Modernism and Popular Culture: Joycean and Eliotic Examples

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I would like to begin in postmodern academic style by invoking a “Calvin and Hobbes” cartoon. The boy and tiger are admiring a framed painting on the wall, while Calvin observes, “A painting. Moving. Spiritually enriching. Sublime . . . ‘high’ art!” In the next panel they are looking at a newspaper on the floor while Calvin notes, “The comic strip. Vapid. Juvenile. Commercial hack work . . . ‘low’ art.” Next they are looking in a book of reproductions, and Calvin points out “A painting of a comic strip panel. Sophisticated irony. Philosophically challenging... ‘high’ art. Finally, Hobbes asks (metatextually), “Suppose I draw a cartoon of a painting of a comic strip?” “Sophomoric,” replies Calvin with all the certainty of an academic critic. “Intellectually sterile . . . ‘low’ art.” Because this is a four-panel comic strip the argument stops here; an academic critic, of course, would have been able to continue for any number of reiterations.

The sort of attitude toward the popular that Calvin articulates here has two main historical roots. As Patrick Brantlinger establishes in his wide-ranging study Bread and Circuses: Theories of Mass Culture as Social Decay (1983), the kind of social analysis that views mass or popular culture as another opiate of the populace allowing a ruling class to maintain its dominance has its roots in classical antiquity, and exists in both conservative and radical forms. But the twentieth century has contributed a distinct conceptualization of “low” art. The specific phrase “mass culture” gained general currency in the 1930s and carried with it the context of the great totalitarian systems. As Brantlinger puts it, “‘mass culture’ appears on the modern scene as a primarily political and apocalyptic term, used to refer to a symptom of social morbidity, the cancer or one of the cancers in a failing body politic.”

This second source for the critique of the popular is a distinctively modern formation, dependent upon the development of both modernity and modernism. Ironically, the modern critique of popular culture is virtually identical whether it issues from the right—the American “Fugitives,” for example—or from the left, as with the Frankfurt School. The presumption of this position is that with the twentieth century “popular culture” takes on a new and pernicious character as it transforms itself into “mass culture.” Terry Eagleton is one of many critics who have observed that high modernist art is “born at a stroke with mass commodity culture.” Fredric Jameson finds that “from the structural breakdown of the older realisms in the late nineteenth century” there emerges not modernism alone,
In Eagleton’s view (which is a Marxist variant of the conventional academic version of modernist art’s position vis-a-vis popular culture), modernist art, terrified of being reduced to a mere commodity, “brackets off the referent or real historical world, thickens its textures and deranges its forms to forestall instant consumability, and draws its language protectively around it to become a mysteriously autotelic object, free from all contaminating truck with the real.”

The American “New Criticism” as it developed during the 1940s and 1950s, taking its cue from some comments of Pound’s and Eliot’s and some early pronouncements of Joyce and of his character Stephen Dedalus, solidified the notion that “high” modernist art was in fact the antithesis of popular art. The attributes of “true” art, especially complexity, allusiveness, ambiguity, irony, self-reference and self-enclosure, were more or less by definition pronounced to be what was lacking in popular art. Literature professors believed that the specialized techniques or reading and evaluation developed by the New Critics would not only reveal the richness of great art works of the canon, they would equally well reveal the paucity of the popular.

In Britain, up to the rise of the Cultural Studies movement in the 1960s the most influential version of popular culture was the negative one presented by F. R. Leavis and Q. D. Leavis. The Leavises, extending their interpretation of the cultural criticism of Ortega y Gasset and Eliot, saw popular culture as the most deadening aspect of modern industrialized society, an agent actively undermining the possibility of genuine selfhood and moral responsibility. In her study *Fiction and the Reading Public*, Q. D. Leavis, using an approach she termed “anthropological,” concluded that unlike genuine literature, which allows the reader “to live at the expense of an unusually intelligent and sensitive mind, by giving him access to a finer code than his own,” “popular novels” substitute an emotional code which . . . is actually inferior to the traditional code of the illiterate. “Popular novels, Leavis continues, “actually get in the way of genuine feeling and responsible thinking by creating cheap mechanical responses and by throwing their weight on the side of social, national, and herd prejudices.”

A number of commentators have noted that the rise of literature as a profession in the twentieth century, which depended upon the institutionalization of “professional” aesthetic reading protocols in literature departments, itself had a stake in highlighting the dichotomy between high and low arts. Especially in the period immediately following the second World World, American academics were concerned to establish a literary professoriate who could claim to have mastered a group of arcane techniques for evaluation and interpretation and who had available for study an established and yet expandable canon with both traditional and modern components. A different but parallel process transpired in Britain, with the rise of “Cambridge English.” Thus, as Thomas Strychacz argues, “the kind of text we usually call modernist was shaped profoundly by a convergence of professional discourse and the rise of mass culture.”

We should note, however, that this institutional scapegoating of popular culture was by no means univocal or unopposed. To cite a few examples: the strain of modernism stemming from Marinetti, with its enthusiasm for speed, mass production, and the other technologically determined aspects of modern culture, was indigestibly present within modernism from the beginning. Especially in America, the “high modernist” 1920s coincided with a period of enthusiasm among the intelligentsia for jazz, for the “negro” and his “folk culture,” for the movies, and so forth. The increasingly leftist ideology of the cultural elite as the 1920s gave way to the
1930s meant that a “mandarin” aesthetic stance was increasingly untenable, and writers from Auden and Orwell to Dos Passos and Steinbeck combined some high modernist characteristics with an interest in and adaptation of forms of popular culture. Artists generally accomplished this balancing act by stressing their solidarity with “working-class culture” as opposed to “bourgeois” or “middle-brow” culture, which had been the real bête noire of the modernists from Flaubert or in any case. In practical terms, however, the distinction between these two cultures was more and more problematic.

The rise of postmodernism—or, more accurately, the origin of several postmodernisms—in the 1960s marked the beginning of the academy embracing of popular culture. As Hans Bertens shows in his magisterial survey *The Idea of the Postmodern*, the earliest form of American anti-modernism in the 1950s, most prominently championed by Leslie Fiedler, involved a rebellion against institutionalized high culture and a turn to the popular. Bertens quotes Andreas Huyssen: “Pop in the broadest sense was the context in which a notion of the postmodern first took shape.” What Bertens calls “Fiedler’s post-male, post-white, and post-Protestant postmodernism,” originally formulated as a more immediate, more authentic alternative to the bourgeois American literary mainstream, gradually took on the lineaments of a revolt against “high” culture, especially literature. At the same time, Fiedler, himself a paragon of the high-culture, European-oriented intellectual, began to transform his writing persona into an enthusiast of mass culture. “It was during a public argument with Lionel Trilling on the ‘soaps’ that I became fully aware, first, of how obsessed I had become with such uncanonical literature,” Fiedler observed, and “second, of how I had passed from snide analysis to passionate apology.” That this transformation had altered Fiedler’s cultural self-image was apparent from his comment, “I began by thinking that I was Stephen . . . But I ended, as you will end, as Joyce ended, by knowing that I was Bloom.”

The question of popular culture’s relationship to high culture and its overall role in modernity is—and always has been—a political one. During the later 1970s and the 1980s, two critical trends converged to cast popular culture in a new light. First, in the wake of Fiedler, Susan Sontag, and other early theorists of what came to be known as the postmodern, popular culture was refigured as both a positive aesthetic and psychological force in itself and, increasingly, as an element within (or in positive tension with) postmodern “high” culture. The implication, often made explicit, was that unlike modernism, “One of whose characteristic features . . . is a gesture or warding off the threat of a developing mass culture,” postmodernism characteristically embraces the popular—or in fact is no longer fundamentally distinguishable from it. Jim Collins’s *Uncommon Cultures: Popular Culture and Post-Modernism* (1989) and Brian McHale’s *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987), however they may otherwise differ in their characterizations of Postmodernism, agree on this. Indeed, in his more recent book *Postmodernism: Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991) Jameson, who had earlier avoided such generalizations, now claims that in the contemporary period most of the arts show “an effacement of the older distinction between high and so-called mass culture, a distinction on which modernism depended for its specificity.”

The second trend transforming the study of popular culture was the growing realization that under careful analysis the political effects of popular culture might not be so uniformly negative as had been generally claimed by both the left and the right. Citing such recent collections as Colin McCabe’s *High Theory/Low Culture* (1986), Tania Modleski’s *Studies in
Entertainment (1986), and Tony Bennett, Colin Mercer, and Janet Woollacott’s Popular Culture and Social Relations (1986), Jim Collins finds in them a shared “recognition that all cultural production must be seen as a set of power relations that produce particular forms of subjectivity, but that the nature, function, and uses of mass culture can no longer be conceived in a monolithic manner.” The British cultural studies movement, which took on institutional identity with the founding of the Birmingham Centre in 1963. In the 1980s Stuart Hall “developed his model of encoding and decoding whereby media codes were analyzed, not in terms of complete ideological closure, but according to ‘preferred’ or ‘dominant’ meaning which could be decoded by viewers from within similar frameworks or . . . ‘negotiated’ or ‘opposed’ in various ways.”

Meanwhile, feminism and cultural studies had produced a sort of consensus view of recent literary history that became dominant during the 1980s. Most influentially elaborated in Andreas Huyssen’s After the Great Divide, this held that high modernism, coding itself as “masculine,” defined popular culture as feminine and rejected it, along with the contributions of women artists who might otherwise have been recognized as pioneering modernists. One of the effects of this critical reorientation was to suggest the outlines of an alternative, unrecognized feminine modernism that was politically progressive and in alliance with popular culture—or, alternatively, to label this feminine literary strain “postmodernism.” One effect of this was to shatter the image of monolithic modernism by portraying it as divided against itself, with texts by Stein, Woolf, and H. D. on one side, and those of the dominant male modernists on the other.

I want to argue that the most recent development in the critical configuration of popular culture is to question its relationship with modernist art—a move whose most radical implication is to reject the accepted political and aesthetic understanding of “high” or “classical” modernism, best embodied for Anglophone readers by the writing of Joyce, Yeats, Woolf, Eliot, and Pound. This is the shared position of the contributors to Kevin Dettmar’s collection Rereading the New: A Backward Glance at Modernism (1992) and of most of the contributors to my own collection Joyce and Popular Culture, forthcoming from University of Florida Press. I believe that Joyceans were the first to stake out this ground, perhaps because of the sheer quantity of popular culture references in Joyce’s work. Popular cultural allusions presented themselves as the natural material for notes or short articles whose main intent was identification. Major Joyceans such as Hugh Kenner did not hesitate to publish their investigations into the minutiae of Joyce’s world—including speculations upon Joyce’s use of the personal development charts included in copies of Eugen Sandow’s Strength and How to Obtain It. The importance of everything in Joyce’s works, no matter how trivial, was simply assumed, much as early Biblical exegeses assumed there was significance in every textual detail—and for comparable reasons. Thus Marvin Magalaner’s early article on Joyce and Marie Corelli, or Gerhard Friedrich’s article relating Bret Harte’s novel Gabriel Conroy to “The Dead” or the many articles by Mary Power, culminating in her identification of Ruby, Pride of the Ring—all these may assume the superiority of Joyce’s work to the popular work they discuss, but that is certainly not the major stress of the article, or particularly important to it.


The first book-length investigation of the subject, Joyce’s Anatomy of
Culture by Cheryl Herr (1986), was part of a wave of Joyce studies, beginning in the mid-1970s, which reflected the new interest in Continental theory. Herr’s orientation at the time was grounded in semiotics, which seemed to offer a means of “reading” institutions as well as texts. There is a clear political thrust to Herr’s analysis, which could be termed Marxist; she is interested in the economic basis of “the cultural contradictions” that she reads in both Joyce’s texts and the popular texts to which she refers. Her implication is that both Joyce’s “elite” texts and the “low” cultural texts of Ireland that she examines (e.g. the music hall and popular stage) are in some ways oppositional. But her semiotic methodology, which treats all cultural texts alike, allowed her to avoid the problems of a study based either in the writer’s intentionally or in the high culture/low culture opposition that had been endorsed within cultural studies as a whole.

My own Joyce, Bakhtin, and Popular Literature (1989), which relies in good part on Bakhtin’s theoretical formulations, sidesteps the same problems because Bakhtin’s terms of analysis recognize no necessary difference in the ideological positioning of “high” and “popular” texts. I argue that Joyce’s invocation of a work of popular fiction is virtually never simple citation or quotation, and the relationship between the two fictions is seldom simply ironic. In Joyce, Bakhtin my overall implication is that the relationship between Modernist art and instances of popular culture is *dialogical*- that is, that it involves a dialogue and a dialectics, but a dialectics thoroughly grounded in the material and ideological context of each “voice.” But I want to stress that both Cheryl Herr’s analysis and my own are strongly motivated by the specific popular forms we studied, whose “texts” lend themselves so much more readily to a subversive reading than to a conservative one. Herr’s study of cross-dressing in the “panto” and the music hall, which she sets against the ‘Circe’ chapter of Ulysses, cannot help finding significant similarities in the two cultural expressions.

My own favorite example of a modernist theme echoed or even anticipated in popular literature is what Douwe Fokkema discusses as the *déracinement* and *détachement* of the modernist artist in early Gide, which he relates to Stephen Dedalus’s embrace of “silence, exile, and cunning.” This stance of empowering and imperative exile has of course been long recognized as a major avatar of modernist alienation. But what most strikes me is that Stephen’s announced model for this position is the elder Dumas’s Count of Monte Cristo, whose book he “pored over”: “The figure of that dark avenger stood forth in his mind for whatever he had heard of divined in childhood of the strange and terrible.” In this popular novel, whose hero would conventionally be called a degenerate version of the Byronic hero, there is a passage where Edmond Dantes, returned from exile, addresses a horrified listener who has tried to impress him with his political power. He himself is among “those men whom God has placed above kings and ministers,” he says.

This, surely, is what Joyce in Ulysses referred to as “the language of the outlaw.”
This is a single example of a modernist theme in an unexpected place; but examples of modernist themes, techniques, and attitudes abound in popular literature of the turn of the century. The famous “mythic method” of modernism, whose use in Ulysses was publicized—and idiosyncratically interpreted—by Eliot in his essay “Ulysses, Order and Myth” was in fact widespread in popular literature of the late nineteenth century. Elsewhere I have discussed Tom Greer’s Irish best-seller A Modern Daedalus (1885), and Charlotte Yonge’s A Modern Telemachus (1886) seems equally interesting in a Joycean context. But one of the most thoroughgoing practitioners of the “mythic method” was Marie Corelli, the all-time best-selling novelist up through the first World War. Corelli’s spiritualist romances reflected her own brand of Theosophy, which she termed “Electric Christianity,” and often featured modern-day characters who by way of what Leopold Bloom would call “metempsychosis” are reborn versions of mythic prototypes. We would do well to keep in mind that in Ulysses itself the idea of “transmigration of souls” is first introduced because Molly has read of it in the racy “circus novel” Ruby, the Pride of the Ring. I do not mean to suggest that there is no distinction between Joyce and Corelli in their use of this technique. But I am suggesting that both popular and “high modernist” literature during the period 1885-1925 may have been responding similarly to cultural currents in ways that would repay rethinking. And I am suggesting that the accepted rationale of the mythic method, as a high cultural attempt to rescue degraded modern daily popular existence by means of appeals to a literary tradition, better reflects the conservative ideology of the New Criticism’s new professorate than it does the workings of Joyce’s texts—or, for that matter, Eliot’s.

I could go on multiplying Joycean examples at length, but it may be of more interest to look briefly at the case of T. S. Eliot, who is often seen as the great conservative force behind high modernism. Two recent essays have seriously questioned that portrayal: Gregory S. Jay’s “Postmodernism in The Waste Land: Women, Mass Culture, and Others,” argues not that The Waste Land is a postmodernist text, but that “it seems important to discover how it is still Modernist, and how it calls forth, dialectically, the reactions that will constitute the Postmodern.” Jay examines a number of the characteristics often thought to separate modernist from postmodernist art, such as the nostalgia for origins, the treatment of the “embattled Self and its threatening Others (women, homosexuals, the lower classes, savages, and so on),” or the attitude toward mass culture implied in the work, and finds that in all cases the poem expresses an ambivalence, which is at root “an ambivalence between a nostalgia for origins and a drive for revolutionary fragmentation.”

A quite recent essay by David Chinitz entitled “T. S. Eliot and the Cultural Divide” tackles a similar array of issues, but concentrates on the mediation provided by Eliot’s poems between high and low cultural artifacts. Eliot, Chinitz argues, “developed a quite progressive theoretical position on the relation between high culture and popular culture and attempted repeatedly to convert this theory into art.” Chinitz points to Eliot’s lifelong attraction to elements of “lowbrow” culture, such as comic strips, boxing, melodrama, vaudeville, and Tin Pan Alley’s music. His respect and affection for Marie Lloyd is of course well known, as is the essay in which he celebrated the “working man who went to the music hall and saw Marie Lloyd and joined in the chorus,” because “he was engaged in that collaboration of the audience with the artist which is necessary in all art.”

Chinitz notes that Eliot was overjoyed when The Cocktail Party became a popular hit; Eliot also stated that “the poet naturally prefers to write for as
large and miscellaneous an audience as possible . . . I myself should like an audience which could neither write nor read.” Chinitz’s point is not that Eliot was a closet progressive, but that in him democratic, even populist tendencies were intermixed with the elitist and aestheticist stance into which he hardened in his later years. After all, we are not required to hear the refrains of popular songs and vulgar speech that punctuate The Waste Land as a mark of modern damnation; it is quite possible that Eliot was also warmly amused and pleased by the energy of “The Shakespearian Rag.” We must not mistake the attitudes in which we have been instructed for the more complex attitudes of the modernists. To invoke a final Joycean example, when Bloom considers submitting a story to the “prize Titbits competition,” we may be condescendingly amused; but we should temper our condescension with the realization that Joyce himself did exactly that. Re-energizing and re-examining the paradigm of modernism is obviously not a project confined to those of us who study popular culture at the turn of the century. Andreas Huyssen’s attempt to distinguish between an elitist high modernism and an “avant garde” is another such attempt, as are the recent efforts to “periodize” modernism, such as Michael Levenson’s distinction between early and later modernist poetries, or Christopher Butler’s scrupulous, transcultural examination of early modernism, or the variety of movements sketched in Peter Nicholls’s significantly-entitled new book, Modernisms. Clearly the day of monolithic modernism is over. I would also like to suggest that the day of conservative, autotelic, purely aesthetic modernism, dependent upon the gesture of exclusion of popular culture, is also passing; too often recently this modernism has been merely the whipping boy for a postmodernism that is conceived—not without considerable difficulty—as populist and progressive.

Despite the anecdotal and biographical evidence I have been invoking, the question is not one of authorial attitudes but of textual relations. As Astradur Eysteinsson has pointed out, the relationship of author to modernist text—his or her “presence” or “absence” in it—is by no means clear, for all the modernist talk of a poetics of impersonality. And even if we were to accept an author’s critical commentary as decisive, the modernists were characteristically ambivalent in most of their statements about art. David Chinitz admits that Eliot recorded plenty of statements testifying to his elitism and aestheticism; what he is asking is that we accord the same attention to Eliot’s artistically populist, progressive statements. I would suggest that with renewed attention to the interplay of popular intertexts within modernist texts we will discover a richness of interaction impossible in the totalizing perspectives conventionally brought to bear upon both popular culture and modernism. The relationship between the two is dialogical, which implies not only the historically embedded aspect of the interlocution but the weight each side willingly or not grants to the other. No doubt there is a modernist text that justifies itself through the exclusion of the popular and thus of the historical specifics of modernity. But that same modernist text through its pervasive irony, its internal dialogics, and through the frequent instances of a mise en abîme of high culture, demonstrates that there is no such thing as a purely aesthetic cultural product, and that cultural artifacts of all “levels” share in the perpetual semiotic interchange that is the condition of art. The modernist text—and this emphatically includes the high modernist text—precisely parallels the popular cultural text in that its political function as praxis is indeterminate, contingent upon historical particulars. Finally, I want to suggest that this is an inevitable conclusion when we read modernism in a postmodern age—not because as critics we are compelled to find our own
condition in what we study, but because aesthetic and pseudo-historical categories such as modernism, postmodernism, and popular culture are imbricated with the modes of analysis we bring to bear upon them. Once we discover a language through which we can approach both The Waste Land and Tin Pan Alley, both Ulysses and The Count of Monte Cristo, we will find that each of these has begun to read the other in unanticipated ways.

Notes


4. Eagleton 140.

5. Q. D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1932) 74.


34. David Chinitz, “Reply” [Reader’s Forum], *PMLA* 110.5 (October 1995): 1053.