

# Review

**Gerald Gillespie. *Proust, Mann, Joyce in the Modernist Context*. Washington, D.C.: The Catholic U of America P, 2003, 326 pp.**

Looking at the title of Gerald Gillespie's recent book the reader can easily guess that a new study on modernism is being offered to enrich the already abundant stock of criticism on the subject. Over the last few years, there has been proliferation of such publications, covering a wide range of approaches and fields. Stan Smith's *The Origins of Modernism: Eliot, Pound, Yeats and the Rhetorics of Renewal* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester, 1994) looked at modernist poetry against a background of its social and political concerns. Other aspects of the politics of modernism were introduced in Bonnie Kime Scott's *The Gender of Modernism: A Critical Anthology* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1990) and in the monograph by Bridget Elliott and Jo-Ann Wallace, *Women Artists and Writers: Modernist (Im)positionings* (London: Routledge, 1994). Christopher Butler in *Early Modernism: Literature, Music and Painting in Europe 1900-1916* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994) considered literature in relation to music and other contemporary art forms. Such relations were also traced by Peter Burger, whose *Modernisms: A Literary Guide* (London: Macmillan, 1995) outlined the variety of movements that have been gathered under the general heading of modernism. Other studies that follow a comparative approach include William Carpenter's *Death and Marriage: Structural Metaphors for the Work of Art in Joyce and Mallarmé* (New York: Garland, 1988) and Hilary Clark's *The Fictional Encyclopedia: Joyce, Pound and Sollers* (New York: Garland, 1990). Within this kind of comparative analysis, Gillespie's book provides a fresh view and much complementary background knowledge about the writings of Marcel Proust, Thomas Mann and James Joyce.

Embarking on a comparative study of three European writers as intricate as Proust, Mann and Joyce is undoubtedly a challenging and an ambitious task, difficult to achieve, unless the scope and nature of the study are carefully defined. In this case, Gillespie clearly sets the limits of his research in the preface, where he provides warnings and suggestions for the reader of his work. Firstly, he indicates that we should not expect to find a unifying theory of modernism. Rather, Gillespie offers a personal and eclectic approach. Thereafter the scholar goes on to explain

his mixed diachronic and synchronic treatment of the subject, since Proust, Mann and Joyce are not presented in isolation, but as the title suggests, “in context.” Viewing these three outstanding modernist authors in connection with other earlier and contemporary writers, the fine arts, and cinema provides a more comprehensive vision of works such as *In Search of Lost Time*, *The Magic Mountain* or *Ulysses*. Gillespie, Professor Emeritus at Stanford University and past president of the International Comparative Literature Association, brings to his critical study a well-rounded knowledge of many literary texts in a number of languages, as well as a thorough familiarity with the various artistic trends that shaped our contemporary Western world.

*Proust, Mann, Joyce in the Modernist Context* can be read in different ways, since there is no prescriptive road map to a better understanding of the main issues involved. The book is organised in two balanced parts of seven chapters each: the first part, entitled “Modernist Moments and Spaces,” offers the “pretexts” and “contexts” of modernism, whereas the second one, with the suggestive title “Metamorphosis, Play, and the Laws of Life,” moves into what Gillespie calls “posttexts” modernism (viii). However, some of the fourteen chapters can be read in isolation, and there is no need to follow the chronological order suggested by the author. Several chapters focus mainly on one of the three writers of the title, such as chapter ten, “The Music of Things and the Hieroglyphics of Family Talk in Joyce’s Fiction,” or chapter eleven, “The Ways of Hermes in the Works of Thomas Mann.” Other chapters, however, treat Proust, Mann or Joyce at the same time and stimulate reflective thinking through rich cross-cultural and interdisciplinary connections with other authors and a great variety of themes and arts.

Among the many attractive features of Gillespie’s critical study, one has to underline the engaging metaphor used to describe the rich and varied cultural scene of the twentieth century. This cultural scene appears in the opening pages compared to an endless cathedral in which there is a chapel dedicated to modernism. Inevitably, the place does at times take on a somewhat labyrinthine form, and therefore the title of the introduction, “A Stroll in the Labyrinth,” is more than appropriate. However, Gillespie perceives and explains several large patterns that help one find one’s way through the maze. It is an enlightening introduction that sets the work in critical perspective and describes the state of the art as regards reflection on such complex concepts as modernism and postmodernism. Here, we cannot but agree with the author that modernism is a multifarious movement that does not represent any

monolithic view of history. If Proust is said to sympathise with modern liberal humanism, Joyce is described as a socialist, by temperament more than by ideological conviction (13), while Mann went through a political progression from early cultural conservatism to a clear anti-Nazi position in the 1930s. Contrary to what many critics have long claimed, Gillespie rightly believes that modernism, and particularly Proust, Mann, and Joyce, did not evade history and existential contingency. On the contrary, the “great modernist novelists were engaged in a profound examination of the question and problem of time” (14). They also questioned and re-examined issues such as personal versus collective identity, the laws of history, the nature of cultural evolution and the processes of reproduction of cultural forms.

The metaphor of the cathedral is expanded in the first chapter, “Spaces of Truth and Cathedral Window Light,” where the author explores the recurrent symbol of the window throughout the history of European literature and art. In a skilful exercise of comparative analysis, Gillespie looks at the presence of the image of the window in literary consciousness from romanticism through the nineteenth century in order to focus his attention after on the presence of this metaphor in modernist novelists. A long list of authors from the nineteenth century is reviewed. Among the many works discussed in this chapter are Keats’s “The Eve of St. Agnes,” Novalis’s *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, Goethe’s *Die Wahlverwandtschaften*, Stendhal’s *Le rouge et le noir*, Hawthorne’s *The Marble Faun*, poems by French symbolist poets and paintings by the romantic artist Caspar David Friedrich. Once the nineteenth-century roots of the imagery related to church window light are identified, the analysis centres on examples of modernist narrative, such as the first book of Proust’s *A la recherche du temps perdu* or Kafka’s *Der Prozess*.

Chapter two, “Epiphany: Applicability of a Modernist Term,” is dedicated to the well-known literary device proposed by Joyce in *Stephen Hero* to express its protagonist’s artistic moment of intense insight, which briefly illuminates the whole of existence and serves as an emotional turning point. Gillespie takes this term away from the Joycean world and applies it to other European writers, including Marcel Proust, Thomas Mann and Virginia Woolf. Particularly interesting are the references to Thomas Mann’s epiphanic scene of the fatal extraction of Thomas Buddenbrook’s tooth in his early masterpiece *Buddenbrooks*. Moreover, the epiphany is seen as an elaborate narrative procedure that is associated with the mental life of an aesthete or artist, as when the narrator in Proust’s *Swann’s Way* recounts specific moments of aesthetic breakthrough based on his own experiences. Gillespie also refers to the

“superepiphanic progression” in the final pages of Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*, with the final convergence of the excursion to the lighthouse and of Lily’s achievement of her vision in the painting. The epiphanic style, it is argued, reflects the absorption of the techniques of impressionism, symbolist evocation and the emerging psychological ideas of the era of Freud and Jung, as well as the experiences of the Wagnerian leitmotif, photography and cinema (51).

Chapters eight and ten also focus mainly on Joyce’s narrative. In the former, “Afterthoughts of Hamlet: Goethe’s Wilhelm, Joyce’s Stephen,” there is a well-researched and insightful study of the character of Stephen, his identity, his role as the son in search of his father, and how all this emerges in a web of allusions to literary texts that can be found in *Ulysses*, a “multitext of subtexts.” Of course, as in many other critical essays on the character of Stephen, Shakespeare—and Hamlet in particular—come to the fore, but Gillespie offers a fresh view of this Stephen-Hamlet relationship. His reading of *Ulysses* and its younger protagonist extends to earlier European obsessions with Hamlet, paying special attention to Goethe’s phantasmagorical realms of *Faust* and the centrality of Hamlet in *Wilhelm Meister Lehjahre*. At the beginning of the chapter, Gillespie states that “we can endlessly spin variations upon the textual status of *Ulysses* and its arts and its characters” (153), and that is exactly what he tries to do in this section. On the other hand, chapter ten, “The Music of Things and the Hieroglyphics of Family Talk in Joyce’s Fictions,” examines some of Joyce’s approaches to age and gender differences in the language used in his writings. Within the context of Joyce’s experimental modernism, this section sets out from the idea that Joyce’s fiction is not only written to be read, but also to be looked at and listened to. Gillespie first refers to *A Portrait*, where Joyce adjusts the language appropriately to the succeeding stages of his hero’s development—from the “moocow that was down along the road” of his early childhood to more complex discussions of the nature of art and life as Stephen grows older. Then, interesting comparisons to elements of “a potential female *bildungsroman*” by Joyce are established in several sections of *Ulysses*. One of them is the beginning of the “Lestrygonians” chapter, “Pineapple rock, lemon platt, butter scotch,” which picks up the “lemon platt” motif that appears in the first words of *A Portrait*, but this time through Bloom’s thoughts about his teenage daughter Milly. Similarly, the language used by Cissy Caffrey and Gerty MacDowell in the “Nausicaa” episode offers another example of the language of adolescence. References to Joyce’s use of feminine language in

*Finnegans Wake* are also discussed in connection with Rabelais's novel *Gargantua and Pantagruel*.

Gillespie's broad account of the literary and artistic contexts in which the works of Proust, Mann and Joyce developed leads to two consequences. In the first, modernism is not simply seen as an innovative trend of experimental techniques that breaks with the past. Gillespie's study suggests a long list of connections between modernist writers and authors, images, ideas, and resources of previous periods, the connections clearly confronting the widespread critical view of modernism as a mere expression of new topics and procedures. We are offered an expanded view of modernism, in which writers like Proust, Mann and Joyce, each in his own way, turn to the tradition of the encyclopaedic novel to create a particular portrait of the society, the politics and the arts of their time, as well as a universal picture of the essential conditions of human nature. Secondly, and building from this first consequence, Gillespie's research shows that the distinction some critics establish between modernist and postmodernist can be blurred. With each successive chapter, long-established views and paradigms regarding modernism are questioned and become more fluid and indeterminate.

This is a compelling critical study that sheds new light on the intricate literary relationships behind modernism and gathers together an enormous range of literary information that enlarges our understanding of Proust, Mann and Joyce. Despite its complexities, scholars will find it useful and accessible. It is clearly written in a straightforward, elegant style. In addition, it is also a well-documented book. Each chapter has a set of footnotes that refer the interested reader to particular critical sources and offer valuable comments or explanations that the main text cannot accommodate. A bibliography with primary works cited in the book is also provided, as well as a selection of critical studies mentioned in connection with particular topics; this selection holds around two hundred titles, a reflection of Gillespie's extensive reading. There is also a very useful index of names and subjects, which covers writers, artists, thinkers and critics. Overall, *Proust, Mann and Joyce in the Modernist Context* makes a large contribution in the field and represents a significant departure from current critical scholarship on modernism.

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