Foreword

In *The Art of Scandal*, Sean Latham investigates the obscured history of the roman à clef in the last years of the nineteenth and early decades of the twentieth centuries, and identifies an important counter-discourse running underneath our traditional narratives of modernist institutions and aesthetics. The book promises to redress an imbalance in current scholarship: a symptomatic blindness created by the ideology of aesthetic autonomy that underpins so many stories about modernism. Indeed, Latham’s attention to the forgotten role of the roman à clef isn’t finally the most important contribution made here; rather, it’s the way that restoring the roman à clef to our histories of modernism makes us reconsider the hegemony of the separation of fact and fiction, life and representation, that is foundational in so much of our thinking. *The Art of Scandal* is an intelligently argued, brilliantly researched, in some ways quiet book that has the potential to send important ripples throughout the modernist studies community. Among many other admirable qualities, it makes outstanding use of archival materials, especially those at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas, Austin, and the special collections at the University of Tulsa. This book, then, which asks us to reconsider our facile segregation of fact from fiction, is itself built on a solid bedrock of literary fact.
Latham argues that “the scandalous boundary between fact and fiction” troubles the entire history of the novel. One can witness a kind of oscillation: early novels legitimate themselves based on a fidelity to “fact” (Gulliver’s Travels, famously, purporting to be a true firsthand account happily discovered by its editor), whereas the modernist novel, in spite of its heavy indebtedness to realism (think of the encyclopedic realism of Ulysses, about which Joyce boasted at every opportunity, (p.viii) or the persistence of naturalism in Conrad and Hemingway), was proud of its autonomy from the “real” world, its creation, in Richard Poirier’s phrase, of “a world elsewhere.” Increasingly redressed in recent years, too much modernist scholarship bought the “autonomy” argument hook, line, and sinker: but our readings were thereby impoverished. Indeed, though often not thematized in quite this way, much of the best “new modernist” scholarship of the past twenty years has been characterized precisely by a refusal to take modernists at their own word, to read them according to their own mythology: the work on modernism’s fraught relationship with the market and commodity culture, for instance. What’s more, Latham seeks to unsettle the authority of modernism’s self-descriptions through detailed attention to earlier British texts that it served the interest of modernists to ignore. A great deal of new work in modernism is dedicated to reconstructing what Michael North has called the “the scene of the modern,” but little of this work performs the equally necessary task of reconstructing obscured prehistories of the modern that still await excavation.

The Art of Scandal opens with an entirely convincing argument about the way that twentieth-century readers have been trained to “believe it weirdly ‘unnatural’ to treat fictional characters and events as if they were real.” It’s one of those humble insights upon which really great critical writing is so often founded: what if we, for argument’s sake, refused to take for granted that which “goes without saying”? Latham is clear about what’s at stake in this nearly unanimous, and nearly unconscious, decision to sever representation from that represented: “Our good literary manners ... have led us to obscure, abandon, or simply mischaracterize a wide array of innovative writing from the early twentieth century which openly conceals fact within fiction in order mischievously to muddle the distinction between them.”
The Art of Scandal also makes an important contribution to ongoing explorations of relations between law and literature in Latham’s careful articulation of the nervous dance between the novel, the roman à clef, and the changing law of libel. The law courts, we have come recently to recognize, are among those institutions of modernism that were too long effaced from our official histories, and need to be restored (just as Paul Saint-Amour, in The Copywrights, seeks to reinsert the law of copyright into the story of modernism). This material will be utterly new to most scholars of modernism and has, we suspect, the power to revise the received modernist narrative in ways that will go beyond what Latham has done with it here: it will almost certainly prove to be foundational in new lines of research.

Working through readings of Wilde and Freud, Joyce and Lewis, Huxley, Lawrence, and Rhys, Latham builds a convincing case for the importance of recognizing the critical, dialectical role played by the roman à clef in the construction of a modernist aesthetics. The readings of individual writers and novels here are always fresh, often revelatory. The material on Joyce alone will certainly get the attention of modernist (and of course Joyce) scholars; and the readings of, at either end of the study, Freud and Rhys, are wonderfully suggestive.

The Art of Scandal is a truly important book for the field of modernist studies; and its argument will, we believe, quickly enter our discussions of modernism. We’re pleased to bring it to you in the Modernist Literature & Culture series.

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