Introduction: Modernism at Night

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IS *QUEER MODERNISM* SIMPLY ANOTHER NAME FOR MODERNISM?

AS DOUGLAS MAO AND REBECCA L. WALKOWITZ NOTE IN THEIR INtroduction to the 2006 collection *Bad Modernisms*, "[T]here were numerous ways of being outside in the early twentieth century" (7). Efforts over the past several decades to imagine modernism as an expanded field have been remarkably successful. Female modernism, African American modernism, queer modernism, sentimental modernism, low- and middlebrow modernism, and colonial, postcolonial, and anticolonial modernism have all been integrated into a renewed understanding of modernism (or modernisms, as it is often written). In addition, the rethinking of modernism as a set of aesthetic movements in relation to a larger context of global modernity and modernization has turned the inside out. Since few modernists, on closer inspection, appear to have stayed high or dry, bad modernism, outsider modernism, and marginal modernism begin to look more and more like modernism itself.[1]

Of all the forms of marginal modernism that have surfaced in the past couple of decades, queer modernism seems particularly likely to merge into modernism proper. This is not (or not only) because, as Kurt Cobain would have it, everyone is gay. With the emergence of queer literary studies, dating from the late 1980s and early 1990s, the specificity of same-sex identities or desires has not been an absolute criterion in tracing the queerness of a particular textual object, author, or set of relations. Critics have long pointed to the pervasiveness of nonnormative desires in the making of the modern; *queer*, unlike *gay* or *lesbian*, is by definition generalizable and therefore apt to make the most of this atmosphere of permission. *Queer* is the uninvited guest, unexpected but not totally unwelcome, that shows up without visible relations or ties. Its unlocatable quality does not have political effects that can be calculated in advance: queerness can be a force of disruption, but it can also be an unremarkable or merely enlivening presence.

True, when *queer* first arrived on the scene, it shook things up considerably. At the opening of what remains the most significant

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book in the field of queer modernism, *Epistemology of the Closet*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick made a dramatic claim about the necessity of attending to sexuality: "This book will argue that an understanding of virtually any aspect of modern Western culture must be, not merely incomplete, but damaged in its central substance to the degree that it does not incorporate a critical analysis of modern homo/heterosexual definition" (1). Thirteen years later, in *Touching Feeling*, Sedgwick drifted from earlier certainties and sounded almost abashed by the éclat of *Epistemology*'s arrival: "Such encounters as those with mortality and with Buddhism . . . have had some slip-slidy effects, for better or worse, on the strong consciousness of vocation that made a book like *Epistemology of the Closet* sound confident of its intervention on contemporaneous scenes of sexuality and critical theory" (2).

Sedgwick describes a personal transit from the founding moment of queer modernist literary studies to more "slip-slidy" reflections on pedagogy, Buddhism, affect, texture, reading as reparation, and nondualistic thought; still, her briefly sketched memoir might also describe a movement in the field away from more discursive approaches to identity, sexuality, and representation and toward approaches that emphasize emotion, temporality, intimacy, embodiment, new forms of social relations, and everyday life.[2] I am not suggesting that we are all sliding along behind Eve Sedgwick, though sometimes—in a good way—it does feel like that. Instead, I would like to suggest that it may be the slip-slidy effects of *queer* itself (and perhaps sexuality more generally as topic) that has found many of us floating away from the fixed course of epistemology and toward more diffuse and local practices of reading.

Queer modernism has an air of inevitability about it. Since the term *queer* is so closely linked to the concept of the margin, the prominence of exile and alienation in even dominant modernism resonates with the outsider glamour of *queer*. In addition, since the classic period of aesthetic modernism coincides with the emergence of modern sexual identities, there is a historical fit between the two terms. This coincidence may explain the sometimes disorienting fact that in several canonical modernist texts *queer* appears almost as frequently as *the*.[3] But perhaps what makes *queer* and *modernism* such a good fit is that the indeterminacy of *queer* seems to match the indeterminacy, expansiveness, and drift of the literary—particularly the experimental, oblique version most closely associated with modernist textual production.

Queer keeps drifting all over the map. Its great strength as a tool of interpretation and politics—its flexibility and its corrosive relations with fixed identity categories—might also be its greatest weakness. For what, after all, does the *queer* in *queer modernism* refer to? Everything? Or nothing at all? In his article "'Spectacles in Color': The Primitive Drag of Langston Hughes," Sam See describes *queer* as "meaningfully unidentified" sexuality, deploying its instability to describe the low-down and down-low practices illuminated in Langston Hughes's collection *The Weary Blues*. What is perhaps surprising in this context (and what reflects the turn to affect in the field) is that this indeterminacy is not incompatible for See with an understanding of nonnormative desires as natural.

One of the key impulses in queer modernist studies was a strong argument against biologist framings of the subject; drawing on the writing of queer modernists such as Oscar Wilde, Djuna Barnes, and Jean Genet, critics championed the unnatural, the perverse, and the artificial. See distinguishes between the normative and the natural in the modernist context, using moments of gender and racial crossing in Hughes's poetry to gesture toward "an embodied queer Negro nature." Drawing on sexological and literary archives, he argues that Hughes's "poetic performances . . . coopt pathologizing taxonomies of blacks and

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queers in order to debunk them even while retaining the nature-based premises of those discursive stereotypes." It is important to bring feeling and feeling natural back into discussions of black queer modernism and to rethink unquestioning refusals of essence. See's argument about the failure of discursive criticism to attend to such questions may overstate the case, however. Most discursive critiques of "nature" recognize its power to shape feeling, experience, and reality itself. We might think, for example, of Louis Althusser's account of ideology as that which seems spontaneous or obvious (116) or of the fact that Judith Butler's critique of gender essentialism turns on a reading of Aretha Franklin's affectively supercharged "(You Make Me Feel like) A Natural Woman" (27–28).

Queer and modernist studies have offered critiques of stable notions of identity. For that reason, Ernesto Javier Martínez's essay "Dying to Know: Identity and Self-Knowledge in Baldwin's *Another Country*" presents a striking counterargument, emphasizing the significance of identity both as an aspect of everyday life and as a significant form that mediates the self's relation to the social. Martínez engages with realist approaches to identity, experience, and knowledge, treating identity categories as "lived theories" that can be evaluated for "degrees of epistemic value." In a turn to affect and experience that we might link to See's turn to the natural, Martínez argues against the postmodern skepticism that he sees as dominant in queer literary studies. While he recognizes the importance of incoherence and confusion as part of lived experience—as integral to the self-knowledge that James Baldwin's passionate characters are dying for—Martínez argues that some critics value opacity for its own sake and disregard reference entirely. Opacity, for Martínez, is not an absolute quality or the negation of knowledge; it has its characteristic climates and textures and is part of the experience of living with (if uncomfortably or partially) social identities.

Brian Glavey's essay "Dazzling Estrangement: Modernism, Queer Ekphrasis, and the Spatial Form of *Nightwood*" also considers the epistemic potential of confusion in its attention to Djuna Barnes's obscene enigmas. Glavey draws on Joseph Frank's classic reading of the novel to push through some conceptual stalemates in modernist studies. He argues that *Nightwood* is neither a monolithic model of aesthetic unity nor an unqualified and heroic example of marginal existence and aesthetic subversion. Instead, the novel, he writes, "offers a vocabulary for talking about queerness, modernism, and the aesthetic that is less Manichean, and consequently more useful, than much of the current critical discourse."

It's true that modernism and critical reflection on it tend to be remarkably Manichean: the field is structured largely by great divides. Queer studies has been known to suffer from the same habits of division. The turn to affect, while in some regards a refusal of binarism, has in others been starkly Manichean; in a few recent critical debates, the central question for the field is apparently whether queers should feel happy or sad. Glavey provides an important corrective to this debate, recalling critics to the complexity of the aesthetic: "*Nightwood*'s experiment with form calls for a more capacious understanding of modernism, one that attends to its political implications and investments without divvying the aesthetic up into the good, the bad, and the ugly." Glavey models this kind of critical response in his essay; he takes up some of the most enigmatic images in the book and offers readings that illuminate but do not resolve them.

I take Glavey's point, even though I am certainly part of the problem. When it comes to queer feelings, I have an immoderate passion for the bad. In recent psychoanalytic criticism and work in affect studies, critics have explored the darker side of queer desire and queer historical experience.[4] This turn to negative representations provides a context for Glavey's serious engagement with the

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full range of *Nightwood*'s enigmas, including those—such as Robin Vote's refusal to be a person—that look unpromising in relation to any recognizable political agenda.

Peter Howarth's essay on the poet A. E. Housman's "dirty postcards" also provides an example of what can be gained from a fuller consideration of unpromising topics. As Howarth notes, Housman's sexuality has been understood primarily through the lens of "repressed homosexuality"; in this essay, the messiness of Housman's sexuality looks like an incitement to thought rather than a political dead end. In his readings of Housman's private postcard and sexology collection, Howarth does not aim to diminish or explain Housman's poetry by reference to "thwarted" desires or personal pathology; rather, he takes seriously the sadomasochistic nature of these materials, tracing the dynamics of power in them to formulate a theory of Housman's politics of form.

Howarth emphasizes the theatrical and reciprocal nature of the sadomasochistic relation. In a reading of the pornographic novel *Nell in Bridewell* and Theodor Reik's writing on masochism, he describes the dynamics of sadomasochistic fantasy: "In its candid 'I know you know' structure, no horror, threat, or scream fails to anticipate its erotic theatricalization: every relation, even the most impersonal, will turn out to be part of the game." Howarth reads in Housman's masochistic poetry the pursuit of a "sense of invulnerability" to be gained from persecution; furthermore, he sees in Housman's embrace of masochism a parody of ideas of aesthetic unity circulating at Cambridge in the early twentieth century. Drawing attention to a series of wonderful links between form and sexual fetish—for example, noting that the term *disinterested* (familiar from I. A. Richards's aesthetic theory) "was one of the code words used by flagellant prostitutes in small ads to promise their clients what they really wanted, the impartial and rigorous dispensation of punishment"—Howarth argues that Housman's poetry makes visible the costs of achieved aesthetic unity.

Brian Glavey writes that "Barnes gives shape to estrangement, making it something that might be shared, that might be recognizable if forever unknown"; her spatial forms are "well wrought without being well lit." It's not a bad reminder of what both the aesthetic and queerness have to offer: indeterminacy, but not blank indeterminacy. These essays emphasize embodied knowledge and emotion, fantasy and confusion, identity and its effacement. In that sense, they may suggest a new scene for queer modernism: not the epistemology of the closet but an encounter with the illegible. Queer lives and queer feelings scribbled over but still just visible—you can half make them out in the dark.

Notes

1. For an emphatically "wet" modernism, see Boone. For an account of high modernism that emphasizes the "failure of 'classical' modernist works to embody the genderized aesthetic norms that they are supposed to promote," see Lamos 9. For an account of queer and cross-class contacts in modernism that emphasizes "its embrace of the irrational and perverse as constituents of the social world," see Trask 4.

2. Such a characterization clearly cannot describe all work in the field; nonetheless, I would argue that even queer work with a quite different focus—say, on political economy or on science, sexuality, and race—often registers the effects of what has been called the affective turn in a broader context.

3. One might think, for instance, of the frequent use of the term in the writing of Henry James, Gertrude Stein, or Willa Cather. Eric Haralson offers a helpful discussion of both the "abundance and diversity of 'queer' things in Anglo-American literature from the nineteenth century to the early twentieth century" (4) and the ways in which the traditional sense of the term (as odd or strange) is "simultaneously in effect and under revision" (10) in modernist texts that are named, after the fact, as queer (see 1–14).

4. For a discussion of the antisocial thesis in queer theory, see "Conference Debates." For important related recent work, see Edelman; Dean. For work on negative

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affect, see Cvetkovich; Ahmed; Berlant; Sedgwick, *Touching*; Ngai; and Love.

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