

## CHAPTER I

*Methodological Prologue*  
*The Constellation of Modernism*

We live in an age in which the impact of materialized forces is well-nigh irresistible; the spiritual nature is overwhelmed by the shock. The tremendous and complicated development of our material civilization, the multiplicity and variety of our social forms, the depth, subtlety and sophistry of our mental cogitations, gathered, remultiplied and phantasmagorically disseminated as they are by these other agencies – the railroad, the express and post-office, the telegraph, telephone, the newspaper and, in short the whole art of printing and distributing – have so combined as to produce what may be termed a kaleidoscopic glitter, a dazzling and confusing showpiece which is more apt to weary and undo than to enlighten and strengthen the observing mind ... Our modern brain-pan does not seem capable of receiving, sorting, and storing the vast army of facts and impressions which present themselves daily.

– Theodore Dreiser, *Jennie Gerhardt* ([1911] 1992: 282)

Three years ago in Paris I got out of a “metro” train at La Concorde, and saw suddenly a beautiful face, and then another and another, and then a beautiful child’s face, and then another beautiful woman, and I tried all that day to find words for what this had meant to me, and I could not find any words that seemed to me worthy, or as lovely as that sudden emotion. And that evening, as I went home along the Rue Raynouard, I was still trying and I found, suddenly, the expression. I do not mean that I found words, but there came an equation ... not in speech, but in little splotches of colour ... That evening, in the Rue Raynouard, I realized quite vividly that if I were a painter, or if I had, often, *that kind* of emotion, or even if I had the energy to get paints and brushes and keep at it, I might found a new school of painting that would speak only by arrangements in colour.

– Ezra Pound, *Gaudier-Brzeska* (1916: 152–3)

I argue in this chapter that a particular “methodology” of intellectual inquiry developed amid the dazzling abundance of goods, knowledge, and experiences that Dreiser and Pound described in their experiences of America and Europe during the time of cultural modernism. This methodology of grasping and analyzing the constituent elements of understanding differs from Enlightenment methodology. It is timely and retrospective, rather than seeking to grasp the “essence” of things, once and for all; and when it focuses on history, as I do in Chapter 3, it models its understanding from the vantage of the present – the *modern* moment – retrospectively, a history of “now,” not “then,” just as Dreiser and Pound attempt to grasp and apprehend the organization of experience in their world. Focusing on the “now” of modernism, the methodology I am describing suggests that the distinction between “modernity” as a chronologically measured historical period and “modernism” as a set of values, attitudes, and habits of thought that shape knowledge, experience, and social relationships, and are shaped by those institutions in turn, is precisely the distinction between content and form (or “data” and “methodology”), inherited from the Enlightenment that cultural modernism calls into question. Instead, as I argue here, “modernist” values and attitudes – manifesting themselves in the arts, in economics, and in habitual ways of engaging with things by people living through the enormous changes of the early twentieth century – constitute what Lionel Trilling calls the “hum and buzz” of cultural life altogether (1950: 200). In this chapter, I trace the “methods” by which, purposefully or habitually, cultural life organizes itself in relation to the arts and to economics in the early twentieth century.

### A Political Economy of Modernism

The methodology I am describing is congruent with a broad definition of “political economy” as it developed in relation to the study of the production and distribution of wealth, well-being, and value in the eighteenth century. Thus, in order to create a context in which to apprehend the experience of modernism – what I call in this chapter the “constellation” of modernism – it is appropriate to begin with a discussion of political economy broadly conceived. The purpose of this discussion is to analyze the “complex unity” of political economy and cultural modernism, which to Dreiser and many of his contemporaries hardly seems a “unity” at all. Still, citing the passage from *Jennie Gerhardt* presented in the epigraph, Bill Brown notes that Dreiser “renders material forces

*Methodological Prologue*

3

inseparable from the phenomenal effects” and suggests that Dreiser often experienced these “material forces” as “a source not of shock but of exhilaration” (2004: 92–3), the exhilaration Pound expresses in his narrative and provokes in the poem, “In a Station of the Metro.”

In 1890, the great neoclassical economist, Alfred Marshall, noted that economics is “taken to mean a study of the economic aspects and conditions of man’s political, social and private life; but more especially his social life. The aims of the study are to gain knowledge for its own sake, and to obtain guidance in the practical conduct of life, and especially of social life” (1961: I, 43). However, Marshall immediately proceeds to say that, despite its focus on social life, economics “shuns many political issues, which the practical man cannot ignore: and it is therefore a science, pure and applied, rather than a science and an art. And it is better described by the broad term ‘Economics’ than by the narrower term ‘Political Economy’” (1961: I, 43). Here, in his *Principles of Economics*, which went through eight editions between 1890 and 1920, Marshall is participating in the professionalization of American and western European vocations (see Maloney 1985). That professionalization takes the form of creating great, impersonal, economic institutions. These include, as I argue throughout this book, the ubiquitous institutions of corporate capitalism. They also encompass professional guilds in law and medicine, research institutions in higher education, and, as Thomas Strychacz has persuasively argued in his book *Modernism, Mass Culture, and Professionalism*, literary modernism itself. All of these things enact modes of incorporation: the transformation of industrial capitalism into finance capitalism; the transformation of the apprenticeships of legal, medical, and religious education into “corporations” of higher learning; and, as Marshall announces, the transformation of political economy into economics. The difference between the two, as Marshall notes, is that political economy conceives of itself as both a moral and a descriptive science. This allows it to maintain, in its purview, the organization of power embodied in politics as an essential element of the economic organization of social and personal wealth. Economics, as a “science, pure and applied,” simply attends to – or purports to attend to – impersonal knowledge and “factual” calculations concerning wealth. Thus, Margaret Schabas notes that in the early nineteenth century “political economy’s flirtation with various fields, whether sociology, law, or history, was ... in keeping with much of early nineteenth-century science. In many respects,” she adds, “it was no more or less diffuse than any other branch of knowledge ... Virtually every treatise began with a declaration to the

effect that political economy is the ‘Science which treats of the Nature, the Production, and the Distribution of Wealth.’” (1990: 8–9; she is citing the Victorian economist Nassau William Senior.)

The difference between political economy and economics can be clearly seen in John Stuart Mill’s classical definition of political economy in an 1841 essay. In this essay, Mill defines political economy as a “*moral* or psychological science” (1948: 129), which as “the science of social economy embraces every part of man’s nature, in so far as influencing the conduct or condition of man in society” that may properly “be termed speculative politics” (1948: 136). He goes on to articulate a definition of “political economy” that could stand as a description of a certain kind of novel, from *Robinson Crusoe* to *The Red and the Black* and on to *The Financier* and *Tono-Bungay*. “What is now commonly understood by the term ‘Political Economy,’” Mill writes, “does not treat of the whole of man’s nature as modified by the social state, nor of the whole conduct of man in society. It is concerned with him solely as a being who desires to possess wealth” (1948: 137–8). In this description, there is an abstraction of “economic man” – “solely as a being who desires to possess wealth” – that made Mill’s *Principles of Political Economy* (1848) a touchstone for Marshall’s work. In *The Insatiability of Human Wants*, Regenia Gagnier describes classical political economy more generally as a Victorian institution. Although she begins with Adam Smith – almost everyone begins with Smith – she traces political economy through Victorians, David Ricardo, Mill, and Karl Marx. Political economy, she argues, was “historical and progressive: it seized as its domain the distant past as well as the distant future” (2000: 40). As we will see, the manner in which it historicizes wealth and well-being is a crucial aspect of political economy. The distinction between wealth and well-being enlarges political economy beyond the professed utilitarianism of the neoclassical economics Marshall describes. “Capitalist incentive,” she writes, “may contribute to GDP (‘wealth’ or ‘growth’) without affecting distribution (welfare, or the relation between the economic interests of individuals and those of the community)” (2000: 32).

Unlike Gagnier, however, I am concerned with political economy as a *modernist* institution. Throughout this book I discuss the ways in which Marshall’s contemporary Thorstein Veblen took exception to both classical and neoclassical economics in his articulation of “institutional economics,” which refines the study of political economy altogether. Many of the scholars analyzing economics cited throughout this book – e.g., W. Brian Arthur, William Tabb, David Reisman, Philip

*Methodological Prologue*

5

Mirowski – explicitly situate Veblen within the tradition of political economy (as opposed to the “neoclassical” economics Marshall articulates). Still, in his focus on motive, morals, and particular aspects of social life in political economy, Mill is describing a tradition of fiction at the heart of the modernist novel, and, as I will suggest, a tradition that also shapes modernist poetry – one that focuses, directly or indirectly, on economics, wealth, or well-being understood as “value.” Needless to say, such a definition leaves out another tradition in modernist literature, in which the present enjoyment of costly indulgences is so matter-of-fact they do not register as pressing objects of desire, a tradition that stretches from Gustave Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* to Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*.

Alex Ross has described the difference between two traditions inhabiting modernism as “two avant-gardes” that developed “side by side” in the twentieth century: one moved “into the brightly lit world of daily life” while the other “went in the opposite direction, illuminating the terrible depths with [its] holy torches” (2007: 45). These seeming countervailing tendencies can help define the phenomenon of cultural modernism as a way of making sense of experience, wealth, and social life – in a word, as a political economy – in the new twentieth century. That phenomenon, I argue, can be most readily grasped by means of retrospective analysis of the historical institutionalization of what had seemed simply to be self-evident truths. Such analysis calls for a reconception of the methods of understanding and engagement, a reconception of “experience” and “knowledge” altogether. Veblen, for example, argues that contemporary economics takes as given and immutable particular *institutions* – such as private property, ownership, and “primordial” oppositions between pleasure and pain (the last of which is heard in Mill’s classical description of political economy) – that require historical and cultural analysis (retrospective analysis). By making the pleasure of consumption the goal of economic activity, Veblen argues, both classical and neoclassical economics leave out the vital issue of *cultural power* inhabiting the present moment – which is to say, the “modernist” moment – in which he lived. “Business men,” he writes, “habitually aspire to accumulate wealth in excess of the limits of practicable consumption, and the wealth so accumulated is not intended to be converted by a final transaction of purchase into consumable goods or sensations of consumption” (1919: 172–3). Instead, such economic activity aims at the creation and maintenance of institutional social power, whose plottings we can see in literary characters, discursive strategies, and the very conception of *representation* that shape

modernist literature. More importantly, we can also see these plottings in the experience, knowledge, and social relations of early twentieth-century culture. Cultural analysis – and especially the cultural analysis imbedded in any notion of political economy – thus calls for a reconception of the methods of understanding and explanation, a reconception which above all eschews the separation of method and material, knowledge and experience, and structure and phenomena. Such analysis rejects the separation of timeless essences and temporal experiences, particularly when we understand “modernism” in relation to its Latin etymology, *modo*, meaning “just now” (Sherry 2016: 2). A political economy of modernism, then, like “economy” in its broadest understanding, delineates a “complex unity” felt and grasped even as it is enacted in habits of thought and experience.

This might become clear in light of the articulation of economics and complexity theory Arthur proposed in his book *Complexity and the Economy*. “We ... see the economy,” he argues, “not as something given and existing but forming from a constantly developing set of technological innovations, institutions, and arrangements that draw forth further innovations, institutions, and arrangements ... Complexity,” he concludes, “studies the propagation of change through interconnected behavior” (2015: loc 287–99; 667). What Arthur says of the economy could be said, perhaps word for word, about the political economy of cultural modernism. Modernism was a phenomenon that constantly developed – after all, “make it new!” was its proper slogan<sup>1</sup> – out of technological innovations and, above all, *institutional arrangements* that arose and constantly transformed themselves during the long turn of the twentieth century. This book focuses on a related cluster of these institutions, namely the advent of corporate capitalism and of the disciplines of economics, the emergence of the lower middle class, and the changing nature of commodities as they relate to those other institutions: the arts,

<sup>1</sup> In *Modernism and the Reinvention of Decadence*, Vincent Sherry, following Michael North, argues that “this motto ... has been accorded a wholly unwarranted authority in the understanding of modernist poetics. Not concocted until 1934, and targeted to the work of translation primarily, ‘make it new’ was not the ordaining precept it has become, now, in the regular refrains of critical appreciation for the major instigations of literary modernism” (2015: 14; see North 2013: 162–71). My point, however, is that in whichever ways this motto plays in literary history, it carries significant weight in the social and intellectual history of the political economy of modernism that focuses on the “propagation of change through interconnected behavior.” In his study, Sherry marshals Walter Benjamin’s *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* in his “new history of modernism” in order to recover the “constitutive identity” of decadence within the poetics of modernism (2015: 13–14, 15–23). In this chapter, I turn to Benjamin in order to articulate a political economy of modernism.

*Methodological Prologue*

7

understanding, and experiences of cultural modernism altogether. As I argue in this chapter, the relationship between the political economy of cultural meanings and values and the discursive arts is not one of cause and effect, base and superstructure; it is one in which part and whole are not organized in a hierarchical arrangement. Rather, part and whole organize themselves in interrelationship (feedback) and interdependency: what Walter Benjamin describes under the metaphor of “constellation.”

This study takes its place in relation to my earlier books, *Modernism and Time* and *Modernism and Popular Music*. *Modernism and Time* examines cultural modernism in relation to intellectual institutions of the sciences, mathematics, and aesthetics in the early twentieth century. *Modernism and Popular Music* examines cultural modernism in relation to the particular social-aesthetic institution of new, popular musical forms conditioned by the “set of technological innovations, institutions, and arrangements” Arthur describes in the recording and widespread transmission of music. Crucial to Arthur’s understanding of how the economy works is his understanding that the complexity of arrangements, rather than the simplicities of reductive formulas, governs any working sense of economics. My global argument in this book is that such a complexity of arrangements also governs, in the time of modernism, that larger phenomenon, the political economy of culture. I take “political economy” to encompass what Raymond Williams calls the “complex unity” embodied in a community of people at a certain time and place (1977: 132). As we shall see, “complex unity” is a term that the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) sets forth to define the word *economy* as well.

### The Complexity of Modernism

In 1928 Walter Benjamin wrote *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* in which he described the difference between ideas and concepts in terms of his metaphorical figure of “constellation.” He argues that:

Ideas are to objects as constellations are to stars. This means, in the first place, that they are neither their concepts nor their laws. They do not contribute to the knowledge of phenomena, and in no way can the latter be criteria with which to judge the existence of ideas ... Just as a mother is seen to begin to live in the fullness of her power only when the circle of her children, inspired by the feeling of her proximity, closes around her, so do ideas come to life only when extremes are assembled around them. Ideas ... remain obscure so long as phenomena do not declare their faith to them and gather round them. (1977: 34–5)



Many commentators have described Benjamin's "Epistemo-Critical Prologue" to *The Origins of German Tragic Drama*, from which this passage is taken, as the most difficult of Benjamin's expositions (see Steiner 1977: 13). The difficulty of Benjamin's argument, I believe, is his resistance to received notions of conceptual thinking.<sup>2</sup> Conceptual thinking, as we have become accustomed to it from the time of the Enlightenment, attempts to derive more or less transcendental "principles" that can be seen to govern the data (or "given") of the phenomenal world. It provides "form" for "content." In *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993), Bruno Latour suggests that the strict opposition of what I am calling "form and content" conditioned the advent of Enlightenment ("early modern") conceptualizations and its political economy. He claims that the strict opposition of "Nature," which allowed the development of transcendental "laws" or mathematical description, and "Culture," which did not, was systematically erased in the actions of colonial administrations during the early modern Enlightenment. In adding the simile of generational life to his analogy of "constellation," Benjamin, like Latour, suggests the necessity of historicizing the abstractions of Ideas by means of temporalizing them (with his temporal qualification, "only when").

Arthur describes the traditional notion of conceptual thinking in relation to neoclassical economics, which is a major component of post-classical economics. He writes:

Neoclassical economics inherited the Enlightenment view that behind the seeming disorder of the world lay Order and Reason and Perfection. And it inherited much from the physics of the late 1800s, in particular the idea that large numbers of interacting identical elements could be analyzed collectively via simple mathematical equations. (2015: loc 299)

Benjamin upsets the self-evident truth that the phenomenal "given" ("content") can be understood by underlying principles ("form") – Benjamin uses the terms "species" and "concept genus" (1977: 34) – and more importantly, he upsets the understanding that this order can predict

<sup>2</sup> Part of this "difficulty," however, is also stylistic, though Benjamin's argument (and mine as well) is that strict separation of style and content is not possible. Still, toward the end of this chapter, I cite Benjamin's famous hope to pursue "the art of citing without quotation marks" (1999: 458). This pursuit, as I suggest in this chapter, takes its place in relation to the "performativity" of modernist discourses, the montage, pastiche, and parataxis discussed below. Such a pursuit enlists his readers in "constellating" the felt meanings of his discourse. Benjamin pursues this kind of intellectual performance, in which arrangements and interrelationships, rather than authoritative assertion, avow knowledge and understanding. With the many quotations and allusions in this Prologue and throughout this book, I pursue a similar goal and strategy. As I mentioned, goal and strategy are not separable but complexly related.



*Methodological Prologue*

9

the behavior of the phenomenal “given,” the observed particulars of experience. Such predictive power is based upon the assumption that the principles governing the worldly behavior of things are timeless. This is what I mean by “more or less transcendental principles”: the assumption that abstract, formal principles *transcend* timely events.

Predictability is also predicated on the assumption that complexity can always be reduced to simple elements in “linear” causal relationships. Niall Ferguson notes, however, that:

Causal relationships are often non-linear, which means that traditional methods of generalizing from observations (such as trend analysis and sampling) are of little use. Indeed, some theorists would go so far as to say that certain complex systems are wholly non-deterministic, meaning that it is next to impossible to make predictions about their future behavior based on past data. There is no such thing as a typical or average forest fire, for example. To use the jargon of modern physics, a forest before a fire is in a state of ‘self-organized criticality’; it is teetering on the verge of breakdown, but the size of the breakdown is unknown, because the distribution of forest fires by magnitude does not follow the familiar bell curve ... The most that can be said is that a forest fire twice as large as last year’s is roughly four (or six or eight, depending on the forest) times less likely to happen this year. This kind of pattern – known as a ‘power-law distribution’ – is remarkably common in the natural world. It can be seen not just in forest fires but also in earthquakes and epidemics. (2011: 300)

Arthur’s argument – Ferguson’s as well – is that this kind of “non-linear” pattern can also be seen in economics (or political economy). My argument is that it can also be seen in the phenomenon of cultural modernism, which emerges amid the “self-organized criticality” of the fulfillments of Enlightenment civilization realized in the late nineteenth-century bourgeois culture of Europe and the United States. One figure for the apprehension of complexity that Arthur and Ferguson describe is Benjamin’s analogical metaphor of “constellation,” which by definition is a figure for nonlinearity (as are the other terms for complexity presented in this chapter – “arrangement,” “configuration,” and “modeling”).

Ferguson notes that “civilizations behave like all complex adaptive systems. They function in apparent equilibrium for some unknowable period. And then, quite abruptly, they collapse” (2011: 323). Whether the transformation of high bourgeois culture into “modernism” at the turn of the twentieth century is a “collapse” or simply a profound transformation is a matter of some contention. This complexity – the “undecidability” – of characterizing modernism as a collapse or a transformation is marked in the manner in which Arnold Schoenberg, for

instance, seemingly collapses the tonal order in music inherited from the Enlightenment even while he maintains the well-tempered scale, which is also part of the Enlightenment inheritance. Such complexity is apprehended, rather than ignored or dismissed, in Benjamin's notion of "Idea." That is, the "Ideas" Benjamin describes function differently from simple linear cause-and-effect, form-and-content notions of Enlightenment thinking. Rather than developing transcendental, deductive, and, above all, impersonal laws that describe and thereby explain phenomena, constellations create a system of arrangement that conditions felt experience and understanding, which Jacques Derrida famously described as "the phenomenality of phenomena" (1981: 30).<sup>3</sup> Such meaning takes the form of "non-transcendental disembodiment": an apprehension of phenomena outside the "given" positivism of data, which nevertheless do not simply inhabit a "spiritual" or "transcendental" realm beyond the time and place of worldliness.

Let me return to Pound's famous poem:

In a Station of the Metro  
 The apparition of these faces in the crowd:  
 Petals on a wet, black bough. (1957: 35)

The apparition Pound apprehends is not a positive fact in his experience of mass transit in Paris, but neither is it something beyond or "underneath" his experience. Rather, it is a sudden appearance that is felt in the moment, just now. Many years ago, Hugh Kenner unpacked the *quality* of this modern experience: "a crowd seen underground, as Odysseus and Orpheus and Korè saw crowds in Hades ... Flowers, underground; flowers, out of the sun; flowers seen as if against a natural gleam, the bough's wetness gleaming on its darkness, in this place where wheels turn and nothing grows" (1971: 183–4). In this analysis, Kenner is "unpacking" Pound's image, offering an array (or an *economy*) of associations – which presents a configuration evoked by Pound's poem. This apparition, I must add, is altogether immanent: Kenner notes:

"Petals," the pivotal word, relies for energy on the sharp cut of its syllables, a consonantal vigor recapitulated in the trisyllabic "wet, black bough" (try changing "petals" to "blossoms"). The words so raised by prosody to attention assert themselves *as words*, and make a numinous claim on

<sup>3</sup> Let me cite this reference explicitly: "All experience is the experience of meaning (*Sinn*). Everything that appears to consciousness, everything that is for consciousness in general, is *meaning*. Meaning is the phenomenality of phenomenon" (1981: 30).