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The New Modernist Studies: What’s Left of Political Formalism?

In their 2008 *PMLA* article “The New Modernist Studies,” Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz simultaneously chart and promote the development of the New Modernist Studies (NMS), a critical movement of which they are the leading spokespeople and practitioners. In the beginning of their piece, Mao and Walkowitz announce that “[w]ere one seeking a single word to sum up transformations in modern literary scholarship over the past decade or two, one could do worse than light on expansion” (737; emphasis in original). They then go on to specify the significance of these transformations for the study of modernism and modernity, honing in on what they call the NMS’s “spatial” and “vertical” expansion. By spatial expansion, they mean NMS critics’ move away from national traditions toward conceptualizations of transnational ones; by vertical expansion, a parallel move away from modernist elitism toward a pluralistic opening up of criticism to popular culture, “works by marginalized social groups,” and a new focus on “matters of production, dissemination, and reception” (738). Given that these critics claim new interest in the way institutional and empirical economic contexts have shaped modernist works, the time is nigh to consider how and why the work of the NMS has emerged out of our contemporary economic, political, and institutional academic situation. By doing so below, I politicize and extend Jennifer Wicke’s prescient (2001) suggestion that “[a]s revivers of its brand [modernism], a brand we cannot seem to do without, we rebrand ourselves as critics and theorists just as we rebrand modernist others” (395). By considering the consolidation of the NMS brand, we can gauge the theoretical distortion and political flattening that too often accompany the transformation of a critical movement into a marketable intellectual commodity.

Here I historicize the form and content of the NMS by reading three of its symptomatic works: Martin Puchner’s *Poetry of the Revolution: Marx, Manifestos, and the Avant-Gardes* (winner of the 2006 MLA James Russell Lowell Prize) and two programmatic self-assessments of the movement by its unofficial spokespersons, Mao and Walkowitz—their 2006 introduction to the collection *Bad Modernisms* and the
aforementioned 2008 “The New Modernist Studies.” In other words, I unearth the methodological assumptions and political negotiations implicit in the work of this loosely aggregated group of critics, providing a politically minded formalist and theoretical reading of the movement’s contextual situation.

To do so, I focus on its work on and in the form of the manifesto genre. This is not only because Puchner’s book on manifestos, *Poetry of the Revolution*, is the most well known and well reviewed book to come out of the movement, but also because Mao and Walkowitz’s two survey articles on the NMS, insofar as they announce and proclaim the existence of a new movement, represent a faint academic echo of the manifesto’s herding of the New’s entrance into the world—if not the manifesto’s experimental form or radical politics. Considering this set of circumstances, it makes sense to look at the NMS’s work on and in the manifesto form in order to read through to its underlying theoretical and political investments.¹

The NMS and the more general interest in “constituting” documents can be understood only by means of a dialectical contextualization of their rise in relation to the declining status of institutionalized literary criticism and its traditional objects of study.² Critics such as Puchner, Walkowitz, and Mao have become more and more interested in considering literature of the past two centuries as an active, affirmative agent in the real world, an intellectual speech act, as our contemporary literature and literary criticism themselves have become more and more marginal to today’s politics, philosophy, and economics. Re-auratized works like *The Communist Manifesto*, Machiavelli’s *The Prince*, and the constitutions and official declarations of the world’s younger nations (perhaps following from Jacques Derrida’s often-cited “Declarations of Independence” — the United States and Haiti spring to mind) serve as examples in which bracing aesthetic expression directly intervened into the political present and made claims on the future—effects it is hard to imagine any written work having today. Marx and Engels, Machiavelli, Thomas Jefferson, and others have become authors of saintly power for many of today’s literary critics, of which the NMS critics are the modernist variant. These historical figures have been reframed as super-empowered scribes who made radical changes in the real world through the agency of the written word.

Yet the auratic power of these figures and their works increases while today’s English departments secure fewer majors, university presses close down, readership for criticism and contemporary literature dwindles, and books share more and more head space with tele-
vision, the cinema, digital music, and the internet. Hosannas sung over *Harry Potter*'s global readership aside, various historical phenomena seem to have rendered the imaginative written word increasingly marginal on many fronts: the challenge of new media; the shortening of attention spans; the decline of close reading both inside and outside the academy; the marginalization of the English department and of the humanities more generally within the corporate university (for this see Bill Readings’s still pertinent *University in Ruins*); the anti-foundational effects of capitalism; the rise of niche models of consumption that come with postmodernity; the ever accelerating “differentiation of society”; and the decline in funding and readership for publishers of books not written by experts in the hard sciences and mathematics. It is only in this contemporary context, in which literature and literary criticism’s status is so starkly residual, that a theoretical sense of imaginative writing’s performative role in history can be celebrated in a secretly nostalgic mode.

By contrast, it is hard to imagine in the present what Frantz Fanon calls a “combat literature,” one that would, for example, express the author’s “need to proclaim their nation, to portray their people and become the spokesperson of a new reality in action” (159) — a revolutionary literature that emerges out of an actual revolution. This is exactly why I argue that it has become cherished, even fetishized, when studied by today’s literary critics, who write from a historically secure position and for whom the revolutions of the past become objects of disinterested theoretical appreciation. Yet as we will see, such revolutionary writings are being spectralized when they become objects of the sort of contemporary criticism practiced by the NMS, which turns combat literature into shadow plays of “resistance” and “politicization” while reducing these two terms to theoretical and political ciphers.

While much has been made of the manifesto form’s ability to make claims on and shape the future, the “future” as a critical category seems almost politically contentless for the NMS. Both the gift and the curse of deploying the category these days seem to rest on this lack of definite orientation of NMS politics: weak utopian impulses can be found in writers of all political stripes and, because of their lack of determinant content, can be made to mean almost anything. This is not to say that utopianism is not an essential part of any political theory that seeks to transcend liberal quietism or conservative nostalgia. However, utopianism’s rootedness in specific historical situations and in a specifically political collective struggle should never
be whitewashed or treated as indeterminate. By pushing material considerations into the background, much work on constituting documents in modernism has done exactly this. Puchner’s canon of Marx’s works tellingly revolves around *The Communist Manifesto*, not the three volumes of economic theory in *Capital* or the analysis in the *Grundrisse*, let alone Marx’s more militant, political texts such as “The Civil War in France.” As Puchner stands for both the promise and the limitations of the NMS’s version of political formalism, it is to his work that we will now turn.

**(New) Modernist Marx**

Puchner’s book is the most politically explicit, ambitious book to come out of the loosely affiliated clique of critics writing under the banner of the NMS (roughly defined here and above as the critics featured in *Bad Modernisms*, its editors Mao and Walkowitz, and perhaps their graduate students). In Puchner’s hands, NMS politics are based on a dramatic retrofitting of the young Marx’s slogan “the philosophers have only interpreted the world, the point is to change it,” from “Concerning Feuerbach” (423). This slogan becomes the tagline in Puchner’s work and the credo that unites manifesto writers from Marx and Engels themselves in 1848 Europe to Valerie Solanas in 1968 America and to every figure in between. According to Puchner, the manifesto’s sui generis formal intent is to change the world, to be performative as opposed to theatrical. Ironically, Puchner uses the young Marx’s quotation about philosophers changing the world as the basis for the claim that Marx “anticipates” and participates in a “tradition” consisting of some strange philosophical bedfellows:

> Attacking not just a particular philosophy but philosophy in general is not unique to Marxism and in fact describes every modernist philosopher after Marx, including Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Jacques Derrida, Richard Rorty, and Stanley Cavell, to name but a few and not even those who place themselves explicitly in a Marxian tradition. (27)

The political effect of Puchner’s compression here is that radical, reactionary, liberal, and apolitical philosophers are deemed part of one antitraditional tradition. According to his analysis, one shared formal technique overwhelms significant differences and divergences among the authors in this grouping, in terms of their political and
economic views, conditions of production, place, and time. Reduction through grouping into camps and traditions is one of Puchner’s most common moves: it allows him to talk about the genre of manifesto literature as if genre were more important than the contradictions, tensions, and historical discontinuities between the objects and subjects of his study, the concrete histories and mass movements that actually brought these manifestos into the world. In the same way, based on their shared use of formal strategies, Marx and F. T. Marinetti are given equal weight as the strong precursors of the manifesto tradition, as if Marxism and futurism were of equal importance in history because of this stylistic link and as if Marx had not also written more penetrating, equally famous works in other genres (Capital, Grundrisse, etc.).

In The Idea of Communism, Tariq Ali recently argued:

There has been a growing tendency in recent times to protect Marx from the disastrous aspects of the Russian and Chinese revolutions by presenting him as a kindly Victorian gent, interested above all in press freedom and literature and analyzing the ebbs and flows of capital in the old reading room of the British Museum when not picnicking with his family and friends on Parliament Hill in North London. This is, of course, true, but should not be used as a mask to conceal his revolutionary views without which he would never have visualized a Communist future. (22–23)

With Puchner, though, in the place of Ali’s kindly Victorian gent we get a (still kindly) modernist gent, an appreciator and producer of world literature, interested above all in stylistic experimentation and critiquing the cultural alienation and social deprivation that came with modernity—that is, when Marx was not anticipating in his work the art manifestos of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

I suspect that the appeal of the young Marx’s tagline about changing the world lies in its open-endedness: isolated out of context, change, like futurity, can function as a much vaguer watchword than those in rival narrativizations of history, those coming out of the specific traditions of Hegelian-Marxist revolutionary politics (e.g., Jamesonian utopianism), liberal progress narratives (e.g., much work in American cultural studies), Spenglerian decline narratives (still produced by belletristic reactionaries continuing the culture wars in almost every English department), Foucauldian genealogies
(best represented by Nancy Armstrong’s *Desire and Domestic Fiction* and D. A. Miller’s *The Novel and the Police*), Bourdieueian tales of institutional crisis (the many books on cultural capital and the economics of the literary marketplace), or even Habermassian theories of cultural transformation (Amanda Anderson et al. on the potential of the public sphere and communicative action).

The important thing about every example of the manifesto genre, we are told, is that it seeks to “change the world”; what this means in any practical sense in any political or historical situation is tellingly left out of the account. Puchner’s capacious framing of the relation between politics and form allows Wyndham Lewis’s *Blast*, Marinetti’s futurist manifestos, Marx and Engels’s *Communist Manifesto*, Solanas’s *SCUM Manifesto*, and works by Guy Debord, André Breton, Antonin Artaud, and Vicente Huidobro to be reduced to essentially the same set of structural tendencies, the previously mentioned performative desire of their texts to change the world paired with their theatrical self-staging, by which he means excessive “posing” (i.e., claims and gestures that outrun evidentiary support): “both performative intervention and theatrical posing are, to some degree, at work in all manifestos” (5; emphasis added). Notice the generalization: the same tension always is found, but to an unspecified “degree.” *Poetry of the Revolution*’s form is theoretical insofar as it seeks to x-ray the manifesto to reveal its structure, its skeleton. As such, its core claim applies to every manifesto but ultimately says very little about the relation between any two specific documents.

As a result, it makes sense that Puchner frames his intervention into modernist studies as a refocusing of critical discussion of manifestos (political and artistic) on form at the expense of content. By explicitly following the footsteps of Marjorie Perloff in her *Futurist Moment*, he can announce that *Poetry of the Revolution* will focus on form instead of content:

Marx . . . helps us understand that it is their form, not their particular complaints and demands, that articulates most succinctly the desires and hopes, maneuvers and strategies of modernity: to create points of no return; to make history; to fashion the future. (2; emphasis added)

In addition to pushing his preference for open-ended descriptions of process (e.g., “articulates,” “to fashion,” “to make history”), this introductory passage frames the relationship between form and content as
a zero-sum game: either one is that bête noire, a vulgar Marxist, and cares about political and historical content, or one adopts the position of Puchner and Perloff and understands the aesthetic and philosophical foundations of cultural modernity exclusively through form. Obviously, to stage the debate as such an agon is to exclude the potential for a dialectical discussion of the form-content relation, as every major Marxist critic from Georg Lukács to Theodor Adorno to Fredric Jameson has emphasized in their work.

While one would never argue that the Communist Manifesto’s most interesting and important intervention was its settling local scores with Sismondi or its endorsement of the Polish agrarian revolutionaries of the 1840s (34, 43), this does not mean that a return to form at the expense of content, as Puchner and the NMS’s critics advocate, is the only politically and theoretically sound way to interpret manifestos and, by extension, the politics of modernism. To claim so allows the book to establish its leftist credentials while actually making conservative moves: it turns struggle, contestation, and contradiction into merely textual processes, for all practical purposes free from historical context and contemporary political stakes. Furthermore, it turns Marx into a modernist, which is to say not an economist, not a political strategist, not the writer of Capital, and not the forefather of actually existing socialism and communism, but only a stylistically experimental author. As suggested by the subtitle of the book (Marx, Manifestos, and the Avant-Gardes), it is Marx and not Marxism that is of interest to Puchner.

By reducing the dialectic between form and content to a pat dualism, Puchner can rectilinearly typologize the manifesto, relating political manifestos to modernist and avant-garde movements by means of a remarkably simple formula: the political manifesto is more performative and less theatrical, while the modernist/avant-garde manifesto is more theatrical and less performative. While dressed in the language of Kenneth Burke’s dramatism, this formulation comes surprisingly close to tautology: political writing is mostly political (directed toward practical effects), and theatrical works are mostly theatrical (directed toward aesthetic effect). Burke’s notion of symbolic action (which as Jameson long ago pointed out in “Ideology and Symbolic Action” could lead to a focus on the “symbolic” or the “action” part of the phrase, depending on the individual critic’s emphasis [421]) is here applied in such a way that every text is part symbolic (i.e., theatrical) and part action (i.e., performative) without the specifics of any single “symbolic action” ever being spelled out in a
satisfying way. To stop at the point at which one claims that the entire manifesto genre can be described as a mix of action and symbolism is to leave undone the hard work of making significance claims, to keep politics gestural, and to write a book long on poetry and short on revolution. As a result, *Poetry of the Revolution* is a founding document of a new school of criticism ironically content to stay completely in the register of what Puchner calls the theatrical. One can only wonder what it means that a book with “revolution” and “Marx” in its title can spend two whole pages politely summarizing Hannah Arendt’s generally anti-Marx, definitely anti-Marxist, and anti-revolutionary *On Revolution*, deeming it “magisterial” (81), and then go on later to quote approvingly a description characterizing post–World War I President Woodrow Wilson as “an honest and able broker” (145). Puchner’s application of Arendt’s theories on war and revolution repeats a general method in the book: seeking to understand *The Communist Manifesto* by privileging philosophies and theories indifferent or even hostile to Marx: for example, J. L. Austin, Arendt, David Damrosch, even perhaps Harold Bloom (there are subterranean symptoms of his theory of influence).

In a 2007 *PMLA* article titled “What Is New Formalism?” that will help us shed light on the significance of Puchner’s version of political formalism, Marjorie Levinson typologizes the dominant modes of the critical return to the aesthetic, dividing what she calls the new formalism into “normative and activist” camps, those in formalism’s normative camp seeking a return to the autonomy of the aesthetic associated with Kantian ethical and rationalist norms, and those in formalism’s activist camp treating the aesthetic object as a fundamental mediating device for literary criticism, thereby seeking to use form as the switchboard system for historicist and politicized reading. Levinson finds significant tensions between these two revived modes of formalist reading, such that normative and activist can be reduced to the following oppositions, respectively: ethical versus political, *belles lettres* versus historicism, immediacy versus mediation, affirmation versus negation. Levinson concludes her essay by praising Susan Wolfson for “[doing] a marvelous job of showing younger scholars that respect for Marxist and historicist critique by no means entails derogating the formal dimension” (568) and by celebrating a recent experiment of W. J. T. Mitchell’s in Adornian immanent critique for “defending his argument at the level of form, not statement, [in order to take] practical measures to prevent . . . co-optation” by any specific ideological platform (567). Leaving aside
her conflation of Marxist methods with historicist ones, I endorse Levinson’s sense that formal analysis and historical contextualization must be dialectically related to one another if either is to be done justice.

Yet the case of *Poetry of the Revolution*, and by extension the NMS movement more generally, adds something important to Levinson’s schema insofar as it presents what Levinson calls “normative formalism” as itself the only means for “activist criticism” and attempt to square the circle, to present the return to modernist norms as itself a form of political activism. By choosing for his content a familiarly political genre, Puchner can simultaneously make claims for the politicization of his own position while drastically redefining the political through the form of his actual arguments. According to Levinson’s criteria, Puchner seems to be, like the activist formalists, “linking the politics of liberation to form” (Levinson 567) but in such a way that the resulting linking remains purely gestural.

The question then becomes: what does a “politics of liberation” really mean, in the context of Puchner’s work and more generally in the NMS? *Poetry of the Revolution*’s conclusion sheds light on the matter. In it, Puchner dismisses both Giorgio Agamben’s and Jean-Luc Nancy’s critical conceptions of the future as purely negative while also resisting “instrumental” socialist manifestos that are, Puchner implies, all content and not formally experimental. In counter-distinction to both, he “call[s] for a crossing” between the two: a hybridized mixture comfortably projected into the future that would “fold means and ends together while sustaining them both, without collapse, in a kind of balancing act or dance, suspended between past and future yet tied to both by repetition and replacement in order to make the new once more” (262). Can one imagine a more equivocal conclusion to a book supposedly celebrating the inconvenient truths and confrontational tactics of the manifesto than an invitation to dance or to perform a balancing act? Liberation seems to be defined here in purely textual, open-ended terms: the manifesto will “make the new” and articulate hope for the future (“something that will come as a surprise” [262]). This in essence just rejects theoretical negative critique for being too negative and actually existing socialism for making actually concrete proposals, in favor of an unspecified mixture of performativity and theatricality, which leaves undefined the relation between theory and politics. This, after all, is to simply cite the shopworn committed-versus-modernist debate (of which Lukács and Adorno represent each stereotyped pole) about the politics of form, and then
idly hope that the contradictions between them will be overcome through stylistic blending.

One finds this faith in blending behind Puchner’s own formal attempts to conceptualize mediated relationships and articulate the relation between art and politics, as when he describes the manifesto as “now situated both in politics and in art” (79):

While the Third International put into place the policy of “socialism in one country,” the avant-gardes developed a new form of internationalism, of world literature, that had been faintly anticipated by Marx and Engels in their Manifesto. (175; emphasis added)

It is a striking parallel that just as Stalin was consolidating . . . Breton started to do the very same thing with surrealism. (186; emphasis added)

Here art movements are being homologized to political ones by means of their shared techniques: the distance between very different sectors of modernist society—avant-garde aesthetic movements and political power blocs—is essentially collapsed. I am not arguing that these homologies are not potentially interesting, only that to frame the art-politics relationship this way is to dodge the problem of the differences between these two sectors and the further problem of how one theorizes their mediation. Hence, the connection between political manifestos and art manifestos is illustrated by Puchner with striking parallels, faint anticipations, and forces that “situate” without his saying how and what they situate.

If Poetry of the Revolution leaves undefined the political and the aesthetic, two theoretical terms it explicitly discusses, then the economic is cut out almost completely, and thus a book invoking Marx in its title spends scant time theorizing the mediating role of the economic between the political and the aesthetic. In one of the few moments when the economic is explicitly discussed, in regard to Dadaism’s co-opting of the language of corporate finance, Puchner writes:

It is easy to dismiss such references as the satires and theatrical poses they certainly are. Nevertheless, dada sought out this multinational language because it provided a model of the international that dada did not fully accept but nonetheless used to forge its own, quite different, transnational project. (140)
The significance of Dada’s use of the idiolect of corporate finance, however, is left compacted: the upshot seems to be that now we understand Dada’s context a little better and that the Dadaists practiced a salutary internationalism. Following this passage, Puchner goes on to discuss how Dada also related to communism, in essence celebrating Dada’s internationalist bricolage of the opposed ideologies of capitalism and communism. Leaving aside the incoherence implied by this definition of internationalism, Puchner’s argument makes clear that what matters is the heroic agency of the avant-garde’s cultural production and its cosmopolitan ideals, so that corporate finance becomes merely another source of metaphors that heroic artists can detourn and recycle with a difference.

As these and other examples show, for the NMS theory means extended paraphrase and application of basic concepts to literature in order to celebrate modernism’s and modernists’ philosophical acumen and then to code that acumen as politically progressive in and of itself. The effect is a push toward consensus and consolidation of received wisdom rather than a push toward groundbreaking theory. For example, Puchner writes, “The tension between the physical and the metaphysical is always a tension between the theater, dependent as it is on bodies and objects, and that which lies beyond it” (202). This sentence is phrased in high theoretical style, with a trans-temporal claim (“always”) and a hoary philosophical opposition (“physical”/“metaphysical”). Despite its style, however, this and other sentences like it make claims that very few critics would disagree with, in that it tweaks an age-old philosophical antinomy — the tense relation between the physical body and the metaphysical spirit — without putting any specific spin on it. In general, the book’s mannered, controlled tone, projecting erudition and familiarity with theoretical trends and prevailing interpretations, applies bare-boned theory in such a way as to fit a wide variety of source material into a simple, commonsensical structural model. What this approach gains in clarity, elegance, and breadth it sacrifices in theoretical complexity and, indeed, rigor. Key terms like political and artistic are universal in scope, legitimately raising a question: what is specifically political and theatrical about the manifesto that could not be said about almost any form of writing whatsoever?

Having analyzed the NMS’s conceptualization of the modernist politics of form as manifested in a representative work, I now conclude by considering the political stakes of the NMS’s own political formalism in the present.
Is the *Neo* in Neoliberalism the *New* in New Modernist Studies?

In the beginning of his chapter on Wyndham Lewis, Puchner mentions that a wide range of writers and critics of the modernist era “denounced” the manifesto for its “badness”: “bad form, bad manners, and bad art” (108). An earlier version of the Lewis chapter appeared in Mao and Walkowitz’s anthology *Bad Modernisms*, whose title this passage so obviously invokes. In Mao and Walkowitz’s introduction to *Bad Modernisms* and in their essay “The New Modernist Studies,” we find formalized into programmatic statements, reduced to sound bites, many of the foundational critical assumptions of Puchner’s *Poetry of the Revolution*. In order to further politically contextualize this movement, it is to these two self-surveys that we now turn our attention by way of concluding. What Puchner discursively elaborates, Mao and Walkowitz hype and brand in order to generate the image of a coherent critical movement.

In a perceptive review of *Bad Modernisms* in the journal *Studies in the Novel*, Daniel Worden playfully suggests that the modernisms of the book’s title are perhaps not so “bad” after all. Conceptualizing modernism as “bad,” according to Worden, “ultimately mimics the most traditional notions about modernism: that modernist art strives to be confrontational and to provide a site for inexhaustible interpretation” (133). By way of endorsing Worden’s claim about the NMS’s methodology, I would like to consider the historical context that authorizes the paradoxical claims for the goodness of modernism’s badness, the newness of its datedness. By doing this, we can unpack the political implications of the NMS’s ventriloquizing, retrofitting, and rehabilitating of the critical positions of the canonical modernists themselves for our contemporary situation.

Like Puchner, Mao and Walkowitz write polite, rectilinear, even clinical accounts of their objects of study while echoing the aggressive style of the avant-gardes and name-dropping the taglines of the most subversive modernists. For example, their most recent attempt at auto-analysis of the field of NMS, their aforementioned 2008 article, pastiches Virginia Woolf’s “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” in stating that the NMS was “born on or about 1999” but claims nothing as radical or witty as Woolf did. The universal human character has not changed for the NMS; instead we are told that a new academic conference and two new academic journals have been founded.

Furthermore, the newness of the NMS ultimately seems nothing more than a gossamer-like attempt to consolidate the current
inchoate status quo of the work on modernism currently being produced by an institutionally powerful generation of scholars, roughly between thirty-five and fifty years of age, one of the first post-1968 generations of literary critics. Mao and Walkowitz lump together many critics whose work is quite antagonistic one toward another but make a claim for the theoretical innovation of this group whose only defining characteristics seem to be that they all write about modernism as politically and aesthetically still alive and fairly recently received tenure at research universities.

As mentioned in my introduction, Mao and Walkowitz single out the word expansion to describe the unifying concept of the NMS’s work on literary modernism over the past ten years. The changes are rung on this gauzy term (so many things expand and contract, after all), but some forms of expansion, not coincidentally of crucial importance to Marx himself both in the Manifesto and elsewhere, are clearly not of vital interest to these expansion-minded scholars: for example, they ignore imperial, military, and corporate expansion. Expansion for Mao and Walkowitz means that modernism can be found in contexts outside the Anglo-American world, before and after its usual delimitation within the timeframe 1900–45, and in low or presumably anti-aesthetic (“the nonimaginary world” [744]) genres such as propaganda works, film, popular music, and little magazines. The article chronicles not the specific methodological touchstones or principles that unite the movement, but the way new content has entered the purview of modernist scholars: transnational and global books and artworks; the politics of information (746). Yet there is no reason to believe that expansion in content should be celebrated in and of itself given that, as already mentioned, expansion can mean or be attached to military operations, imperial occupation, and capitalism’s overproduction crises or creative destructions. That is why methodological elaboration is more important than the choice of subject matter: to celebrate critical interest in new content is to say nothing about context, about how and why it is interesting.

For the critics in this ascendant critical camp as presented by Mao and Walkowitz, modernist technique and mind-sets (what they call in the introduction to Bad Modernisms “the future of thinking” [16]) have again become active political agents in the world—humanistic forces, if self-reflexive and occasionally paradoxical ones, for the liberal “good,” the goodness of being “bad.” Here they are, again from the introduction to Bad Modernisms:
Could it be, then, that the new-old appeal of modernism lies partly in a *consolation* of this sort, *emerging from its very negatives*? If so, we will not be surprised to find modernism holding special allure in times when the *future of thinking* seems uncertain, when anti-intellectualism seems ascendant, when resistance to all but the simplest positions and solutions has arrogated to itself the mantle of the good. (16; emphasis added)

This passage gets to the heart of why the genre of political constituting documents appeals so deeply to today’s modernist critics: it is a form that provides a nostalgic “consolation” and embodies what Arendt used to call without irony the “life of the mind.” The genre compresses intellectualism, political praxis, and formal complexity into a weapon with which to resist the imagined subtextual enemies of *Bad Modernisms*: neoconservatism, G. W. Bush’s anti-intellectualism, and the simplistic domestic and foreign policy that led to such baleful low-lights as No Child Left Behind and the United States’ wars against Afghanistan, Iraq, and that nebulously defined enemy, “Terror.”

When juxtaposed against neoconservatism, the NMS can be symptomatized as a new liberalism and as the program of “bad modernism,” both as past content and as present critical practice, as a fantasy antagonist to new forms of oppression and orthodoxy. Mao and Walkowitz’s “badness,” their language of the emergence of consolation from negatives as opposed to sublimely evil mind-sets represented by oppressive state power, takes the form of the promotion of beauty and complex thought against the sublime slaughter celebrated by the neocons. This is why aestheticism of the decadent Wildean and Paterian variety, the celebration of beauty against the violent excess of the sublime, holds a central place in the NMS canon (e.g., Mao’s *Fateful Beauty, Bad Modernisms*’s essay on Pater). Decadence represents a still viable, personal mode of protest against modernization, usually represented by hegemonic bureaucracies of the state (as opposed to corporate or transnational empires), which are represented as oppressive, crude, and primitive. In Mao and Walkowitz the aesthetic tends to stand for freedom and autonomy, an already achieved utopian sphere carved out within the baroque wreckage of wars, revolutions, and wage slavery, as well as an already determinant content, a form of liberal individual fulfillment (happiness, peace, pleasure) stretched to cover what is the properly collective subject matter of history.
These modernist visions of the near future, of freedom, or of Mao and Walkowitz’s “thinking” are indeed old new. Their revival of old forms of liberal goodness, freedom, ethical evaluation, and the voluntarism implicit in their veneration of “critical thinking” has a new function in relationship to neoconservatism. The latter is framed as their enemy, but it also innocently celebrates the sorts of intellectual and cultural freedoms that could be seen as so many rights to be “bad,” such as the women’s rights that Bush and his advisers cynically claimed as a positive reason for continuing bombings and raids in Afghanistan and Iraq after weapons of mass destruction failed to appear. Such liberal commonplaces about freedom and the future of free thinking pass as common sense in a world reconfigured by capital and war but are inadequate to the task of legitimate theoretical intervention. In fact, insofar as the NMS’s critics misrecognize themselves as outright enemies of neoconservatism by suppressing economic and ideological continuities in favor of focusing on minor cultural divergences and by driving into the background the essential (if still mediated) connections between the economics of neoliberalism and the politics of neoconservatism, neoconservatism could even be considered a sort of Conradian secret sharer of the NMS. David Harvey has pointed out that since “US neoconservatives favour corporate power, private enterprise, and the restoration of class power,” it follows that “[n]eoconservatism is therefore entirely consistent with the neoliberal agenda of elite governance, mistrust of democracy, and the maintenance of market freedoms” (82). If this is true, then those writing under the aegis of the NMS should be wary of the New in New Modernist Studies veering dangerously close to the neo in neoliberal. Their fuzzy advocacy of the freedom found in humanism, internationalism, cosmopolitanism, antistatism, and doctrinaire antination-alism could after all be considered similar to the vacuous freedoms celebrated by free marketeers and even by the Project for the New American Century.

Jürgen Habermas famously described modernity as an incomplete project. The NMS takes Habermas one step further and argues that modernism is also an incomplete project worth completing, a project still intellectually, aesthetically, politically vital, even indispensable. As such, it seems that the NMS itself has yet to absorb into its theory and practice Jameson’s crucial claim in his 2002 A Singular Modernity that no narrativization of modernization or modernism can provide ideologically neutral or epistemologically secure critical
vantage points on modernity. While Jameson’s own conception of utopia could be exposed to some of the critiques above, one undoubtedly finds that the NMS’s critical program provides a textbook demonstration of his claim that “[r]adical alternatives, systemic transformations, cannot be theorized or even imagined within the conceptual field governed by the word ‘modern’” (215). This holds even if a critic’s expressed subject is Marx, revolutionary politics, and literature. In these new imperial times, dominated by corporate-led globalization and transnational warfare, the simple satisfactions of individual freedom of thought, no matter how modernist the style, are dramatically insufficient, both theoretically and politically.

Notes

1. Additionally, it is interesting to consider Puchner’s receipt of the MLA’s James Russell Lowell Prize in 2006 for *Poetry of the Revolution* as a bestowal of institutional legitimacy on the NMS, on a wider range of new work on the positive effects of constitutions and manifestos, and on the “constituting” and/or “performative” dimensions of these documents. Receipt of the Lowell Prize represents a step toward institutional advancement.

2. While we are proposing papers for others to write, it would be interesting to analyze the historical and methodological trends that can be deduced from the list of Lowell awardees over the past twenty years. Broadly speaking, since the prize was given to Jameson’s *Postmodernism* in 1990, with honorable mention given to Eve Sedgwick’s *Epistemology of the Closet*, the move seems to be away from awarding the prize to ambitious attempts simultaneously to create new theoretical fields and to intervene into contemporary public debates. More recently, the prize has been given to fairly modest, only faintly political works in trending subfields such as “thing theory” (Isobel Armstrong’s *Victorian Glassworlds*), cinema studies (Laura Marcus’s *The Tenth Muse*), and so on. The move seems to be away from methodological innovation toward new or ascendant subject matter, and from intervention in theory to reflection on or legitimation of extant theoretical trends. In the mid-1990s the prize seemed to go to works that attempted to brook a middle course, that were theoretically innovative and yet rooted in a specific subfield, such as Joseph Roach’s *Cities of the Dead* (performance studies) or Catherine Gallagher’s *Nobody’s Stories* (history of the novel, economics of literature). Alan Liu’s *The Laws of Cool*, awarded honorable mention in 2004, is perhaps an exception to the trends I have hastily sketched above, as it intervenes in a trendy subject matter (knowledge work and the culture of information) and yet legitimately challenges many of that burgeoning field’s dominant assumptions.

3. In addition to “Ideology and Symbolic Action,” see *Political Unconscious*, 81.

Works Cited


