Conclusion

On the Refusal of Modernism’s Afters

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Abstract and Keywords
This book has traced a history of modernism’s decline and of its doubters. In post-Vichy France, the US circa 1968, and late apartheid South Africa, modernism’s fate was precarious, its reputation tarnished, and its politics reviled. The inescapability of the political in these contexts compromised the structural conditions of the autonomous literary field on which modernism had been built. In turn, it threw into crisis the philosophical defense of autonomy and the literary legacies of modernism, which grew out of and were guaranteed by this autonomous literary field. The stories we tell about late twentieth-century literary history reflect this dilemma. According to received wisdom, the period between 1945 and 1990 saw postmodernism replace modernism in both literature and scholarship, and new waves of postcolonial literature and theory discredited the Eurocentric specter of modernism. ...
This book has traced a history of modernism’s decline and of its doubters. In post-Vichy France, the US circa 1968, and late apartheid South Africa, modernism’s fate was precarious, its reputation tarnished, and its politics reviled. The inescapability of the political in these contexts compromised the structural conditions of the autonomous literary field on which modernism had been built. In turn, it threw into crisis the philosophical defense of autonomy and the literary legacies of modernism, which grew out of and were guaranteed by this autonomous literary field. The stories we tell about late twentieth-century literary history reflect this dilemma. According to received wisdom, the period between 1945 and 1990 saw postmodernism replace modernism in both literature and scholarship, and new waves of postcolonial literature and theory discredited the Eurocentric specter of modernism. *The Art of Hunger* has read modernism and aesthetic autonomy through the history of its supposed decline, in order to tell the story of aesthetic autonomy’s failures, and, in tandem, of modernism’s slump. By following the history of modernism through its dark night of the soul, it has sought to understand what happened to modernism, and how its specter continued to shape literary and academic culture through the years of its apparent demise.
In some respects, this is a strange book to have written in the second decade of the twenty-first century. In the last decade or two, modernism has seen a revival of sorts. The expansion that Douglas Mao and Rebecca Walkowitz influentially identified as the signature move of the “new modernist studies” has entailed an explosion of the modernist canon and, with it, a new impulse to apply the term to an ever-widening set of texts and movements.

Global modernist studies has found new modernisms in Turkey and Africa, in the Caribbean and China. For scholars like Susan Stanford Friedman, this geographical expansion has also entailed a temporal one, and modernism’s historical borders have correspondingly loosened. In Friedman’s most provocative formulations, she speculates that there might be a modernism of Tang Dynasty China. Meanwhile, scholars of contemporary literature, from Mark McGurl to David James, have argued that modernism never really died, positing its return or its persistence in contemporary literary style, in the aesthetic positions that animate our literary field, or in the institutions of contemporary creative writing. The literary industry too participates in modernism’s revival, selling a new generation of authors, from Ben Lerner to Eimear McBride, and from Jack Cox to Teju Cole, as heirs of the modernist canon.

Underpinning this expansive gesture is often the unspoken conviction that “modernism” is a term of approbation. To call a contemporary or a non-Western work modernist often carries with it a claim about its literary value. Modernism is serious literary business (which is to say, it sells as cultural capital, although not necessarily for any great financial profit) and branding a work with this term brings it within the orbit of this seriousness. It suggests that it is literary with a capital L, that it partakes of the best that has been thought and said. Modernism, in short, continues to signal a position in the literary field—a position of high cultural capital and low financial returns, sustained by its relative autonomy—and the expansion of the term suggests both the prestige of this position and its availability to authors who, too late or too far away, might not otherwise have occupied it. Modernism’s expansion has, in this sense, rested on its rehabilitation, its renewed credibility as a form of cultural capital and as a set of literary and aesthetic positions.
More than just a sociological jostling for position, however, modernism’s revival in the twenty-first century has hinged on a revaluation of its ethical and political implications. This revaluation has tended to take two forms. On the one hand, a new spate of leftist scholarship has continued the tradition headed by thinkers like Adorno and Jameson, insisting on modernism as a uniquely revolutionary force in literature. In the US, the scholars around the online journal nonsite have followed and expanded the (p.201) work of Michael Fried and Walter Benn Michaels, for whom modernism’s autonomy persists as a last bulwark of resistance against contemporary neoliberalism’s totalizing heteronomy. Meanwhile, in their recent book Combined and Uneven Development, the Warwick Research Collective has linked modernism with their notion of “world-literature,” as the literature that “registers” modernity. They vacillate on the extent to which this registration is necessarily critical, but the examples they select certainly imply that modernism is relevant to them as “the (modern) culture that says ‘no’ to modernity,” echoing Adorno.5 What these groups share is a conviction that modernism offers a position from which a critique of contemporary capitalism can be mounted. Modernism’s retreat from overt political engagement becomes not a refusal of politics tout court but a refusal of co-optation, grounded in the conviction that politics can be invested in form. Modernism is due a come back because, as neoliberalism reaches and perhaps passes its peak, modernist literary resources become political resources, carrying forward the impulses of the revolutionary twentieth century. Its seriousness is not just the seriousness of literary consecration but, more importantly for these thinkers, of real political resistance (even where that resistance is largely negative or defensive).
Against this political justification of modernism, another set of scholars have made the case for its legacy as a largely ethical one. For several of the contributors to the landmark volume *The Legacies of Modernism*, which has set the agenda for work on modernism’s relationship to contemporary literature, the relationship between these two moments is determined by their negotiation of what Tim Woods calls “the ethics of form.” For writers including Andrzej Gasiorek, Peter Preston, and Woods himself, modernist formal experimentation provides the foundation on which some of literature’s strongest ethical claims can be built. These writers participate in a line of thought whose most influential recent proponent has been Derek Attridge. In *The Singularity of Literature*, Attridge provides an ethical justification for literature: “To respond to the demand of the literary work as the demand of the other is to attend to it as a unique event whose happening is a call, a challenge, an obligation: understand me, translate my untranslatability, learn me by heart and thus learn the otherness that inhabits the heart.” Although his case in *The Singularity of Literature* is not confined to modernism, his ideas are developed further (p.202) in a companion study, *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event*, which reads Coetzee as a belated modernist. Taking Coetzee’s modernism as the prime example of his ethics of literature, Attridge grants modernism and its contemporary manifestations a privileged position in his theory of ethical reading, a position that more recent scholars of modernism’s relationship to contemporary literature carry forward. For these critics, contemporary writers reprise modernism as part of a larger attempt to explore the ethical possibilities of form and of literature in general.
Both the political and the ethical defenses of modernism link its resurgence to its capacity to achieve positive outcomes in the present. Modernism comes to embody qualities that literature in general is taken to hold, and its return is taken to fill a contemporary need for a more critical, resistant, healing, or ethical literary mode. This claim to modernism’s special literary quality tends to rest on its long-standing association with aesthetic autonomy. For the political critics, modernist autonomy holds open the space for critique, granting literature freedom from the coercion of totalizing political systems. For modernism’s ethical defenders, it guarantees what Attridge calls the “singularity” and the “alterity” of literature, holding the text separate enough from the reader to permit a true ethical relation. For both, modernism’s privileged relationship to autonomy is central to its status as an honorific, and central to its value as a term that can circulate beyond the historical moment with which it is conventionally associated.

While this commitment to modernist autonomy as a force for good produces worthy defenses of literature in general and of modernism in particular, the writers of the art of hunger refuse the consolations of these positions. Because authors like Beckett, Auster, and Coetzee imagine aesthetic autonomy as unfree and anti-social, they raise difficult, perhaps intractable, questions about modernism’s political and ethical functions. As I have argued throughout this book, the art of hunger is an anti-politics of literature. It is also an anti-ethics. It cannot provide a model for liberation, because it does not experience itself as free, and it cannot provide a model for social relations, because it refuses society. As a result, the modernism sketched in this book, unlike most accounts of modernism’s life after modernism, is neither good nor redemptive. Returning to modernism does not offer Beckett, Auster, or Coetzee a way out of their historical impasses, or even a particularly effective perch from which to critique the systems that produce them. It does not make authors, characters, or readers ethically sound or attentive. For scholars (and I began this project as one of them) who want their commitment to modernism to be a commitment to a way of living well or to an optimal political system, the art of hunger is deflating. In the art of hunger, modernism is more curse than redemption.
Deflating the claims that are made on behalf of both modernism and aesthetic autonomy, the art of hunger asks us to interrogate the processes of canonization that these claims support. Declarations of the ethical worthiness of writers like Beckett and Coetzee have been key to their centrality to the canon of post-1945 writing. At the same time, a whole theory of literature’s political force has taken Beckett, Kafka, and the Melville of “Bartleby” as its central figures. My analysis, however, suggests that we might need to re-evaluate our defense of these writers, as we re-evaluate our defense of modernism itself. It suggests that whatever is compelling about writers like Coetzee and Beckett, it is not edifying in the way that most ethical or political readings of their work suggest.

In this sense, *The Art of Hunger* offers a counter-narrative of modernism’s afterlives. The writers I have discussed here link modernist formal experimentation to constraint and control, as in Beckett; they tie the modernist heritage to solipsistic self-exploration and intergenerational violence, as in Auster; and they suggest that modernist autonomy is inimical to and irreconcilable with a politics of racial liberation, as in Coetzee. Above all, they understand modernism’s links to autonomy not as a form of liberation or sociability, but as a practice that is essentially unfree, and one that produces unfreedom. Modernist canons and modernist concepts are central to their understanding of aesthetics, but art itself, in their hands, becomes a duty, a limit, a travail, and a restraint. If Romanticism produced the influential account of art and especially of aesthetic autonomy as a practice of freedom, the art of hunger is the strand of modernism that most polemically rejects this claim—the strand of modernism in which art’s exception ends in unfreedom.
Deflating as this account of modernism and its afterlives may be, my intention here has not been to offer a critique of modernism, nor to suggest that the authors I discuss do (or should). What fascinates me about this decidedly grimmer account of modernism’s persistence in the late twentieth century is precisely that it has persisted at all. The commitment of writers like Beckett, Auster, and Coetzee to the modernist legacy offers the clearest example of its on-going presence in post-World War II literary culture, but its influence is wider and deeper than the predilections of a handful of authors. As Chapters 3 and 4 of this book have suggested, modernism has profoundly structured the anglophone university in the second half of the twentieth century. Literary studies as we know it today is to a substantial extent the product of modernism and its legacies, and modernism’s persistence is one of the central stories of the institutionalization (p.204) of literature in the university. At the same time, the most fervent and formative literary debates of the late twentieth century took modernism as their subject or their chief example. From France in the 1940s through the transnational upheavals of 1968 to South Africa in the 1980s, the most bitterly fought debates over art’s relationship to politics and society were, as we have seen, also debates about modernism. While Beckett, Auster, and Coetzee’s unwavering commitment to modernism was a minority position, so too was that of those who outright dismissed its importance or its influence. For many—perhaps for most—writers in the second half of the twentieth century, modernism was a legacy to be grappled uncomfortably with, inescapable but fraught. The counter-narrative of the art of hunger brings these institutional and social histories of modernism back into focus, and it reminds us that modernism’s return is not just—indeed, not primarily—a validation of its virtues.
Instead, *The Art of Hunger* suggests that modernism returns throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, not because it has an exemplary solution to the problem of what art is for in the modern world, but because it constitutes an exemplary formulation of the problem itself. I have been arguing that the art of hunger emerges at moments when aesthetic autonomy’s social position is in crisis. In the same way, modernism itself returns as a way of articulating the ongoing twentieth-century crisis in the social function of art. Its allure therefore varies for different groups, depending on the extent to which art’s social function seems to them to be genuinely in doubt. For a radical and politically engaged tradition, running from post-war members of the French Communist Party, to student protestors at Columbia in 1968, to black intellectuals in South Africa in the 1980s, art served a clearly defined social role, as part of a larger political project. For these writers, modernism held little appeal. But for other writers in these contexts, from Jean-Paul Sartre and Roland Barthes to Nadine Gordimer and André Brink, the situation was not so clear-cut. Even for many who espoused political art, the sense that art was in crisis was pervasive. For these writers, the turn to politics was imagined as a solution to this crisis, a way of making art commensurate with the demands of their historical moment. But while they rejected aesthetic autonomy in its more anti-political forms, they overwhelmingly continued to develop their ideas through reference to modernist examples. Modernism, therefore, returned as an important touchstone for writers for whom art’s social function seemed precarious, in crisis, or under threat, even where aesthetic autonomy did not. Indeed, modernism for many was the dilemma they hoped to escape from, the statement of a problem whose solution they were desperately seeking.
The art of hunger is one form in which modernism returns, but, as we have seen, it distinguishes itself from the modernist engagements of writers like Sartre and Gordimer on two fronts. Firstly, for the writers of the art of hunger tradition, the relationship between aesthetic autonomy and modernism is what modernism is. Refusing to decouple their commitments to the modernist tradition and to aesthetic autonomy, they seek to carry aesthetic autonomy forward, even as its social role is thrown into question. Secondly, and as a result, the art of hunger gives up all hope that the return to modernism might be a recuperative or empowering maneuver, or that the problem that is modernism might find a solution. Instead, in tracing both the unfreedom inherent to aesthetic autonomy and the crisis that modernism articulates, the art of hunger brings into sharper focus modernism’s role in negotiating larger dilemmas about the status of art at moments of social upheaval.
As a result, the art of hunger does not provide a model for political action or for ethical relation. In fact, we can learn most from these writers precisely where they refuse to provide a model for action. The tradition outlined in this book provides a useful corrective to a long-standing impulse within literary studies—perhaps especially within modernist studies—to find extra-literary benefits in the literary works we most value. If there is value in the art of hunger, it does not lie in the assertion that Kafka helps us to better fight capitalism, or that Coetzee offers a model for ethical action. The art of hunger instead asks us to see art as a social category, without transforming it into a site of political or ethical progress. Similarly, by yoking the expansive, utopian category of art to the finiteness and frailty of the experience of hunger, it highlights the distinction between the unfreedom that results from our finitude as human beings, and the oppression produced by social injustice. As such, the art of hunger illuminates the ground on which political action must be built, even as it insists that art may never be the terrain on which political battles are won. For those of us who seek a progressive or leftist politics, the art of hunger underscores what we sometimes want to forget but ought not: that our bodies themselves present constraints and limits to freedom that no political activity can wish away; and that art as we have come to understand it in the twentieth century has its own logic that may not offer a model for political or ethical action. The art of hunger, an art of anti-politics and unfreedom, reimagines the aesthetic as a site of limitation and constraint, and modernism as the privileged vehicle of this deflating aesthetics. When we inherit modernism, therefore, we inherit a problem. The art of hunger is one history of this problem: the history of art as a practice of unfreedom. (p. 206)

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(8) Ibid.,