Introduction: mapping modernist continuities

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There is an ongoing need to 'see the past in relation to the future': so according to Virginia Woolf in 'How It Strikes a Contemporary', an essay from 1925 that provided her with an occasion to meditate on the way our understanding of even the most innovative writers cannot be divorced from their ancestry.[1] Woolf's implication that we can only fully evaluate what is new about the arts of the present through the very predecessors from which they may seek to depart is a valuable starting-point for exploring the coexistence of tradition and invention in fiction today. Bringing together both distinguished and emerging scholars of twentieth- and twenty-first-century literature, *The Legacies of Modernism: Historicising Postwar and Contemporary Fiction* offers a rich but by no means exhaustive engagement with the stylistic, thematic and political afterlives of the formal and intellectual ambitions of literary modernism.

At a time when it has become a critical commonplace to state the need for ever-expanding global maps of modernism's contexts of production,[2] it may seem churlish to insist that we urgently need to extend – in a similar impulse of critical and methodological expansion – modernism's boundaries by charting its late twentieth-century continuities. However, the pertinence of this book of essays lies precisely in its effort to substantiate the basic speculation that the modernist project is unfinished. In so doing, *The Legacies of Modernism* offers a forum for reflecting on how we can historicise the past sixty years of Anglophone fiction by relating its innovations to those of early twentieth-century writing. That the following chapters confine themselves to fiction is by no means an attempt to rehearse the generic elevation of the novel, in David Lodge's words, as 'arguably man's most successful effort to describe the experience of individual human beings moving through space and time'.[3] It could indeed be argued that narrative fiction (as distinct from poetry, drama, memoir or reportage) has in the postwar era offered the most capacious and dynamic medium for studying how writers have re-engaged with

modernism's aesthetic and ideological challenges. Yet in this book, several contributors show how the consequences of modernism should be read alongside the very processes and circumstances through which the generic superiority of the novel has been contested. Relocating modernism's global legacy, for example, Susan Andrade, Peter Middleton, Rebecca Walkowitz and Tim Woods invoke transnational and postcolonial contexts in an awareness that to prioritise fiction (over other genres) as the re-energiser of modernism is to become 'answerable', in Peter Hitchcock's phrase, to the fact that the novel is 'inexorably colonialism's success, a narrative form writ large in modernity's reach'.[4] At the same time, this book finds in the novel's contested relation to colonial modernity the very reason to embrace rather than dismiss the paradoxes we confront when investigating postcolonial writers' contributions to modernism's recrudescence. If anything, the essays here respond to the recent shift in scholarly interest that sees less attention being paid to modernism's conceptual links to, or tenuous divides from, postmodernism, than to the implications of its correspondence both with the histories of decolonisation and with the contemporary geopolitical challenges of globalisation. In so doing, this collection follows the cue of Simon Gikandi's shrewd contention that while our initial impulse might be to spotlight 'modernism as the site of Eurocentric danger', in the knowledge that 'modernism represents perhaps the most intense and unprecedented site of encounter between the institutions of European cultural production and the cultural practices of colonized people', we should also explore the fact that 'without modernism, postcolonial literature as we know it would perhaps not exist'.[5]

To displace the sovereignty of the novel in modernism's wake, therefore, isn't this volume's primary objective for critique. Rather, its contributors take the more nuanced step of setting their analyses of fiction in dialogue with other kinds of prose, including novelists' own critical essays. This dialogue not only reveals the persistence of that most modernist of non-fiction prose forms – the manifesto of artistic purpose and ambition. It also allows us to gauge the extent to which contemporary writers are practising historicising procedures of their own, when they use the critical essay as a platform for debating the novel's future possibilities while offering back-stories to the impulses behind their craft.

By remaining alert, then, to what is at stake in retrospectively tracing patterns of recapitulation and change in the late twentieth-century novel, *The Legacies of Modernism* offers a series of disciplinary interventions concerning how we compare apparently discrete phases of literary history with one another. Its contributors show that we can legitimately read the

modernist period itself via models of continuity and adaptation (rather than demise) after mid century, so as to enrich the way we reconstruct the story of fiction's postwar development. This act of reconstruction is a highly reflexive one, since it acknowledges that the very 'possibility' of building a new literary history, as Fredric Jameson has recently remarked, is bound up with the nature in which any 'history is inseparable from the way in which the object of that history is constituted'.[6] Examining both the theoretical and contextual consequences of making modernism thus the 'object' of extension, adaptation and reanimation in postwar and contemporary fiction, this book puts into practice Jameson's further distinction that

> If the object of a literary history is construed as the individual work (or masterwork), then a very different narrative will have to be invented than the one that is likely to obtain if that object is constructed as a set of movements, or schools, or even styles. Indeed, we may hazard the guess that the value of such a history today and in the future will be not so much to serve as a handbook or checklist of facts, so much as a vehicle for increasing reflexivity about the constructedness of both the object and the text that purports to be its history.[7]

What Jameson seems to be calling for, or at least predicting, is a revisionary form of literary–historical scholarship that's self-consciously responsive to the very historical sources, circumstances or phases that it proposes to understand anew. This model for conceiving literary history as a 'vehicle' instead of a factual documentary has a direct bearing on this book, whose contributors test the contention that a more complex account of fiction's transitions from mid century to the present can only be achieved by an understanding not only of what modernism was but also of what it might still become. As Dominic Head reminds us in his chapter, when offering an incisive revaluation of regional late modernism: 'The perennial problem with literary history is that it emphasises change, drawing chronological lines in the sand that may be preliminary signposts, merely, requiring complication and enrichment, so that the way the history is manufactured is constantly under review.'

This idea of placing the modernist period 'constantly under review' may strike readers as hardly unprecedented, given the wealth of comparative and postcolonial scholarship that has helped to devolve modernism's Eurocentric canonisation and remap its key sites of transition. But the process of thinking through modernism's continuity *does* remain somewhat under-theorised. As Stephen Ross points out – introducing a collection that purposefully aims to correct 'theory's marginalization within the new modernist studies' – the relation of theory to modernism can itself be seen

as an index of modernism's persistence.[8] From within this 'complicated history of modernism and theory', writes Ross, unfolds 'a narrative of repeated attempts to break with the past that nonetheless depends upon a profound, if occulted, continuity'.[9] As early twentieth-century literature entered the curriculum, and as high-modernist poetics became lionised by New Critical pedagogy, modernism's critical legacy flourished despite postmodernism's efforts to dismember modernism's technical aims.

Postwar universities themselves became 'the training ground', in Amy Hungerford's phrase, 'for both readers and writers'. In this account, as literary studies departments turn the previously hallowed realm of stylistic creativity into the scene of inculcation and classroom debate, 'high-culture modernism and its assumptions about reading and about literature are bequeathed to postwar generations of students, and student-writers'.[10] Thanks to its translation into the curricula of compositional, New Critical – and then, later – theoretical instruction, modernism thus survived the drive among postwar metafictional writers to lampoon its provisos and reduce what had been 'outlandish' devices, as Philip Roth called them, to nothing more than 'conventions of seriousness'.[11] Thus although we might accept the view that postmodernist novelists developed largely parodic responses to those modernist techniques they refused to inherit, their 'playful extension of modernist aesthetics that strenuously refused to be serious' coincided, as Ross points out, with the way 'theory took the official story of modernism produced by modernism itself through its institutionalization and canonization, further reduced it, and subjected it to a sustained and vociferous critique'.[12] How it is that later twentieth-century writers have participated in that degree of critique is one of the questions addressed by the present collection. But the following chapters also seek to overtake that rather familiar account in which modernist narrative techniques are merely displaced or satirised by postmodern fiction. Indeed, Patrick O'Donnell has correctly suggested that '[b]ecause the movement from modernism to postmodernism is fundamentally historical (which, once more, does not mean that it is necessarily epochal or sequential), their relationality continues to evolve and change as the contours of the landscape change when new work appears, when "older" work attracts new forms of attention'.[13] While exemplifying this new sense of attention to the past, many of the contemporary novelists considered in this book complicate the picture of continuity even further, since they would hardly identify themselves as 'postmodern', to the extent that their work eludes any developmental paradigm in which modernism is either seamlessly outstripped or parodically appropriated by postwar writing.

The very proposition that modernism may have a surviving, active 'legacy' for the novel today therefore faces two sets of disciplinary hurdles. The first of these results from entrenched assumptions about modernism's periodisation, especially when 'theories of the postmodern', as Matthew Hart has rightly warned, 'tell a tall tale of historical rupture instead of a real story of complex continuity'.[14] The second stumbling block relates to form itself, namely, the equally entrenched assumption that the stylistic features of postmodern narrative still provide an adequate starting-point for investigating how later twentieth-century writers have dealt with modernist methods. As to the former hurdle, recent years have witnessed impassioned critiques of the cultural and geographical boundaries of modernism as an era. Susan Stanford Friedman has been most vocal in this respect, pointing out that even within a discipline that's as self-scrutinising as the 'New Modernist Studies' certain spatio-temporal parameters remain unquestioned. As Friedman agues, 'rethinking the periodization of modernism requires abandoning . . . the "nominal" definition of modernity, a noun based designation that names modernity as a specific moment in history with a particular societal configuration'.[15] Friedman's contention is that there have been (and, by implication, still are) 'multiple' moments of modernist production, moments that compel us to redefine where and when artistic modernism began and ended – if indeed it is right to speak of modernism's culmination at all. In a particularly damning remark, Friedman suggests that the very act of pinpointing an 'end date for modernism' has 'pernicious' consequences, the most detrimental side-effect being that we have a delimited view of 'modernisms outside the West', because of the way modernism has been historicised through the lens of culturally biased if not hegemonic paradigms.[16] 'Declaring the end of modernism by 1950', warns Friedman, 'is like trying to hear one hand clapping. The modernisms of emergent modernities are that other hand that enables us to hear any clapping at all.'[17]

In the context of this volume's contribution, Friedman's call for an expanded cartography of modernist writing reminds us that our tracing of modernism's temporal and cultural reach is always susceptible to the shortfalls of retrospective categorisation, always 'inseparable', to recall Jameson's terms, 'from the way in which the object of [modernism's] history is constituted'. Responsive to the complexities of turning modernism's postwar reception into that 'object' of historical analysis, *The Legacies of Modernism* examines what it might mean to reread the politics and aesthetics of later twentieth- and twenty-first-century fiction by

deliberately foregrounding the reciprocities between writers today and their modernist predecessors – yet without suggesting that modernism itself is finished either. Upbeat as it sounds, this premise that modernism is an unfinished project is one that contributors here variously theorise, while acknowledging, nonetheless, that contemporary writers have tested the viability of modernist agendas persisting in their own politico-aesthetic goals. Indeed, in the work of several generations of novelists considered throughout this book, we shall see how '[t]his modernism after modernism', as Derek Attridge puts it, 'necessarily involves a reworking of modernism's methods, since nothing could be less modernist than a repetition of previous modes, however disruptive they were in their time'.[18] If not the 'repetition', however, then certainly the recuperation and reassessment of past modes strikes to the heart of modernism's own internally paradoxical efforts to remake inherited forms in the process of making them new.

Novelists themselves may disagree of course about the sensibility and direction of that process. 'The task for contemporary literature', declared Tom McCarthy in a recent interview, 'is to deal with the legacy of modernism. I'm not trying to be a modernist, but to navigate the wreckage of that project.'[19] With *Remainder* (2005) and *C* (2010), McCarthy delivers a valuable artistic and philosophical 'archaeology' of modernism, or, more accurately, Futurism, as these novels feature not so much empathic characters as depersonalised enactors, who are often less prepared to perceive the world affectively than to decipher it geometrically. My contributors pursue their own versions of his compulsion to 'navigate' modernism's legacy, though they often recover more than its crumpled 'wreckage'.[20] Challenging the view that the modernist project has crashed, questioning the literary–historical rationale for pinpointing its endings, making a case for how innovatively contemporary writers have redeployed modernist methods when responding to the pressing demands of their immediate cultural moment – such are the interventions provided by chapters below. In doing so, they offer a twin corrective: the refusal to let modernism be rigidly periodised is reciprocated by a similar refusal to view the postwar as a phase in which experimentation was written off as the residue of high-modernist involution. What the contributors here demonstrate, irrespective of their different critical approaches, is that by charting myriad continuities between earlier and later twentieth-century writing we can alter the axis of debates not only about the way we pinpoint transitions in fiction's development from mid century to the present day, but also about how the very nature of those transitions can only fully be understood *as* dialogues with, rather than departures from, their modernist past. At the same time, an equally

important reason for this collection to exist at all is to reassess how such dialogues are themselves often driven by quintessentially modernist sentiments. As Peter Brooker has recently observed, '[f]or all the importance . . . of the conservative implications of "tradition" in "modernist" art, as notably in T. S. Eliot, this tendency, too, gave currency to a newly anthologized past which served to critique the present and *immediate* past in a radical rupture which looked in its own terms towards a transformed future'.[21]

How novelists throughout the postwar era and since have thought about their future by recourse to their modernist heritage is one of the crucial questions this volume as a whole seeks to address. Its contributors provide a complex picture of ideological and stylistic forms of inheritance, a picture that fails to satisfy a story of modernism's outright dismissal, a Bloomian one of its anxious influence, or one of its deconstruction by the self-interrogative strategies of postmodern metafiction. *The Legacies of Modernism* spotlights instead the careers of postwar and contemporary writers who refuse (in Andrzej Gasiorek's analysis of Forster and Zadie Smith) either to 'reject modernism as an elitist dead end, following the so-called Angry Young Men and "Movement" writers of the 1950s', or to interpret modernism's precedent as simply 'demanding the radicalism associated with continuous stylistic experimentation'. Rather, they exemplify the widening of the horizon of compositional, intellectual and political ventures that were initiated but not altogether exhausted by earlier twentieth-century writers – self-nominated experimentalists or otherwise. As Milan Kundera declared in his reflections on the intersection of tradition and creativity in *The Curtain* (2007): 'The Novelist's ambition is not to do something better than his predecessors but to see what they did not see, say what they did not say.'[22] This conception of renewal speaks to the critical ethos uniting the chapters in this book, as they lay a foundation for rethinking the very terms with which we read the perpetuation of modernist commitments through contemporary fiction's formal, ethical and political advancements. To the extent that Kundera asks us to scrutinise the adequacy of how we historicise a given '[n]ovelist's ambition' in light of his or her precursors, he speaks directly to Brooker's explanation of the inelegance of *post*modernism as a category for framing the process of 'active, contestatory remembering' enacted by postwar and contemporary literature.[23]

That this process may still deserve even suppler, more nuanced analytical strategies and categories is one of the reasons why *The Legacies of Modernism* is needed. Undeniably fashionable throughout the 1970s and 80s, the terminology of postmodernist studies nevertheless flattened out the complex

senses in which '[a] new late twentieth- or twenty-first-century modernism can only emerge . . . in a combined estrangement of and re-engagement with the past it inherits, a making the new new again'.[24] It is the goal of this collection to chart that emergence, and thereby to promote further research and discussion concerning how our understanding of the production, reception and institutional dissemination of contemporary writing may be reshaped once we start to account for its 're-engagement' with modernism. As a methodological consequence of carrying out that goal, this book demonstrates why it is so vital that we keep the conversation alive between historicist accounts of modernism's continuities and approaches that do justice to particular aesthetic (re)formations that continuities of this kind inspire.

Elaborating this conversation between formalism and historicism, I have written elsewhere of the need to connect 'specific formal elements to a larger sense of modernism's periodic evolution', while at the same time viewing modernist conceptions of 'form not as evenly progressive but as marked by transitions in which recapitulation and rupture, tradition and innovation, often go hand in hand'.[25] The present collection carries forward that model of interaction (rather than antagonism) between traditionalism and renewal by contributing fresh understandings of modernism's legacies in three key respects. First, it shows how later twentieth-century fiction may be read in such a way as to reassess the transnational reach and consequences of the modernist project after mid century, without losing sight of the historical specificities of the emergence of different modernisms from within discrete literary–cultural conditions. Second, several chapters here also reconsider the legacy of (high) modernism's *own* self-conscious utilisation of artistic lineages, demonstrated most famously by T. S. Eliot's linking of individual creativity to literary heritage. And third, by tracking how that self-consciousness has persisted for recent writers (though not, as is often assumed, in the postmodern guise of textual self-referentiality), this book showcases a range of alternative vocabularies for analysing the way contemporary novelists perpetuate the coalescence of invention and tradition, a coalescence that modernists themselves had fostered. There is therefore a pertinent, if not urgent, metacritical purpose to this collection, as contributors reflect on the very question of combining historical and stylistic levels of analysis in order to comprehend how modernism has informed the ambitions of writers who negotiate its wake.

The Legacies of Modernism is divided into four parts that represent not only a series of literary–historical touchstones or convenient

organisational schemes, but also a set of thematic avenues along which to pursue the contours of modernism's afterlives. Each of these parts includes a combination of chapters: contributors who employ theoretical approaches to address interpretive or disciplinary matters have been set alongside those whose chapters offer more textually focused 'case studies', insofar as they closely read modernist influences either in particular works or comparatively in two or more writers. This combination, within each of this book's sections, provides a balance between addressing larger questions concerning *why* modernism's continuity in the latter half of the twentieth century might be important to our understanding of the evolution of postwar fiction, and examining more aesthetically specific questions of *how* modernism's legacy has both informed and challenged writers' stylistic ambitions. What unites this volume's four parts, therefore, is the impulse to think about the work of modernism's legacies on two levels: by engaging with the implications for the discipline of historicising postwar narrative via its modernist inheritance, while simultaneously bringing into focus what's formally inventive about writers from recent years through the lens of tradition.

Part I gives a voice to what Marina MacKay and Lyndsey Stonebridge call that 'critically awkward phase of twentieth-century writing', as it explores high modernism's most immediate consequences leading up to, and directly after, the Second World War. Randall Stevenson, Dominic Head, and Philip Tew each consider the way modernism's presence 'lingered in the literary imagination', as MacKay and Stonebridge put it, when, 'sometimes ironically, sometimes peevishly, mid-century writing reacted to its influence by adapting some of its elements to new political and fictional ends'.[26] Stevenson opens this section by offering a background to the postwar tendencies and responses that Head and Tew then go on to describe. Walter Benjamin's image of an angel looking backwards – across piles of debris, accumulated by the increasing disasters of 'progress' – dates from 1944, but as Stevenson's chapter implies, it is also relevant to earlier moments in the twentieth century. Beginning with interwar writers, Stevenson goes on to consider the continuation of forms of nostalgia during and after the Second World War, with a movement in novels such as Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* (1945), Lowry's *Under the Volcano* (1947) or Lehmann's *The Ballad and the Source* (1944) towards a more fully Edenic manner of retrospection – one in which any idyll envisaged is recognised as imbued with the seeds of its own destruction.

Following on from Stevenson's sense that a survey of twentieth-century nostalgias invites comparisons with earlier periods, but is especially

intensified in the modernist era, Head's concentration on provincial fiction reassesses the work of mid-century regionalists in relation to the fervent age of experimentalism that preceded them. As it was for Stevenson, so nostalgia – as much a novelistic trope as a cultural condition – becomes an important cipher for Head. While acknowledging that such comparisons between periods suggest a key role for nostalgia within *all* narrative, both Head and Stevenson suggest that its role is made particularly apparent by the historical trauma of another world war, a role that ought, in turn, to be specified in terms of the literary modes in which it is expressed. Head and Stevenson therefore help us to recognise the multivalent manifestations of nostalgia, in narrative register as well as in recurrent themes, offering alternative explanations for why late modernist innovations appeared when they did and in unlikely provincial contexts of literary production.

That late modernism should itself be seen as an advantage for the postwar novel rather than its adversary was a conviction that motivated a cluster of writers who formed a renaissance, as we might call it, in avant-garde writing between the late 1950s and 70s. Philip Tew turns to B. S. Johnson as the figurehead of this phase of radical experimentation, considering how Johnson both paid homage to the strident advances of Joyce and Beckett and simultaneously distinguished himself from contemporaries with equal sympathies toward modernism, such as John Fowles, Doris Lessing and Christine Brooke-Rose. What emerges in Johnson's case, as Tew shows, is a portrait of an individualist who adheres to a distinctly modernist will-to-experiment (treating experimentation itself with a seriousness that separates him from the exercises in self-reflexivity performed by burgeoning postmodern writers of his time), yet who also dissociates his belief in the novel's social efficacy from high modernism's preservation of artistic integrity over political instrumentalism.

Part II builds on such accounts of the self-conscious deployment – and political recalibration – of modernist methods by exploring how writers have deliberately reassessed the purpose of literary innovation. In interpretive respects, this section offers a timely response to the 'return' of critical formalism in recent years,[27] but it does so precisely to explore the politics of modernist aesthetics in terms of the work they do – and might still do – for fiction today. Far from isolating and divorcing writers' aesthetic ambitions from their politico-ethical ramifications, then, this section pursues the correspondence of mode and matter, taking note of Robert Kaufman's reminder that if a text's matter, its affective content,