
The Anxiety of Contamination: modernism and the masses

Stephen Elliott

Abstract

In modernist discourse, critics commonly prescribe to the view that the movement “constituted itself through a conscious exclusion, an anxiety of contamination by the other” (Huysen 1986, vii). Authors included in the modernist canon are often situated on one side of a “great gulf”, wholly removed from the masses. However, an interrogation of series such as Boni & Liveright’s Modern Library, as well as the negotiations between modernist authors and their publishers, can be seen to expose the instances in which this claim might be rendered inadequate. To consider the context in which Modernism arose, and how a canon is not a fixed but a fluid thing, we can complicate the persisting view of Modernist elitism and reveal the nuances that existed between the intellectual and the masses.

Key Words

Modernism, Masses, The Modern Library, Canon, Middlebrow, Wyndham Lewis, Dos Passos

Introduction: the capital “m”

When speaking of modernism as a literary movement, a characteristic aura of elitism is archetypally evoked, derived from a set canon into which only writers of high cultural value are granted inclusion. Many critics begin their contributions to the discourse by echoing Clement Greenberg’s distinction between modernism as a denotation of what is “modern”, and Modernism, with a capital “m”, which “has the great advantage of being a more historically placeable term” (1980). Such distinctions in retrospective criticism inevitably establish and preserve, in equal measure, a fixed perspective of the period or movement in question. In his seminal work, *The Intellectuals and the Masses*, John Carey posits that, as a result of the Education Act of 1871, and the mass reading public that it spawned, the literary elite believed their lot to be categorically under threat, not only in artistic contribution but in way of life. Carey notes: “To highbrows, looking across the gulf, it seemed that the masses were not merely degraded and threatening but also not fully alive. A common allegation is that they lack souls” (2005, 10). Andreas Huyssen, too, remarks that Modernism, as a literary movement, “constituted itself through a conscious exclusion, an anxiety of contamination by the other” (1987, vii). This ostensible “us” and “them” mentality, embedded in the views of Modernist commentators such as FR Leavis, TS Eliot and DH Lawrence, serve to paint a vivid picture of the period’s landscape as one of polarizing standpoints. However, if we are to interrogate this period through a publishing lens, where artistic integrity is offset by commerce and economic value, it emerges that such standpoints can be problematized.

This essay will endeavour to achieve this in three ways. Firstly, I will consider Boni and Liveright’s Modern Library series as indicative of “the flexibility of cultural categories in the interwar period” (Jaillant 2014, 1), where multiple “brows” were not yet wholly distinct from each other. Specifically, I will look at the publishing of books as volumes, with each contribution as part of a whole, and the effects of uniform marketing on the texts themselves. Secondly, I will interrogate the Modernist text as “a site of struggle between literature and mass culture” (Strychacz 1993, 41), in which this “struggle” necessitates an engagement with the masses in terms of both the novel’s content and its economic value.

This point will draw on the negotiations between authors and publishers, using Wyndham Lewis and John Dos Passos as representative examples. Lastly, I will engage in a general discussion of the ambiguous nature in which a literary canon is formed, paying particular attention to FR Leavis's proposed canon and the fluidity of Modernism before the post-war period. Ultimately, these sections will serve to complicate the persisting view of modernist elitism and to outline the oft-ignored nuances that existed between the modernist author and the masses.

Blurred Brows and the Modern Library

Boni and Liveright's Modern Library series, created during the First World War, quickly garnered much attention for its dedication to the two core tenets of its ideology: "New York glamour and intellectual sophistication" was combined with "a very affordable price" (Jaillant 2014, 2). Along with the Everyman Series, the Modern Library worked to revivify the value of "cheap books" which, for the last forty years, had been condemned for offering reprints to the masses as aesthetically inferior, shoddily produced products – the direct antithesis of "gentleman's" publishing. Established publishers and booksellers alike endeavoured to disassociate themselves from this lowering of standards, fearing that "cheap books make a cheap man" (Satterfield 2002, 77), yet the Modern Library managed to elevate itself from this favourless corner of the industry. One early advertisement in *New Republic*, modelled around a conversation between two friends fighting the war in France, successfully exemplifies why this might have been. One friend states:

I don't know anything about the innards, but the description of the outside at 60c per, would send a bargain-hunting woman out in the rain with her new Easter bonnet...They've got here all the books I've ever wanted to read...There's a book here that will get even you. (Boni & Liveright 1917, 15)

Looking beyond the demonstrable marketing ploy, it is the central duo, their differing social standings and opposing literary preferences, that is of significant interest. While one is a sports enthusiast, the other is an avid book lover – and thus the Modern Library is promoted as a democratic series catering to *all*, rather than to only the masses or the literary few.

Moreover, the wartime setting acts as a *mis-en-abyme* of sorts, employing a backdrop in which people of all classes and natures are found to be unified in the name of a single, common cause. Regardless of its commercial bent, this illustrates how Boni and Liveright's series can begin to problematize the "gulf" that Carey so readily places between two ostensibly separate cultural groups.

Lise Jaillant further expands on this argument, lending particular focus to the authors that comprised the series. Noting that Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* and Maupassant's *Mademoiselle Fifi* were included in the first list in 1917, Jaillant highlights that the Modern Library was quickly branded as a "daring collection of modern classics" (2014, 19). In following years, other early-Modernist writers found popularity through the series' winning mixture of prestige and affordability. Picked up by Liveright in 1921, Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* went from a poorly-performing newcomer to a text that "exemplified the greatness of American literature – a literature that was open to new trends and controversial experimentations" (Jaillant 2014, 41). Employing again his incisive and likeable promotional wit, Liveright paired a later Anderson publication with the slogan, "Anderson is no longer 'caviar to the general'" (Turner 2003, 73), managing, in one phrase, to both gild the reality of the author's previously poor sales and to satisfy the growing need to bring highbrow literature into the mainstream.

Indeed, what is perhaps most compelling about the Modern Library are the instances in which its serialisation of books can be seen to blur the "brows"; how certain books acquired, through neighbourly proximity with other texts, a discernible influence on the way one novel was received in relation to another. One such instance was Joyce's *Portrait of a Young Man as an Artist*, in which its hero renounces mainstream society in the name of artistic integrity. Already a lauded work, to find it marketed alongside *Fourteen Great Detective Novels* – the former was volume 145, while the latter immediately preceded it – is somewhat absurd. Jaillant draws attention to what this precisely entailed:

As booksellers generally arranged Modern Library books by numbers on a special display rack, most consumers would have encountered the two books

simultaneously. The fact that the Modern Library was displayed as a *coherent* collection conveyed cultural prestige. (2014, 65)

If we are to take this usage of “cultural prestige” as equivalent to “cultural capital”, in the Bourdieuan sense – that is, that it implies a context of *class* – what occurs is a unique distortion of boundaries in the panorama of Modernist publishing. This was not an exceptional case, either: “the 1919 list included *Best Ghost Stories* (number 73 in the series), alongside Maupassant’s *Love and Other Stories* (number 72) and Dowson’s *Poems and Prose*” (Jaillant 2014, 4). Obliging, we have only to look to our own modern-day bookshelves to see how such a conflation might play out. Penguin’s revived series of Little Black Classics and Modern Classics, for example, each contain a sprawling variety of classic texts marketed as a definitive whole. Arranged in volumes and not by author, it is easy to grant equal worth to one text when it is scarcely physically discernible from the other, especially when the price is also kept consistently uniform. That *Portrait* and *Fourteen* were marketed, displayed, purchased, and even reviewed as if siblings demonstrates how “highbrow” modernist texts “had not yet been disassociated from lesser kinds of literature” (Jaillant 2014, 64).

A Site of Struggle

As seen with the bibliographic study of the Modern Library, by lending an eye to 20th century publishing circuits, the division between the “highbrow” and the commercial market that catered to a mass audience becomes increasingly complicated. It is easy to pick up strands, even swathes, of Modernist elitism – Woolf’s *Middlebrow* reads, somewhat flippantly, “‘What’s that?’ I cry. ‘Middlebrow on the cabbages? Middlebrow infecting that poor old sheep? And what about the moon?’ I look up and, behold, the moon is under eclipse. ‘Middlebrow at it again!’” (1974, 69). And TS Eliot famously proposed:

There is no doubt that in our headlong rush to educate everybody, we are lowering our standards [...] destroying our ancient edifices to make ready the ground upon

which the barbarian nomads of the future will encamp in their mechanized caravans.
(1948, 108)

Still, it remains that the Modernist text can be considered, in more ways than one, “a site of struggle between literature and mass culture” (Strychacz 1993, 41). Joyce’s *Ulysses* provides a fitting example. In one respect, the text’s “struggle” is derived from its focalizer, the common Irishman, being rendered through a fiercely unconventional and alienating *avant-garde* style. In another, the “struggle” emerges through Joyce’s censorship and his eventual publication. Not only is Joyce typically considered, alongside Woolf and, later, Eliot, the zenith of literary Modernism – capital “m” intended – but he was, significantly, published in Britain, America and Europe at a time when series “sold modernism to a wide audience – thus transforming a little-read highbrow movement into a mainstream phenomenon” (Jaillant 2017, 1). It stands, then, that the “struggle” can also be located between the two prominent forms of capital centrally at work here: “cultural” and “economic” – or, more specifically, between authorship and publication.

Wyndham Lewis’s *Tarr* uniquely embodies these concerns. Originally serialised by *The Egoist* alongside *Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man*, the novel was championed by Ezra Pound and labelled as a challenging modernist text for which Lewis himself “had in view a publique d’elite” (Lewis 1963, 552). It is slightly surprising, then, that a decade later, Lewis would accept an offer to publish with Chatto & Windus, in The Phoenix Library, a series that, like the Modern Library, serialised cheap books. Moreover, terms included a complete rewrite of the text so as to cater to “a large audience who had never read *Tarr* before” (Jaillant 2017, 71). Remarkable as it is that the text would be reworked for commercial purposes – something of an about-face from Lewis’s initial elitist enterprise – it is clear that the novel’s economic capital was a brewing, if not immediate, concern. This could be reasoned as an anxiety around the book’s readability, which had sold badly in previous years. If we were to subscribe to Elitist Theory, posing Modernist elitism and the Avant-Guarde to forms of social control (Rubin 1992), a means of implementing and calcifying the “great divide”, Lewis’s case raises an important question: were Modernist authors also concerned with economic

value, success, popularity? As focus veers from the sphere of the minority to that of the masses, Strychacz's "struggle" is now reframed as a patent complication in the central dichotomy of Modernist discourse. To have two versions of *Tarr* is to see commercialism directly intruding on the modernist text, tangibly transforming it. As it happens, there is even a novelistic "struggle" to Lewis's revised version, since the "dual genesis of *Tarr* creates a novel with two centres" (Ayers 2004, 60).

John Dos Passos provides an alternative version of the "struggle", albeit similarly rooted in the commercial. Dos Passos's writing is typically branded as strong urban realism, displaying a "technical boldness" that is indebted to "James Joyce, Gertrude Stein and Marcel Proust" (Spindler 1981, 391), as well as to the visual innovations of modernist artists and architects. Indeed, the melange of influences that contribute to his style meant that "Dos Passos's brand of modernism made him either a respectable lowbrow author or a thrilling highbrow one" (Turner 2003, 130). Far from a conclusive depiction of a Modernist voice, Dos Passos's publisher, Harcourt Brace, struggled to sufficiently promote the author's brand. Turner clarifies:

Harcourt's advertisements present Dos Passos as [...] an exciting storyteller without mentioning his technical innovation, and as a writer who deals with real events without mentioning his sharp social criticism [they] simply ignored those points that might make Dos Passos a difficult author to sell. (2003, 130)

Confluent with Lewis's incentive for rewriting *Tarr*, the issue here is one of marketability; of how to sell Dos Passos as a brand that appeals to a wider audience. Indeed, Harcourt seems perfectly happy to reduce its author's complexity to a tailored list of trademarks, side-lining cultural value for economic. These were concerns that configured the decision making at the Modern Library, too. When offered the rights to *Manhattan Transfer* and *Three Soldiers* in 1927 and 1928, respectively, Cerf declined both, explaining that "he did not think Dos Passos was quite worthy of the Modern Library" (Neavill 1981, 246). It was only when Dos Passos found widespread acclaim for his pivotal work, the *U.S.A Trilogy*, that Cerf re-examined his initial assessment of the author, choosing to include two works in the series.

In 1939, he would publish *U.S.A* as a Modern Library Giant, concluding his establishment of the once-denied author as a worthy mainstay of the “intellectually sophisticated” series. As with *Tarr*, the “struggle” of the modernist text is derived from its negotiability: negotiable to the publisher but also, seemingly, to the author who releases their text into an industry which embraces titles “for which they believed a substantial demand existed” (Neavill 1981, 246). In this sense, the Modernist dichotomy is problematised by the publishing house itself, which functions as a platform on which the Modernist author and the masses converge.

Busting the Canon

Modernist discourse traditionally presupposes “modernism” to be a “self-evident category restricted to canonical authors such as Joyce, Woolf and Stein” (Jaillant 2014, 6). Yet, as the example of Dos Passos suggests, the Modernist canon was, until the latter half of the century, still in its nascent form. It is certainly illuminating to consider such authors and their coevals, now wholly integrated into literary syllabi and publishers’ popular Modernism lists, as undetermined affiliates, so to speak. However, this sheds little light on the processes that laboured to shape the canon as we now know it. As far as *how* the canon was being formed, we must look to the prominent critical voices of the time. FR Leavis’s *New Bearings in English Poetry*, for example, offers some insight. Published in 1931, the influential work names what Leavis considered to be the two essential poetic voices of the decade: Ezra Pound and TS Eliot, along with Gerard Manley Hopkins, their forebear. This is hardly unsurprising – both were important figures in the modernist landscape and, indeed, remain so – but it is Leavis’s judgments beyond the “English” scope that are of real interest. As Hugh Kenner notes, in spite of Yeats’s “magnificent” intelligence, Leavis disregards his work for its “meditation on the events of the poet’s life: an *Irish* life” (1984, 51). In his magazine, *Scrutiny*, too, we find some stirring omissions: William Carlos Williams is altogether ignored for his “American-ness, the cisatlantic tang of his cadence” (1984, 52); and Joyce’s *Ulysses* is denied its recognition as the forerunner of countless major Modernist works including Leavis’s best-loved exemplar, *The Waste Land*. And yet, we know these omissions as stalwarts of today’s Modernist canon. Leavis’s work certainly gives an impression of canonization in its formative stage; of laying the groundwork, at least. Critics such as Carey

and Huyssen typically compound their assertions of the period with a totalising view of the “canon” as equivalent to a distinct cultural sphere. It is, however, precisely its formative nature that complicates this notion of a fixed Modernist canon – and thus a definitive central dichotomy.

This is not to say that the literary canon has never come under scrutiny or attack. Even in the mid-eighties, Kenner claimed there was a “crisis in literary study” revolving around the question of canon formation (1984, 50). More recently, Paul Lauter’s *Canons and Contexts* interrogates the institutions integral to the process. Lauter remarks: “The processes of institutionalization [...] heavily capitalised anthologies and national marketing of texts – not to speak of academic tradition and inertia – all contribute to the difficulty of changing a canon once it has been formed” (1991, 40). The work of “canon busters” like Lauter is vital to the complication of Modernist elitism. Ultimately, it justifies an interrogation of the serialisation in the Modern Library and similar lists, and of the commercially-inclined negotiations between Modernist authors and their publishers. As these points, along with a consideration of Leavis’s proposed canon, prove, a canon is better observed as a fluid thing, rather than a fixed entity. Indeed, it is safe to say that, until the later half of the century, no author had thought to situate themselves in a set catalogue of Modernists. And while many clearly did fear contamination, it was not with the stringent division of cultural groups. It is with this assertion that we are truly welcome to repudiate the notion that the Modernists “constituted [themselves] through a conscious exclusion, an anxiety of contamination by the other” (1987, vii); and to begin to bring to light the nuances that existed between the Modernists and the masses.

Conclusion

In conclusion, perhaps it is worth reflecting once again on Greenburg’s proverbial “m”. While drawing its utility from being a “historically placeable term” (1980), it seems that its shortfall is in evoking the fixed Modernist canon and, by association, perpetuating the “gulf”. However, interrogating the period through a publishing lens allows these conventions to be problematised. By observing the serialisation of the Modern Library, we

can clearly see how, in spite of its favouring of the ‘intellectual’ text, the notion of ‘brows’ is blurred by uniform marketing and the democratic endeavour of making high culture available to all. Furthermore, the negotiations that occurred between authors and their publishers – such as with Lewis’s two versions of *Tarr* and between Dos Passos and Cerf – reveals the Modernist text to be a “site of struggle”, where the author, in being commercially influenced, is not wholly removed from the sphere of the masses. The attitudes of publishers equally demonstrate this, insofar as the text and its author is reduced to a product or brand, with economic value as a central concern. Lastly, the work of “canon busters” such as Lauter provides a useful viewpoint on the issue of canon formation. Indeed, by considering Leavis’s contributions to the task, the Modernist canon appears to be more fluid than fixed. Thus, the Modernist canon as we know it, and its surrounding discourse, can be complicated. Having followed Jaillant’s example and endeavoured to “recover the cultural context in which ‘modernism’ first appeared” (2014, 6), it becomes apparent that, in the first half of the century at least, the epithet of ‘Modernist’, and its catalogue, was not yet a fixed thing and Carey’s “gulf” had not yet grown to be particularly great.

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