The first modernists asked us to believe in a break with the past, to believe that they were writing in a way that was wholly new. Yet early admirers of modernism celebrated these writers for their engagement with literary precursors. This is especially apparent in the case of James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922), where discussions of Homeric and Shakespearean parallels have sustained more than one generation of critics, but it also holds true of discussions of Katherine Mansfield’s debt to Chekhov, of T.S. Eliot’s debt to Dante, or of Zora Neale Hurston’s debt to the oral tradition of Eatonville, Florida. Rimbaud’s “we must be absolutely modern” (Rimbaud [1967], 209) conceals the intensity of the modernist obsession with the past. In fact, it exists alongside such credos of recovery as Virginia Woolf’s “we think back through our mothers if we are women” (Woolf [1989], 76). This essay starts by recognizing the variety in modernist engagements with the past: contending that, although the terms used to discuss the role of tradition in modernism have often assumed an almost exclusively Eliotic cast, the relation of modernist writers to their past is far richer, more complex, and more contentious than the contrast between Rimbaud and Woolf’s aphorisms makes it seem.

What distinguishes modernist writers’ understanding of tradition from how pre-twentieth-century writers understood it? Technological and epistemological changes of the period made it increasingly difficult for modernists to assert the existence of a "great tradition." (That is clearly part of the fun for F.R. Leavis, anti-modernist author of a book by that title.) At the same time, increased interest in Asia, Africa, and the Americas fed a popular enthusiasm for non-European cultures and traditions. Thus, judgments of the past became self-consciously contingent and individual rather than the more confidently prescriptive judgments of earlier cultural arbiters. In short, unmooring tradition from progress, greatness, and a more certain notion of the canon’s fixity meant that tradition became a *problem*, rather than a fact.

Furthermore, all these changes to historical and cultural understanding transformed the past into a commodity. The notion of the past as a thing, traces of which one could manufacture (as with furniture), or perform (as with folk dance), collect (as with museums), restore (as with heritage sites), and consume (as with all these things) gained significant ground in Europe and the Americas in the late nineteenth century. In turn, this commodification of the past made it possible, in Eric Hobsbawm’s formulation, to *invent* tradition. In fact, Hobsbawm argues that the period from 1870 to 1914 saw a particularly rapid proliferation of what he calls invented traditions (Hobsbawm [1983b], 263). For Hobsbawm, invented tradition includes “both ‘traditions’ actually invented, constructed and formally instituted and those emerging in a less easily traceable manner within a brief
and dateable period—a matter of a few years perhaps—and establishing themselves with great rapidity” (Hobsbawm [1983a], 1). As cultural phenomena, these invented traditions are deeply intertwined with the emergence of the modern nation-state as well as with broader social changes of the period (Hobsbawm [1983b], 263). Hobsbawm’s social focus contains important implications for individual writers. For them, the proliferation of invented traditions made it seem possible to create a choice of inheritance. Rather than feeling, as, for example, Matthew Arnold did, that there was a coherent tradition which all citizens of a nation inherited, the modernists saw a vaster and more diverse array of fragments from the past from which to choose. All of which brings us back to the problem of tradition: as a thing, and a thing that could be invented or exchanged, the modernists all had to determine, consciously, what his or her relationship to tradition would be.

In his entry on “tradition” in Keywords, Raymond Williams emphasizes the negative connotation of the word and its variants, particularly the adjectival traditional (Williams [1983], 319–20). It is not my intent to dispute the connotation, but to look behind it. When modernists worked to eschew the traditional, they sought to avoid the genteel, the bourgeois, the predictable; they did not repudiate the past. In general the modernists favored a simultaneously heroic and ironized recovery of the socially or geographically distant or taboo while rejecting any signs of obedience to the dictates of the traditions and customs of the recent, local, and accepted. The notion of literary tradition that the modernists adopted was distinctly oppositional: it was not a continuation of the reader’s world, but a disruption of it.

A conflict between modernism and other elements of modernity was, from the start, a central element of modernism’s self-understanding and, consequently, has had continued importance to readers of modernism. At the moment of mass culture’s emergence, writers confronted the restructuring of their audience from elite to mass, from citizens to consumers. In Axel’s Castle (1931), one of the first studies of modernism, Edmund Wilson claims that the only available positions for a writer in his time are withdrawal and exile (Wilson [1953], 287–8). But Wilson’s two versions of alienation oversimplify the wide range of responses within individual writers’ careers. In fact, his example of exile is Rimbaud, whose aphorism, “we must be absolutely modern,” inspired subsequent writers to embrace the modern world from which he ultimately exiled himself. Ambivalence about the modern lies at the heart of literary modernism and the difficulty of generalizing a modernist attitude to the present parallels the complexity of the modernists’ engagement with the past. What unites these writers, however, is the widespread belief, pace Wilson, that one could legitimately choose exile, withdrawal, engagement, or, even some happy combination of all three. And that one might, through reading in forgotten, neglected, or foreign traditions, make productive comments about modernity.

Few exemplify the apparent paradox of anti-modern modernity more dramatically than Sigmund Freud, who created modern psychoanalysis in a conventional bourgeois study filled with antiquities. Freud’s groundbreaking and quintessentially modern discoveries were based on the notion that the past could be recovered. Freud analogized his work to archaeology and for one of Freud’s patients, the American poet H.D., the antiquities in his study were continuous with his psychoanalytic work: “Thoughts were things, to be collected, collated, analysed, shelved or resolved. Fragmentary ideas, apparently unrelated, were often found to be part of a special layer or stratum of thought and memory, therefore to belong together” (H.D. [1984], 14). H.D.’s list—”collected, collated, analysed, shelved or resolved”—is instructive: it bespeaks a confidence in the power of
psychoanalysis (perhaps beyond Freud’s own) to master thoughts and memories. The final two terms, “shelved or resolved” suggest a satisfying finality: anything disturbing or aberrant can be put away, relegated to the back of the case, or explained, reclassified until it fits the existing rubric of the collection. If “thoughts are things” that can be catalogued, then they may be less troubling to us. What H.D. neglects to mention here is nonetheless strongly implied: if thoughts and memory can “sometimes” be pieced together, sometimes they cannot. Freud could determine “the main theme of his collection: non-fragmentary pieces from ancient Rome, Greece, and Egypt” (Forrester [1994], 227), and set about acquiring appropriate items, but the work of collecting a coherent narrative from the fragments of the past proved more difficult. His interest in the non-fragmentary relic sets him apart from modernists of subsequent generations, from H.D., for example, who collected and celebrated the fragments of Sappho as her poetic heritage, and from T. S. Eliot, who felt that only fragments remained.

For writers seeking to order this profusion and confusion of traditions, psychological fiction, especially experiments in capturing the “stream of consciousness,” became one important method for selecting among the fragments of the modern world. The choice that Woolf, Joyce, and, above all, Proust, made to recover and record everything of significance to an individual mind highlights the intense individualism of the period. In The Waves (1931), Ulysses (1922), and A la Recherche du temps Perdu (Remembrance of Things Past) from 1913–27, what counts as important is what happens to the center(s) of consciousness of the work; what counts as the useable past is the motley collection of texts and memories that capture, however fleetingly, that mind’s attention. When Proust compares the flood of memory brought on by the madeleine to Japanese paper flowers floating in a bowl, he is capturing a fashion. He offers something of interest to cultural historians who can note a displacement of a Japanese custom onto French culture, inaugurated by the arrival of Japanese woodcuts in Europe, solidified by their transformation in the paintings of Van Gogh, Gauguin, and Manet:

And as in the game wherein the Japanese amuse themselves by filling a porcelain bowl with water and steeping in it little pieces of paper which until then are without character or form, but, the moment they become wet, stretch themselves and bend, take on color and distinctive shape, become flowers or houses or people, permanent and recognizable, so in that moment all the flowers in our garden […] and the whole of Combray and of its surroundings […] sprang into being, town and gardens alike, from my cup of tea.  (Proust [1981], vol. I, 51)²

The moment is ripe with orientalism, but Proust’s interest in it is not even quasi-scholarly. And Japonerie is not the moment’s importance for Proust. To him, the metaphor matters because it is exotic, beautiful, was experienced by him, and helps him explain his own experience.

As Proust shows, tradition survives through memory. Trade and empires introduce people to other traditions, separate in place but simultaneous. Philology and history teach people about traditions long forgotten; anthropology, archaeology, and psychology, with their interest in human origins and the distant past, suggest a shared past, and, especially in the early twentieth century, perhaps even a shared origin for apparently diverse traditions. Thus, along with Proust and Freud, many modernists believed that any individual’s unconscious may well contain the memory traces of a shared human tradition. If this is truly the case, they believed, one reasonable way to go about preserving the tradition of a culture would be to make a thorough catalogue of the memories of one individual mind.
Thus Proust’s project, and the novel of introspection and psychological depth generally, becomes another way of telling the story of modernism and tradition.

Eliot opens “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919), by attempting to revive the idea of tradition as a key term, a goal that this essay shares, in spite of its critical stance on Eliot. As Eliot austerely puts it, tradition “cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labor” (Eliot [1975], 38). Until quite recently, critics used his work, and perhaps Harold Bloom’s The Anxiety of Influence (1973), as models through which to explain modernism’s relationship to its past. The work of John Guillory and Wai-Chee Dimock, in which questions of tradition intersect with questions of canon, proves particularly helpful in re-mapping this terrain in terms other than the more narrowly Oedipal ones of Eliot and Bloom. In Cultural Capital (1993), Guillory moves away from judgment of individual works, focusing instead on the process and history of canonization. In fact, for Guillory “the question of judgment is the wrong question […] The work of preservation has other more complex social contexts than the immediate responses of readers to texts” (Guillory [1995], 237). Guillory’s work, through his use of Bourdieu, provides a means to analyze the contexts that led to a range of modernist interaction with traditions, as well as the canon-making public reception of these results. Where Guillory works to unseat Matthew Arnold and T. S. Eliot, Wai-Chee Dimock positions herself against Harold Bloom’s idea that texts survive because of their success in the battle for immortality. Instead, she links “literary endurance […] not to the text’s timeless strength but to something like its timeful unwieldiness” (Dimock [1997], 1062). Transforming the physics of resonance into a metaphor for the way we read literature, she demonstrates the important ways in which cultural “background noise” can make the previously inaudible audible, and how this, in turn, transforms the meanings of texts over time.

Each of the modernists labored to make tradition their own. For each, the problem of tradition was central, but overall responses to the tension between tradition and innovation were diverse. Among the strategies adopted, the best known are the twin projects of erasure and recovery: the attempt by writers such as Baudelaire and Stein to conceal their debt to precursors, and the recovery efforts of writers such as Eliot, Joyce, and the philosopher Walter Benjamin who present themselves as cultural heroes, saving bits of the past from destruction. By contrast, those who straddle the border between realism and modernism, such as Henrik Ibsen, Nella Larsen, and R. K. Narayan, often adhered to traditional narrative forms in their thematically experimental works, while Zora Neale Hurston and D. H. Lawrence introduced a vernacular tradition into artistically ambitious texts. Finally, in later modernism, writers examined the politics of these choices and began to develop a politics of citation that was about canonizing modernism and its antecedents. Some chose the integrative strategies of the blues aesthetic, demonstrating, for example, that African-American voices have always been part of American literature, by blacks and whites (a position developed by Ralph Ellison), while others chose separatism, showing how women novelists have forged their own literary genealogy (as Virginia Woolf did).

In outlining these four broad strategies, my goal has been to show the diverse range of responses to tradition and thereby to suggest the range of questions scholars might pursue once tradition becomes visible to us as it was to the modernists themselves—as an array of discrete fragments, even a commodity. Many of the writers whose texts I discuss as exemplifying one strategy were equally adept at another. This hazard, inherent to any brief survey, only emphasizes the serious play with tradition, which, I want to argue, is an unacknowledged organizing principle of modernism.
Erasure and Recovery

Those who worked to erase signs from the past in their work—Marinetti, Stein, Baudelaire—were among the most intense and important formal experimenters of modernism. Those who collected and worked to recover and preserve traces of the past that were being lost in the rapid drive to modernization—Joyce, Eliot, Benjamin—were, also, among modernism’s most important formal experimenters. These approaches to the past are responsible for many of the most recognizable modernist texts. At first, the impulse to erase or obscure one’s debt to the past would seem to run counter to the effort to recover it, but both impulses rely on a distinctly modern understanding of what tradition is.

Where Freud collected the ancient, Gertrude Stein collected the contemporary. Her collection of early cubist painting and sculpture helped define her moment. In collecting Cezanne, Matisse, and Picasso, she announced her belief in the art of the present just as, in her writing, she sought to erase signs of her own debt to literary and philosophical precursors. Though her approach to literature shows the influence of Henry and William James, Walt Whitman, and other American individuals, it is hard to see the traces of this in such texts as Tender Buttons (1914), with fragments such as “PEELED PENCIL, CHoke / Rub her coke” (Stein [1990], 476). The logic here is elusive in both its representation and its origin. How is a peeled pencil like a sharpened one? Is the choke a start—like the choke to the engine of one of Stein’s beloved automobiles—or an end, like the cough of a speaker who has lost her words? Like Stein’s most famous statement, “rose is a rose is a rose is a rose” (Stein [1933], 169), this moment resists the leap to metaphor and refuses to hold our hands in simile—as Robert Burns does with “O My Luve’s like a red, red rose” (Burns [2002], 113). And, just as “rose is a rose is a rose is a rose” cuts its ties with tradition by announcing how it is different from its precursors, “Peeled pencil, choke” announces its difference from the metaphorical, and by comparison, sentimental, imagist poems that immediately preceded it.

Even texts such as the opera Four Saints in Three Acts (1934), which seem to announce their interest in specific historic figures, zero in on such tiny details of their lives—or what their reputation conjures—that the connection between the text and any information one might glean about St. Theresa of Avila or St. Ignatius of Loyola is loose indeed. Stein’s celebration of language in its own right, of words, sounds, and her own power to manipulate them is possible because she feels more responsible to be an originator than a successor. For Stein, the lesson that prior masterpieces teach is not specific; it is the general lesson of their own existence: “The manner and habits of Bible times or Greek or Chinese have nothing to do with ours today but the master-pieces exist just the same and they do not exist because of their identity [...] they exist because they came to be as something that is an end in itself” (Stein [1998], 358). Stein’s goal is to produce writing “that is an end in itself” in the modern way.

In the final verse paragraph of The Waste Land (1922), there is only one line that is not a quotation or adaptation: “These fragments I have shored against my ruins” (Eliot [1930], 46). Where Stein worked to erase her debt to precursors, Eliot strove anxiously to preserve his. (His sense that his contemporaries were losing touch with their past earned the derision of Rebecca West, who thought only an American could hold the delusion that Europe was anything other than shackled to its past [West (1990), 591].) From exile in Paris, James Joyce worked to reconstruct the Dublin of 1904 in Ulysses.
In spite of all the differences between them, the striking fact remains that both Joyce and Eliot share a sense that it is possible, modern, and intensely imaginative to transform texts of any kind, from any available cultural source, to serve one’s own purposes. Where Joyce enriches tradition by combining all of Irish culture, from the most arcane to the most banal, into a single text, Eliot combs Europe, the Middle East, and India for legends and quotations and tops it off with a little jazz and urban anomie. For both writers, tradition is not simple and emphatically not a blood inheritance (the Irish speakers in Ulysses are English), but the inheritance that comes from reading and observing.

For philosopher Walter Benjamin translation is a process of recovery, one fundamentally engaged in “coming to terms with the foreignness of languages” (Benjamin [1968], 75). For him, translation is “charged with the special mission of watching over the maturing process of the original language and the birth pangs of its own” (Benjamin [1968], 73). Thus, good translation both recovers and transforms. What he admires in Hölderlin’s translation of Sophocles is that, by showing the seams of translation, Hölderlin shows how philological labor is creative and modern, how the project of reviving the foreign or the ancient adds something new to the language. Where Benjamin’s translator takes fragments of language and shapes them into a vessel, in “On Not Knowing Greek” (1925), Virginia Woolf pauses over the fragments themselves and marvels at the untranslatability of words. Recently, Page DuBois, too, asked us to look at the fact of the fragment before projecting it into its whole state. She compares fragments of text to the mutilated “bodies” of statues (DuBois [1997], 37). DuBois, like Woolf, wants us to pause over failure before we imagine “intention” (Benjamin [1968], 76). Benjamin’s notion of translation, especially as tempered by feminist skepticism about the possibility of recovering the fragment, brings together the projects of erasure and recovery, showing how these two prominent ideas of tradition are linked, and how both persist in casting the individual author as the heroic preserver/transformer of civilization. Like Joyce and Eliot, Benjamin’s innovation lies in creative intertextuality; like Nietzsche, Derrida, and Barthes, Benjamin’s best work permits the aesthetic and the theoretical to infiltrate each other. As literary artists of the period asked us to rethink the national, racial, social, and temporal boundaries of tradition, so critics like Benjamin and Woolf deliberately resisted the newly emergent disciplinary boundaries that would seek to separate art from philosophy.

Modern Themes, Realist Plots

Ultimately, the most socially subversive literature of modernism may not have been the most formally experimental. Broad audiences immediately recognized the texts that used familiar narrative structures to explore modern themes as new. The social changes they described—and helped usher in—in many instances came quickly thereafter. Through recognizable characters in familiar settings, Henrik Ibsen, Nella Larsen, R. K. Narayan, and Franz Kafka raised questions about the conventions and customs of their world. Their most important relationship to the past is not mediated through text; they challenge custom and tradition as lived experiences. Their stories, whose meanings were initially shocking, subsequently became so plain that the texts faded from the modernist canon. Now, a few generations later, the elliptical minimalism, the “scrupulous meanness” (Joyce [1966], vol. 2, 134) of these texts reveals the degree to which they depended on a thorough acquaintance with the very customs they challenged. In fact, as time passes, it may be these texts calling for
social change that are shown to have had the widest impact on the history of art and society. The changing times have made them resonate—to adopt Wai-Chee Dimock’s term—differently for us: initially revolutionary, they quickly seemed tame; now, strange again, we may once more be able to see what was initially so modern about them. In turn, a renewed sense of the modernity of these texts may expand the scope of what we call modernist to include texts with a self-conscious and critical stance toward lived tradition and social custom, a stance that is more individualistic and less rigorously mimetic than the texts of realism but less revolutionary than those of the avant-garde.

Take, for example, any of the stories from Joyce’s *Dubliners* (1914). His technique of scrupulous meanness creates stories that do not so much end as stop. When Eveline cannot board the ship with Frank and stands on the quay like a terrified animal or when Mr. Doran prepares to meet his pregnant lover’s mother at the end of “The Boarding House,” their fate is meant to be clear. Eveline will never leave Dublin; Mr. Doran and Polly will accept their entrapment into marriage (and their varying degrees of complicity in it). Ibsen offers more closure when Nora leaves Helmer at the end of *Et dukkehjem* (A Doll’s House) from 1879, but she leaves her husband and children not to return until the “miracle of miracles:” “when we could make a real marriage of our lives together” (Ibsen [1961a], 286). It is clear enough that Ibsen, like Nora, does not “believe in miracles anymore” (286). Still, her decision to leave a marriage where her value is only as a doll, not a partner, was scandalous enough so that, under strong pressure, and aware of the “barbaric outrage” (Ibsen [1961b], 454) he was committing, Ibsen wrote an alternative ending for the German theatre, in which Helmer persuades Nora not to leave her children “motherless” (Ibsen [1961a], 287).

Here, the most important traditions being questioned are the social ones. In this, the theater led the way, where dramatists used prose (instead of the more traditional verse) to explore contemporary social problems. A similar commitment to questioning social codes permeates the early novels of Rebecca West, who took her pen name from the heroine of Ibsen’s *Rosmersholm* (1887). Her first novel, *The Return of the Soldier* (1917), was written during the war while she lived in a country house with her son (whose father, H. G. Wells, remained with his wife and family). *The Return of the Soldier* is one of the first novels to deal with psychoanalytic treatment for shell shock. This work, and her second novel, *The Judge* (1922), both explore the obstacles to love across social class boundaries. *The Judge*, which treats single motherhood across two generations, ends with the young suffragette heroine, Ellen Melville, suspecting that she is pregnant and accepting it as her fate (West [1980], 430).

Modern as these texts are, are they modernist? Answering that question while preserving the distinction between modernism and modernity does not preclude rethinking how we define modernism. Neither form nor chronology alone is sufficient. If we include the desire to break with social convention among the several signs that contribute to making a text modernist, we can reintegrate into the critical discourse on modernism the social urgency that motivated some modernists (and distinguished their projects from aestheticism). The social problems that Joyce and West were exploring—unwanted pregnancy, unequal and unhappy marriage, the suffocation of provincial life—were already being treated in the realist literature written just prior to and during this period. But the modernist contribution here, with its focus on the heavy toll social custom takes on the individual psyche reveals another facet of the modernist ambivalence to tradition. Furthermore, distinctions among modernism, realism, and naturalism remain. Unlike naturalist novels, with their sense of custom as a veneer and their intense interest in the contours of a character’s descent or rise,
modernist texts take custom seriously as an evil influence, and, at the same time, retain some belief in the individual’s potential to shape her or his destiny. That is, for all of these characters—Eve-line, Polly and Mr. Doran, Nora, and Ellen Melville—there came a moment when they held their future in their own hands. For their part, realist novels carefully delineate the whole social context in which characters operate. To the realist novelist, customs may be limiting but they are not necessarily repressive, and they function within a larger and more populated context. In contrast, the modernist attack on custom focuses on the spirited individual with enough imagination to discern his or her own entrapment. Ultimately, *A Doll’s House* is not modernist drama, though Ibsen—like Thomas Hardy, Anton Chekhov, and Henry James—plays an essential role in the early history of modernism for helping shape modernism’s social conscience.

Social acceptance of the complexities of race has not made such rapid progress and so the novels of Nella Larsen, especially *Passing* (1929), have suffered a different fate. *Passing*, which explores the tense, homoerotic friendship between two light-skinned, bourgeois black women, one of whom is “passing” for white, was initially praised, then neglected for decades, and is now enjoying a critical resurgence. *Passing* still seems modern—even modernist—in large measure because its treatment of homosexuality and race as social constructs remain relevant to us, three-quarters of a century after its publication. Both *The Return of the Soldier* and *Passing* explore erotically charged relationships between women, both contain discussions of modernist taste in art, clothing, and interior design, both have moments of high modernist metaphor within their fairly linear narratives, both explore the effects of social change on gender roles, in and out of marriage. But West’s criticism of rigid social class boundaries and sympathetic treatment of psychic trauma have become accepted and commonly held middle class attitudes. In contrast, Larsen’s trenchant criticism of a systematic racism that, by forcing people to choose a race (and thus, the role of oppressor or oppres sor), encourages some non-whites to cut ties with their families in order to enjoy the social and economic opportunities of the dominant race, is a story that continues to have emotional and political force today, as does her portrait of the crushing power of sexual repression and the closet. *Passing’s* continued importance, then, indicates our social failure.

Another way to judge the impact of these thematically daring works is by turning to literature from colonized peoples and to some of the first postcolonial texts. In many of these, the first generation of Western-educated men and women marked their passage from the communal world of the village to a national (if not international) bourgeois individualism through realist tales of heretofore undocumented lives. In seeking the edges of what counts as modernism, we would do well to reassess the work of writers from the colonial world, such as R. K. Narayan, Chinua Achebe, Aimé Cesaire, and C. L. R. James. They present a different challenge to the question of modernism and tradition, for they pursued the language and literary models of the colonial power over and above the predominant and traditional forms of artistic expression from their homelands.

Rather than attempting to “play to the metropolitan culture’s […] perception” (Mishra [2001], 45) by writing orientalist prose, R. K. Narayan borrowed a foreign model, the social realism of English novels, for his art. The opening of *Swami and Friends*, while firmly realist in form, shows the seams of moving between two worlds: “It was Monday morning. Swaminathan was reluctant to open his eyes. He considered Monday specially unpleasant in the calendar. After the delicious freedom of Saturday and Sunday, it was difficult to get into the Monday mood of work and discipline” (Narayan [1980], 1). Everything here, from the repressed emotion of “specially unpleasant”
to the Christian shape of his week, indicates middle-class England. The boy’s name is the only sign that we are elsewhere. As the novel progresses and we enter Swami’s schoolboy world, the tensions among traditions, between India and England, Hindu and Christian, authority and rebellion, emerge again and again. Swami admires both Gandhi and his friend whose father is chief of imperial police; he adores cricket and idolizes its English stars; enrolled in a Christian school, he has a Brahmin boy’s doubts of Jesus’s divinity, for any God must surely be a vegetarian. Throughout, we see the effects of fragmented, commodified traditions on the life of an ordinary colonial boy.

In *Die Verwandlung* (Metamorphosis) from 1915, we reach another kind of limit to the ways that writers stretched the generic boundaries that would seem to separate realism, modernism, and the avant-garde. Franz Kafka’s Gregor Samsa, too, dreads beginning his weekly routine, though for vastly different reasons. The allegorical literature of modernism, in which a basically realist story contains one or two outlandishly fantastic elements — a protagonist who turns into a beetle-like vermin or one who remembers everything — present a philosophical and epistemological challenge to tradition. Kafka and Jorge Luis Borges are the clear masters of this style and in their works the pressures of tradition and custom on the individual are pushed to their limits.

Typically, social change is attributed to broad and rapid historical trends: changes in industry, urbanization, and the expansion of educational opportunities. As the American and French Revolutions continued to teach the modernists, it was possible to remain within one’s discursive tradition and yet to utterly reject a fundamental fact of it as traditional and entrenched as the monarchy itself. As customs became visible as things, constructed and invented, then they could be abandoned when they no longer served their purpose. Where, two centuries earlier, revolutionaries focused their attention on authoritarian governments, in the early twentieth century, writers focused on the persistence of authoritative thinking in social custom and familial structure. Texts that question tradition as it is lived play an absolutely central role in making tradition visible. This is true even of the early drama and the late-colonial and early postcolonial literature, texts that stand just on the border of modernism. As part of the commodification of the past, perhaps few texts are as important as these, for they examine what society takes for granted and show its artifice and its undesirability.

**Vernacular Traditions**

Closely connected to those texts with modernist themes, but operating in a slightly different cultural register, were those texts that self-consciously incorporated vernacular traditions into their high modernist discourse. Many of these works were in conscious dialogue with the emergent field of anthropology. But our ability to see this connection should not blind us to the mixed reception of these works when first published.

In 1926, Langston Hughes published “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” to encourage other African-American writers to acknowledge their heritage in their work. In doing so, he marked the difficulty of the endeavor:

> The Negro artist works against an undertow of sharp criticism and misunderstanding from his own group and unintentional bribes from the whites […] Both would have told Jean Toomer not to write Cane. The colored people did not praise it. The white people did not buy it. (Hughes [1998], 420)
Few careers exemplify what it might mean to overcome the dual obstacles of misunderstandings from other blacks and the condescension and worse of whites than Hughes’s sometime friend and collaborator, Zora Neale Hurston. Furthermore, Hurston’s reception well illustrates the principles of resonance, for, until Barbara Johnson’s “Metaphor, Metonymy and Voice” (1984), critics heard the difference between Janie’s speech (largely in the vernacular) and the narrative (standard written English, full of high-modernist metaphor) as a flaw in the novel’s style or a marker of Janie’s social class rather than as evidence of Hurston’s liberating and celebratory incorporation of multiple traditions.

In terms of tradition, what makes Hurston important is her modern, intellectual, and professional relationship to the folk tradition she documents (in work such as *Mules and Men*, 1935) and transforms (most notably in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, 1937) and her ability to blend that tradition with the literary innovations of modernism. Throughout the thirties, she “worked closely with a number of prominent Boasians, including Melville Herskovits […] and Ruth Benedict” (Gambrell [1997], 101), and *Mules and Men* was a distinctly Boasian project. Nonetheless, Boas’s preface singles out her access — “she entered into the homely life of the southern Negro as one of them” (Boas [1978], x) — and her “loveable personality” (Boas [1978], x), not her intelligence or acumen.

Like Hurston, whose work moves among all her worlds — Harlem, Columbia University, Eatonville, Florida — D. H. Lawrence combines the worlds of the miner, the bohemian Londoner, and the exile while focusing on the pain of being trapped in a working class world and of leaving it behind. In stories such as “Odour of Chrysanthemums,” Lawrence (like Hurston) moves from detailed aestheticized description to dialect, as in this scene where Elizabeth Bates solicits another miner, Rigley’s, help in looking for her alcoholic husband, not yet knowing he has been killed in the pit:

*Rigley was big man, with very large bones. His head looked particularly bony. Across his temple was a blue scar, caused by a wound got in the pit, a wound in which the coal dust remained blue like tattooing. “Asna’ e come whoam yit?” asked the man, without any greeting, but with deference and sympathy.* (Lawrence [1974], 292)

Our introduction to the man teaches us to admire him first as a physical specimen. Lawrence presents his speech authentically, and then teaches us how to hear it. Rigley is handsome and scarred by work; he is abrupt, but respectful and sympathetic — and, in the European canon, few emotions rank higher than sympathy, which he expresses.

Later, as the pregnant Elizabeth examines her husband’s corpse, she experiences an isolating sexual anguish: “she knew what a stranger he was to her. In her womb was ice of fear, because of this separate stranger with whom she had been living as one flesh” (Lawrence [1974], 300). Like Hurston and like Thomas Hardy, from whom Lawrence learned so much, Lawrence emphasizes the spiritual, emotional, and intellectual depth of his uneducated characters. And when he writes about a middle-class character, he still finds ways to incorporate the vernacular: as a story of origin in *The Rainbow* (1915) and *Women in Love* (1920), as a topic of personal and anthropological interest in *Women in Love, Kangaroo* (1923), and *The Plumed Serpent* (1926), or, most notoriously, as objects of desire, as in *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* (1928).

While Hurston and Lawrence welcomed the opportunity to combine urban modernism with elements of a rural folk tradition, the Irish literary revival maintained a more skeptical stance toward the modern. Thus, in William Butler Yeats’s most famous lyric, “The Lake Isle of Innisfree,” he may
be “on the roadway, or on the pavements grey” (Yeats [1983], 39) but even there he hears “lake water lapping” “in the deep heart’s core” (Yeats [1983], 39). For Seamus Deane, this effort to reject the modern is central to the emergence of a distinctively Irish national literature:

Ireland would become a nation by recovering its traditions and refusing both modernization and modernity. The irony is that such a refusal, variously formulated by many writers, was itself one of the critical features of modernity. Tradition, once conceptualized in this fashion, was already lost; modernity, once refused and dismissed was already in place. (Deane [1995], 364)

For Gayatri Spivak, women of the developing world are especially trapped in this paradox: “Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the ‘third world woman’ caught between tradition and modernization” (Spivak [1988], 306). Both Spivak and Deane re-inscribe the oppositional relationship between tradition and the modern, even modernism. Writers who incorporated the vernacular into their work thematized and lived the “violent shuttling” between worlds that Spivak describes. In doing so, however, they changed both worlds. Hurston and Lawrence each effected a recovery from within. These writers profited from a more flexible notion of tradition by asserting the centrality of their own traditions and, in writing work that integrated highbrow modernist techniques with their own vernacular, they expanded the boundaries of tradition.

Integration and Separatism

In “Figurations for a New American Literary History,” Houston Baker contrasts the racial and racist orthodoxies that constrained American literary history for generations with the investigative openness of paleontology. While literary historians trapped themselves in a notion of ever-refining, ever-progressing Eurocentric tradition, scientists could continually revise what they knew as new evidence arose: if what was first thought to be a tooth turned out to be a thumb spike, as in Baker’s example, then so be it. No orthodoxies need be disrupted; science advances. But when early literary historians of the United States began to include Native American and African-American literature in their accounts, they confined those texts to appendices, ignoring (even rejecting) the possibility of integrating more than one tradition into their grand narrative of American national development. Extending Baker’s analogy beyond the borders of the United States, might we not, by opening the definition of tradition to new resonances, find new ways to understand how tradition operates within modernism? If, in doing so, we unseat some old orthodoxies about how tradition operates or what counts as tradition, then all the better. Like Wai-Chee Dimock, Baker celebrates the present discovery that alters how we read the past.

Rita Felski argues that, while “modernism […] can be situated in historical time” (Felski [1995], 22) there is much less agreement regarding the movement’s sociopolitical consequences (Felski [1995], 23). Nonetheless, for Felski, whether we are looking at the more political tradition of the Continent or the rarefied aestheticism of the Anglo-American context, “[b]oth of these traditions, nevertheless, are united in their largely uncritical reproduction of a masculine—and often overtly masculinist—literary lineage” (Felski [1995], 24). For Felski, however, “the feminist critique of
literary history is best achieved not by denying the existence of formal and aesthetic distinctions between texts [as those who would erase the distinction between modern and modernist might have it], but rather by questioning and rethinking the meanings that are frequently assigned to these distinctions” (Felski [1995], 25).

Both Houston Baker and Rita Felski have explicit theoretical goals related to identity categories (race or gender). In this pursuit, their precursors are Ralph Ellison and Virginia Woolf, who first showed us that, if the past is a commodity, it is possible to work with it and use it to construct a tradition amenable to one’s aesthetic and political goals and, in the case of both these writers, a tradition which seems to come to its natural culmination in one’s own work. For if the best literature, for Ellison, combines the alienation and existential angst of European philosophical modernism with a blues sensibility, then is not *Invisible Man* (1954) the best novel? Or if the best literature, for Woolf, finds a way to express the heretofore unheard voice of Judith Shakespeare, does that voice not find its way into print in *A Room of One’s Own* (1929)?

The tense discussions about jazz that ensue between the invisible man and his white communist companions signal the complexity of Ellison’s integrationist vision. While the invisible man is rightly insulted at the implication that any black man naturally has the voice of a Paul Robeson (Ellison [1995], 312), his story closes by linking Louis Armstrong to existentialism, by claiming that Armstrong’s performance contains the knowledge of existential doubt and pain (Ellison [1995], 580–1). This claim, so bold then, has become apparent to us now. But we see African-American literature as part of the American inheritance in a large measure thanks to writers such as Ellison.

In *A Room of One’s Own*, Virginia Woolf argued that women have a different experience of the world from men and that literature by women should be expected to be different—in subject and in style—and thereby be judged by different criteria. Though Woolf herself profited greatly from her close study of precursors of both sexes and though she argued—in the same text—that the very greatest works of literature were the products of androgynous minds, her statement that “we think back through our mothers if we are women” and her account in *A Room of One’s Own* of the history of English literature as written by women made visible a tradition that had been present all along. Her impact has been stunning, though, like Ellison’s it is by now quite familiar, inspiring multitudinous studies, from the philological (for instance Margaret J. M. Ezell’s *Writing Women’s Literary History*, 1993) to the personal (for instance Alice Walker’s *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*, 1984), all aimed at giving wider recognition to the long-neglected voices of women.

Though their emphases are different, both Ellison and Woolf make similar, highly individual modernist claims: that their intelligence and their experience count, in all its particularity and in all its centrality. In both cases, this is a cosmopolitan and highly politicized gesture. It is one that subsequent writers have distanced themselves from. Yet it cannot be denied that, in Ellison’s insistence on the always-already presence of African-Americans in American literature, in Woolf’s tracing of a woman’s tradition of writing, they both showed their followers a new way of arranging the canon. In so doing, they remade tradition.

In their manifestoes, if not always in their aesthetic texts, the modernist pioneers sought to shake off the burden of the past. The effect of this unburdening was as if an ancient vase had shattered on the floor. Faced with a mass of fragments, writers adopted very different strategies. Some felt liberated, as had been the intent of the vase-breakers. Others became anxious curators. But most strug-
gled to find some workable compromise, choosing to save some fragments from their own past, some from the past of other cultures or the disenfranchised segments of their own. In every case, what the modernists shared was the consciousness of the past as a commodity that they could manipulate, construct, use, or abandon. While the modernists actively resisted anything traditional in their work, they mined the past for heretofore-overlooked models of innovation and imagination. In so doing, they ushered in a broader and more flexible notion of the past while advocating a radically individual understanding of tradition. And that notion lies at the heart of modernism’s complex bequest to us.

Notes

1. “Il faut être absolument moderne” (Rimbaud [1967], 208).
2. “Et comme dans ce jeu où les Japonais s’amusent à tremper dans un bol de procelaine rempli d’eau, de petits morceaux de papier jusqu’là indistincts qui, à peine y sont-ils plongés, s’étirent, se contournent, se colorent, se différencient, deviennent des fleurs, des maisons, des personnages constants et reconnaissables, de même maintenant toutes les fleurs de notre jardin […] et tout Combray et ses environs […] est sorti, ville et jardins, de ma tasse de thé” (Proust [1919], vol. I, 73).
3. “sich mit der Fremdheit der Sprachen auseinanderzusetzen” (Benjamin [1992], 56).
4. “das gerade unter allen Formen ihr als Eigenstes es zufällt, auf jene Nachreife des fremden Wortes, auf die Wehen des eigenen zu merken” (Benjamin [1992], 55).

Bibliography


