All literary London discovered Freud about 1920.”³⁵ Freud’s ideas dovetailed with those of Einstein and Bergson in that all questioned empirical ways of knowing. If, as psychoanalysis made clear, human beings could not be sure of their own motives, if the unconscious, that which could neither be seen nor felt directly, was the real animator of

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our behavior, this was yet another blow to the idea of objective, knowable reality. When May Sinclair complained about the absurdity of the opposition between “realism and idealism, or objective and subjective art,” then, she participated in the growing and overdetermined skepticism about these crumbling distinctions.

The third aspect of modernist writing Sinclair’s review highlights is the question of realism in works of this period. Sinclair implicitly asks us to look beyond the appearance of realism in women’s literature that is not on its face experimental. Consider Nella Larsen’s *Passing* (1929), for example. It is written in a relatively straightforward style, apparently realistic. But the narration is far from objective. Readers very soon discover that the narrative’s focalizer, Irene Redfield, though she does not narrate in the first person, gives us a skewed account of events. Subtler and more engaging than Ford Madox Ford’s *The Good Soldier* (1915), *Passing* raises similar issues of reliability, and, more profoundly, questions the degree to which “reality” is objective. Larsen’s text can be described as the inverse of Richardson’s *Pilgrimage*: Larsen approaching subjectivity via objective narration, and Richardson approaching objectivity via subjective narration. Both can be read as testaments to the changing scientific and philosophical ideas of the early twentieth century.

Whether or not their work is evidently and formally experimental, all of the writers considered in this volume break new ground by approaching modernity from women’s perspectives, as diverse as those perspectives turn out to be. As Douglas Mao and Rebecca Walkowitz note in the introduction to their collection *Bad Modernisms*, the “new modernist studies” “reconsiders the definitions, locations, and producers of ‘modernism.’”³⁶ The main thrust of this reconsideration has been toward expansion: as their volume demonstrates, there is much more to modernism than was apparent when analysis of “the men of 1914” with occasional mention of Virginia Woolf dominated courses and conferences about modernist literature.

The expansion of the “new modernist studies” has taken place along axes of location and time. In keeping with the geographical expansion, this collection reaches toward a transnational account of modernist literary production in English. Although the majority of the writers examined are English or American, contributors also analyze works by Canadian, Irish, Indian, African, and Caribbean authors. The volume also participates in the parallel temporal expansion of modernist studies. Each chapter ranges historically according to its topic: some begin with events in the late nineteenth century, others situate themselves in the years between the wars, and some extend past the Second World War, especially when examining texts from postcolonial nations. Women’s literature, as it emerges in this volume, has many