CHAPTER I

Introduction
The Problem of Late Modernism

We are not only the “last men of an epoch.” . . . We are the first men of a Future that has not materialized. We belong to a “great age” that has not “come off.”

Wyndham Lewis, 1937

There is no avant-garde, only those who are left behind.
Motto from art-text by Richard Tipping, 1993

I

Since the late 1920s, it has become an increasingly central part of the avant-garde’s vocation to profess its lack of vocation. The statements of Wyndham Lewis and Richard Tipping, separated by more than fifty years, are a case in point. A similar thought animates both artists, that the avant-garde has failed—that it has never ceased to fail—to deliver on its historical promise to “materialize” an unprecedented future in prophetic works of art. For Lewis, the modernist painter, novelist, and polemical “blaster,” this realization was sobering. It became the occasion for stock-taking works like his memoirs of World War I, Blasting and Bombardiering, and his post–World War II autobiography, Rude Assignment; it was a spur to rethink past experiences and hunker down to the much bleaker future that had come to pass despite all avant-garde “renewals.” For the young Australian postmodernist Tipping, in contrast, the late-twentieth-century dissipation of vanguardist pretenses offers a happy freedom to make art playfully, with little concern for who
might be following him and whither. If no one really knows which way things are going, he suggests, why not just go your own way? (Perhaps not accidentally, some of Tipping’s best works are humorously modified road signs.) Lewis stoically bestows an epitaph on the grave of the fallen modernist legend; his postmodernist successor discovers a place—as good as any—to begin to dance.

Conceptions of modernism and the avant-garde, as even a limited survey will suggest, are shaped by factors that go well beyond narrowly aesthetic concerns. These may include, among a welter of other elements, particularities of nationality, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality; questions of political engagement; concrete experiences of wars and other important historical events; developments in technology; and religious beliefs. Moreover, insofar as terms like “modernism” and “avant-garde” are used historically to situate a selection of artists and works within a certain geography and time span, they are subject to the conceptual, narrative, and figural parameters that shape all historical writing. Simply put, as we write the cultural history of the twentieth century, we spin out stories of artists, writers, thinkers, movements, and the works they conjured into life; and we weave these stories into the larger fabric of social and political history. Our historical plots have beginnings, middles, and ends; births and deaths occur; there are fixed settings and spaces of errancy; times of decision and dreamtimes in which the logic of the day seems suspended or deranged. Within these bounds we delineate our heroes and villains, setting them on their fatal paths to perdition or bringing them through narrow escapes from the grips of enchanters with resonant foreign names. Yet all the while our choices as to place and period, our selections of “characters” and of their deeds, are being swayed by a powerful, invisible force field of stories twice- and thrice-told, stories learned far too well and recounted on demand.

Modernism has generated a number of different stories, many of which have become familiar to the point of becoming a kind of academic folk wisdom: modernism is the liberation of formal innovation; the destruction of tradition; the renewal of decadent conventions or habit-encrusted perceptions; the depersonalization of art; the radical subje-
tivization of art. And so on. Despite the diversity and contradictory nature of opinions about what modernism is (or was), however, the study of modernism has tended to be dominated by one very broad and richly embellished story: its “Book of Genesis,” which narrates its creation out of the spirit of revolt against the nineteenth century, whether that age be conceived as bourgeois or socialistic, Victorian or Biedermeier, positivis-
tic or decadent and symbolistic. The grand narrative in the study of modernism has been that of its beginnings: “origins,” “rise,” “emergence,” “genealogy,” are key terms in this ever more nuanced account. Granted this point, one may go on to observe how much this center of gravity in traditional modernist studies accords with the ideology of modernist aesthetics as such. From writer-critics like Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot to their latter-day heirs in the academy, critics have defined the movement in large part with figurative and evaluative underpinnings of modernism itself, with the Poundian imperative to “Make It New.” In authoritative cultural histories of modernism such as Allan Janik and Stephen Toulmin’s *Wittgenstein’s Vienna*, Carl Schorske’s *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna*, and Stephen Kern’s *The Culture of Time and Space* and in major studies of literary modernism such as Hugh Kenner’s *The Pound Era*, Marjorie Perloff’s *The Futurist Moment*, and Michael Levinson’s *The Genealogy of Modernism*, the accent has fallen on relatively unitary and “vital” moments of its development. In the continental context, this critical emphasis has meant giving pride of place to the cubist and futurist movements before World War I and to the avant-garde ferment of the twenties. Only recently have scholars begun to address the less coherent fate of modernist culture in 1930s France, while the fascinating cultural history of Vienna after the founding of the republic all but disappears behind the crowd of studies dedicated to the pre–World War I ferment. In the Anglo-American context, the imagist and vorticist movements and the postwar Paris expatriate scene likewise receive a disproportionate amount of critical attention, because they identify clear communities of rebel experimenters working in emerging modes and forms.

In the present study of modernism during the late 1920s and 1930s, I have turned this historiographic telescope the other way round, to focus on modernism from the perspective of its end. I develop my argument in two major parts. The first of these, “Theorizing Late Modernism,” sets the literature of these years in its broad cultural and political context while elaborating a revisionary model for understanding modernist writing in this transitional period. The second, “Reading Late Modernism,” considers in detail the writings and related works—visual, critical, political, and cultural-polemical—of Wyndham Lewis, Djuna Barnes, and Samuel Beckett, who serve in this book as exemplary late modernist figures. I conclude with a coda chapter on a posthumously published novel by the Anglo-expatriate poet and artist, Mina Loy. Loy’s *Insel* gives a fictionalized account of her experiences working in the early 1930s as a procurer of modern paintings for her son-in-law’s
New York gallery. Her narrator’s ill-fated adventures with an ineffectual German painter suggest the baneful short-circuiting of the once-energizing connection of modernist literature and modern visual arts. Indeed, in its wider implications, Loy’s book registers a trembling of the whole artistic field, from writing to painting to photography and cinema, and the threat these new plate tectonics of culture posed to the social “islands” where modernist poet and painter had together found temporary refuge. The ending of Insel stands as an emblem of the end of an artistic epoch: the seedy painter who never paints and the aging writer who futilely seeks to squeeze some inspiration out of an artist-hero meet for the last time, tacitly agree that their alliance has not panned out, and part ways with a sense of relief.

My concentration on these authors is motivated by two impulses, the first evaluative, the latter strategic. Let me lay down my cards in advance: I seek to make a case for the importance of these authors and works and to elevate their status in the canons of twentieth-century literature as now taught in the American university. Bluntly stated, the majority of the works I discuss in this study are just not read—and not only by the half-mythical “common reader,” stunted by the profitable conformism of mass-market publishing and the eviscerated budgets for public libraries, but even by scholars and teachers of modernist literature. I attempt to account historically for the feeble presence of these works in the protocols of our collective reading. But I must add that the conditions that brought these works lame-footed and stuttering into the world are, precisely, historical, and thus part of a past that may be surveyed, criticized, and superseded. It is high time to get on with the task of reading these works and discovering what we have missed by accepting critical bedtime tales as truth and letting our uneasy questions go to sleep.

Beyond this plea for revaluation, however, I also seize on these writings for strategic purposes. They form something of a vanishing point for the perspective lines projected by works in several different artistic fields, as well as by the political and critical discourses current in the late 1920s and 1930s and by diverse popular tendencies of the day. Careful reading of these works, together with the reconstruction of their context, shows the tacit dialogue they conducted with the other arts. It reveals how they sought to bind the restless, disturbing collective energies of recorded music, fashion, advertising, radio, and film; and it exposes to critical view the stigmata where mass politics and urban life left their forceful signatures.
When the history of modernist literature is considered in this way, from the perspective of its latter years, an alternative depiction of modernism becomes possible. At first glance, late modernist writing appears a distinctly self-conscious manifestation of the aging and decline of modernism, in both its institutional and ideological dimensions. More surprising, however, such writing also strongly anticipates future developments, so that without forcing, it might easily fit into a narrative of emergent postmodernism. This problem points to a central paradox of late modernist literature in English: its apparent admixture of decadent and forward-looking elements and its consequent lack of a clearly defined place in the dominant frameworks of twentieth-century criticism. It is as if the phosphorescence of decay had illumined the passageway to a reemergence of innovative writing after modernism. Ultimately, I wish to suggest, the writing of this period has much to teach us about the broader shape of twentieth-century culture, both preceding and following the years between the wars. Yet the double life of this significant body of writing—its linkage forward into postmodernism and backward into modernism—has not, by and large, been accounted for by critics and historians of the period.

II

The earliest and still one of the best diagnoses of the new literary dispensation that emerged in the 1930s may be found in George Orwell’s 1935 review of Henry Miller’s *Tropic of Cancer* and, at greater length, in his extensive essay on Miller and the significance of his work, “Inside the Whale.” The review is largely subsumed into the later essay, so I will not discuss its contents in detail. Orwell, however, opens his remarks on Miller with a lurid and extreme image evoking an uncanny automatic mechanism that functions even after death. He is speaking of literature and its ability to face up to or avert its eyes from the perilous condition of the present: “Modern man is rather like a bisected wasp which goes on sucking jam and pretends that the loss of its abdomen does not matter. It is some perception of this fact which brings books like *Tropic of Cancer* (for there will probably be more and more of them as time goes on) into being.”

In 1935 this characterization of “modern man” might have seemed hyperbolic and shrill; by the time “Inside the Whale” appeared in 1940,
with Nazi victories blanketing the map of Europe and British capitulation to the mad Charlie Chaplin emperor in Berlin a very real possibility, it was hard not to concur with Orwell’s pessimism, if not his precise diagnosis. In forty pages of brilliant, undeceived examination of the main lines of twentieth-century British writing, Orwell diagnoses the condition of literature in England on the brink of a total war for survival. He reveals the collective psychology underlying the epochal shifts in authorial stance and popular taste from the Georgian decades of A. E. Housman and H. G. Wells, to the modernist revolt of T. S. Eliot and James Joyce, to the “Boy Scout atmosphere of bare knees and community singing” he sensed in the leftish boosterism of W. H. Auden, Stephen Spender, Cecil Day-Lewis, and company—all set against a background of political, military, and human horrors: the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact to divide up Poland between Germany and Russia, the mechanized drone of Stuka dive bombers and Panzer brigades, and the stifled cries of the concentration camps.

The historical panorama that Orwell sets out with such unforgiving concision serves to foreground the peculiar homelessness of Miller’s work in this history. Miller, quite simply, doesn’t fit in the big picture of his times. Out of frank disbelief, Miller avoids the progressive commitments of the Edwardians and the communist enthusiasms of the Auden generation; neither, however, does he exhibit, modernist-style, any faith in the power of carefully crafted, difficult art to redeem the squalid realities of his subproletarian existence. If these large-scale tendencies of attitude and taste had once been, for better or worse, conditions of possibility for an enduring English literature, Miller, in contrast, heralds an altogether different future in which literature as such is endangered by a world much too much with it. Miller’s work, Orwell writes, “is a demonstration of the impossibility of any major literature until the world has shaken itself into its new shape.” For Orwell, Miller is more than just a writer; he is the unlaureled proseist of middle-class unemployment, the pulverization of professional society in train from the late 1920s on—the collective désespoirment of the middle strata, not just in the sense that the heirs of the Edwardian bourgeoisie were without jobs, but also, more fundamentally, that they were bereft of vocation, of any calling in which they might sincerely believe. Miller writes neither to praise collective idleness nor to ally himself rhetorically with the grave-diggers of a dying culture, signing on to a future utopia of labor and endeavoring to bury it. It is in this “neither-nor” that Orwell detects a new tone, and identifies it the endgame of modern individualistic cul-
ture, with the late modernist torso gyrating mechanically while the head no longer serves to guide it and no limb propels it on.

Unfortunately, few critics have developed in a systematic manner Orwell’s essayistically formulated insight. Among contemporary scholars of modernist culture, the architectural historian Charles Jencks has made a compelling case for employing the notion of late modernism in critical discussions of twentieth-century architecture and, by extension, the other arts as well. Jencks designates as “late modernist” the persistence in architectural practice of an avant-garde moralism, utopianism, and purist style after the classic period of International-style architectural modernism (1920–1960). “Late modern” architecture, Jencks argues, coexists with the postmodernism that emerges in the 1960s. By comparison to either modernism or late modernism, postmodernist architecture is pluralist and populist in its ethos, intentionally addressing different “taste cultures” from the general public to elite, knowledgeable constituencies, capable of appreciating inside jokes and learned references. Postmodernist architects are unashamedly historicist in their use of ornament and ironic allusion to earlier buildings, which may be freely drawn from for figural and structural ideas. More generally, postmodern architecture abandons the central concern of modern architects with the autonomy of form and its exhaustive display of function. The modernist supercategory “form-equals-function” yields to a diversified concern with meaning, sensuality, and context; symbolism, allegory, and narrative return as major artistic resources. In contrast, late modernism represents a kind of exasperated heightening of the logic of modernist architecture itself. Architectural late modernism is, Jencks writes, “pragmatic and technocratic in its social ideology and from about 1960 takes many of the stylistic ideas and values of modernism to an extreme in order to resuscitate a dull (or clichéd) language” (15).

Two aspects of Jencks’s argument are useful for my considerations of late modernist literature. First, he emphasizes the overlap and coexistence of late modernism and postmodernism. These are not successive stages but rather alternative responses to the legacy of modernism and its possible continuation. Second, he recognizes that these terms cannot be defined simply as a matter of style, for they also embrace aspects of social ideology and artistic ethos as well. As Jencks remarks, “To call a late modernist a postmodernist is tantamount to calling a Protestant a Catholic because they both practice a Christian religion” (16). And if the Thirty-Something Year War that followed on the schisming of modernism has left the artistic field razed and the scattered troops looting
whatever they came across in their retreat, Jencks’s point still stands. The choices for artists working in the wake of modernism had real stakes, and these stakes have not been sufficiently recognized in the rush to postmodernism: art’s relation to the past, its address to a public, and its stance toward the society and politics of the day. On this, I cannot express my agreement with Jencks too strongly. The extension of Jencks’s arguments to literature, however, is limited by his specific concentration on architecture, which has a distinct stylistic and institutional history. Architectural modernism had its first heave with the socialist urbanism of the late 1920s and 1930s and its second wind with the urban development after World War II, whereas literary modernism peaked much earlier and, free of any strong ties to economic and political institutions, much more feebly. Hence, one should expect that “late modernist” literature would have an analogously different historical shape than that of architecture. In contrast with different building forms, differences in literary architectonics have few direct social effects; hence, questions of ethos and social vision have a less direct translation into formal considerations than in architecture. Moreover, no “postmodernist” complement existed at the moment that late modernist literature made its first appearance—as I am arguing, around 1926. Instead, this emergent literature appears in tandem with a still developing corpus of high modernism. James Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*, Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves* and *Between the Acts*, Ezra Pound’s *Cantos*, Aldous Huxley’s *Eyeless in Gaza*, and other monuments of high modernism share the field with a new generation of late modernist works.

Fredric Jameson, in his celebrated writings on postmodernism, acknowledges the need for an intermediary concept to characterize the cultural products of the “transition” between modernism and postmodernism, although he leaves the task of theorizing this interim largely to others. Somewhat grudgingly, he admits that “we should probably . . . make some place . . . for what Charles Jencks has come to call ‘late modernism’—the last survivals of a properly modernist view of art and the world after the great political and economic break of the Depression, where, under Stalinism or the Popular Front, Hitler or the New Deal, some new conception of social realism achieves the status of momentary cultural dominance by way of collective anxiety and world war.” As exemplary “late modernists” in literature, Jameson mentions Vladimir Nabokov, Samuel Beckett, Charles Olson, and Louis Zukofsky, “who had the misfortune to span two eras and the luck to find a time capsule of isolation or exile in which to spin out unseasonable
forms” (305). The concept of late modernism was, indeed, already implicit in Jameson’s earlier study of Wyndham Lewis, whose “prophetic assault on the very conventions of the emergent modernism” presaged the “contemporary poststructuralist aesthetic, which signals the dissolution of the modernist paradigm.”11 He goes on to note that “Lewis cannot be fully assimilated to the contemporary textual aesthetic without anachronism” (or as Jameson might now write, it would be ahistorical to call Lewis “postmodernist”). Nevertheless, Lewis’s out-of-phase relation to modernism, his anachronistic “kinship with us” (20), constitutes a central focus of Jameson’s study. In my own account as well, Lewis—as cultural critic, painter, and novelist—plays a crucial role in the late modernist breakup and reconfiguration of earlier “high” modernism.

Examining modern and postmodern modes of irony in Horizons of Assent, Alan Wilde offers a more elaborated description of late modernism than Jameson’s. His conception has two major elements. First, it represents a welcome attempt to break down the overly schematic opposition of modernism and postmodernism in literary history. To “do justice” to the “jagged course of literary history,” Wilde feels the need for a third term: “Late modernism interposes a space of transition, a necessary bridge between more spacious and self-conscious experimental movements [i.e., modernism and postmodernism—T.M.].”12 Second, through close reading of works by Christopher Isherwood and Ivy Compton-Burnett, Wilde contrasts the qualities of irony that characterize modernist and late modernist fiction. Modernist irony, Wilde argues, helps bring to life a richly inclusive and interconnected fictional world as a symbolic compensation for the chaos and impoverishment of modern life. The modernist work registers these modern social realities deeply even in its negative relation to them; its formal and stylistic difficulties testify to the strains suffered in keeping the world at bay. In contrast, late modernist irony engages with social realities less profoundly and offers no embracing vision in which the contradictions of modern life would be resolved. The late modernist text, no doubt, turns to the reader a more reserved and diplomatic face than that of the fractious modernist monster. But monsters also have their poignance, and sweetness and clarity are dearly bought: high modernism’s “generosity and breadth—its desire to restore significance to a broken world” (119)—are abandoned in the late modernist work as so much useless baggage.

In his study Postmodernist Fiction, Brian McHale makes an analogous attempt to find a place for works that are caught in the no-man’s-
land between the camps of modernist and postmodernist fiction. Like Wilde, he seeks both to account for historical change and transition in the modes of writing and to identify distinct stylistic and formal characteristics of these transitional works. He distinguishes modernist and postmodernist fictions in terms of their overall “set” toward reality. Modernist fiction, McHale suggests, is predominantly “epistemological” in nature: it seeks, despite the confusing webs of psychic, perceptual, and social facts, to disclose a coherent, knowable world. Postmodernist fiction, in contrast, functions differently. Relinquishing the modernist quest to know “the” world, it invents possible worlds; postmodernist fiction is, in McHale’s terms, ontological, world-making, rather than world-disclosing. Between these two possibilities, McHale posits a third mode, which unsettles the opposition between the epistemological and ontological dominants. He identifies this possibility, notably, with Samuel Beckett’s post–World War II trilogy (as well as Alain Robbe-Grillet’s *nouveau roman*): “Here, we might say, modernist poetics begins to hemorrhage, to leak away—though not fatally, since it is still (barely) possible to recuperate these internal contradictions by invoking the model of the ‘unreliable narrator,’ thus stabilizing the projected world and reasserting the epistemological dominant of the text.”13 Such works, which McHale designates “limit-modernist” texts, are marked precisely by their oscillation between the dominant features of modernist and postmodernist fiction.

All three critics make important contributions to formulating a poetics of late modernism. Jameson’s imperative to historicize the moments of literary change; Wilde’s choice of the 1930s as the point of departure for late modernism; and McHale’s excellent description of the formal workings of late modernist texts have strongly influenced the model I develop. Yet for each, late modernism amounts to little more than a peripheral issue, a bit of detail work on the capacious but drafty house of fiction built by Modernism, Postmodernism, and Co.

The “unsearable forms” spun out by late modernist writers, however, signify more than just patchwork in the otherwise unbroken facade of literary history. Untimely phenomena like late modernist fiction represent breaking points, points of nonsynchronization, in the broad narrative of twentieth-century cultural history. They embody the force of the exception within what might be called “the negative invariance of history,” its tendency to conserve institutions and processes in the midst of historical change.14 Accordingly, the works of late modernist literature should not be viewed simply as cultural curiosities salvaged from time,
aesthetic souvenirs that exert their unsettling fascination by reviving an already moribund modernism. Rather, they mark the lines of flight artists took where an obstacle, the oft-mentioned “impasse” of modernism, interrupted progress on established paths. Facing an unexpected stop, late modernists took a detour into the political regions that high modernism had managed to view from the distance of a closed car, as part of a moving panorama of forms and colors. The cultural products of this period both are and are not “of the moment.” Precisely in their utimeliness, their lack of symmetry and formal balance, they retain the power to transport their readers and critics “out of bounds”—to an “elsewhere” of writing from which the period can be surveyed, from which its legitimacy as a whole might be called into question.15

Late modernist writing was not particularly successful in either critical or commercial terms, and each work tended toward formal singularity, as if the author had hit a dead end and had to begin again. In content, too, these works reflected a closure of the horizon of the future: they are permeated with a foreboding of decline and fall, of radical contingency and absurd death. Thus John Hawkes, in his statement for a 1962 forum, “Fiction Today,” characterized Djuna Barnes as an exemplar for the contemporary writer of “experimental fiction,” a pathbreaker whose work bears signs of her passage through the funereal spaces of modernism’s demise:

Like the poet, the experimental fiction writer . . . enters his created world . . . with something more than confidence and something less than concern over the presence of worms in the mouth. Like the poem, the experimental fiction is an exclamation of psychic materials which come to the writer all readily distorted, prefigured in that nightly inner schism between the rational and the absurd. And the relationship between the sprightly destructive poem and the experimental novel is not an alliance but merely the sharing of a birthmark: they come from the same place and are equally disfigured from the start.16

Late modernists like Barnes, Hawkes suggests, carry the signs of death on their faces, the disfigured countenances they show to their postmodern successors. Paradoxically, however, these very signs of disfiguration charge their work with its contemporaneity, its ability to speak to the writers of the present day.17

The backward-turned glance by which one may read and interpret such funereal signs is what Walter Benjamin described in his Trauerspiel and Baudelaire studies as an “allegorical optic.” The allegorical optic seeks its truth in the mortified ruin of the work (or here, in the
undoing of a whole literary movement and aesthetic). It is a critical gaze that shatters the unity of the object at hand into fragments: “In the field of allegorical intuition the image is a fragment, a rune. Its beauty as a symbol evaporates when the light of divine learning falls upon it. The false appearance of totality is extinguished. For the *eidos* disappears, the simile ceases to exist, and the cosmos it contained shrivels up. The dry rebuses which remain contain an insight, which is still available to the confused investigator.” Yet this optic, which I apply to the works of late modernism, seeing in them splinter-products of a shattered “classic” modernism, replicates the late modernist’s already belated relation to high modernism as ruin. Late modernist writers were divested, by political and economic forces, of the cultural “cosmos”—the modernist “myth,” in its most encompassing sense—in which the singular works of high modernism seemed components of an aesthetically transfigured world. In the empty spaces left by high modernism’s dissolution, late modernists reassembled fragments into disfigured likenesses of modernist masterpieces: the unlovely allegories of a world’s end. In such works the vectors of despair and utopia, the compulsion to decline and the impulse to renewal, are not just related; they are practically indistinguishable. As Benjamin writes, “This is the essence of melancholy immersion: that its ultimate objects, in which it believes it can most fully secure for itself that which is vile, turn into allegories, and that these allegories fill out and deny the void in which they are represented, just as, ultimately, the intention does not faithfully rest in the contemplation of bones, but faithlessly leaps forward to the idea of resurrection” (232–233). Sinking themselves faithlessly into a present devoid of future, into a movement grinding to a halt and an aesthetic on the threshold of dissolution, the writers of late modernism prepared themselves, without hope, to pass over to the far side of the end.

III

In 1930, under the title “Crisis of the Novel,” Benjamin reviewed Alfred Döblin’s recently published novel *Berlin Alexanderplatz.* Before turning to his more specific comments on Döblin’s urban epic, he offers general remarks on the state of the European modern novel at the end of the 1920s. Benjamin suggests that there are two equally authoritative but antithetical strains of modernist novel. Together they constitute the extremes of a schismed field of modernist narrative, and
the tension between the two models is the clearest index of the crisis to which his title refers.

The first tendency is represented by André Gide’s *The Counterfeiters* and finds its theoretical expression in the same author’s “Journal of *The Counterfeiters.*” Gide advances there his idea of the *roman pur* (pure novel), in which no element would be extraneous and in which the main idea expressed would be the process of the novel’s composition itself. Character, plot, theme, dialogue, and even reading would all be immaterial to the single thread of the writing:

I should like events never to be related directly by the author, but instead exposed (and several times from different vantages) by those actors who will be influenced by those events. In their account of the action I should like the events to appear slightly warped; the reader will take a sort of interest from the mere fact of having to reconstruct . . .

Thus the whole story of the counterfeiters is to be discovered only in a gradual way through the conversations, by which all the characters will portray themselves at the same time.20

Gide’s highly involuted, unified, self-referential composition stands in stark contrast to the second tendency, which Benjamin sees exemplified and theorized by Döblin. Benjamin (following Döblin’s own essay “The Construction of the Epic Work”) calls this second tendency “epic”; its main characteristics are its orientation toward everyday speech and the use of montage techniques to open the literary work to an array of extraliterary contents. If Gide’s subtle hand is discernible over all his materials, all the more so as he retreats from direct authorial address, then Döblin’s authorial presence is nearly eclipsed by the heterogeneous materials he assembles. “So thick is this montaging,” Benjamin writes, “the author has difficulty getting a word in among it” (233).

In delineating two extreme tendencies in modernist fiction—the first marked by purity, formal mastery, and orientation toward unique interiorized experience; the second, by heterogeneity of materials, montage techniques, and orientation toward everyday life and speech—Benjamin clearly intended to map out a field of possibilities for the modern novel. At the same time, however, his essay has a precise historical aim: to identify the marked tendency toward polarized extremes that was characteristic of the period. It was not one or the other that was the most significant historical symptom; it was their tense coexistence. Precisely this had come to the fore and called for critical analysis. Benjamin emphasized that historical features of both past and present become visible
only at specific moments and in specific situations. The 1930s, with its extreme tension and conflicts, was just such a “horizon of legibility” for modernism, a “late modernist” moment in which stock of the overall shape of modernism could be taken.

Benjamin’s distinction between two poles of novelistic writing bears a marked similarity to Peter Nicholls’s recent, more general consideration of the “divergences” internal to both modernist and postmodernist writing.21 Nicholls bases his discussion on Jean-François Lyotard’s concepts of “discourse” and “figure.” In Discours, figure, Lyotard argues that discourse, conceived by structuralists as a closed and self-referential grid of linguistic differences, always opens out onto a space and time incommensurable with the linguistic system. This otherness, language’s “depth element,” disrupts the systematicity of discourse and transgresses its generic forms. Lyotard calls the disruptive otherness within discourse the “figural.”22 Nicholls adopts these two notions, opposed but also mutually imbricated, to define two interrelated poles of modernism, depending on whether the element of discursive mastery or figural disruption predominates.

Like Benjamin, Nicholls seeks to corrrelate compositional and generic features of texts with their social meanings, to discern how the form of works and their historical situation coincide or clash. Notably, Nicholls attempts to distinguish between Anglo-American and continental modernisms on the basis of these tendentially different relations to signification. Anglo-American modernism, with its “stress on technique as mastery,” assumes that “non-signifying effects must be seen to be won from the effort of signification (from the ‘combat of arrangement,’ in Pound’s phrase)” (10). In contrast, Nicholls suggests that a continental modernism like German expressionism tends toward the “figural” dominant, which mobilizes “a non-semiotic dimension which subverts the order of discourse” (12). “Here,” he writes, “good form’ seems always about to mutate into its opposite, to yield something which the structure cannot contain or speak” (12).

Nicholls’s notion of this internal divergence in modernism is highly suggestive and has implications far beyond the scope of his arguments. For example, it suggests a basis for the different qualities of modernism as manifest in the various literary genres. The choice of genre is inseparable from the tendency toward discursive mastery or figural transgression of discourse. The novel, with its sedimented history, its well-codified conventions, and its strong ties to narrative forms, would seem by nature to tend toward an aesthetic of discursive mastery. The “main-
stream” of European high modernist fiction—Proust, Gide, Mann, Hesse, Svevo, Broch, Musil, Joyce, Woolf (and others)—focused on the problem of mastering a chaotic modernity by means of formal techniques: ironic detachment; highly mediated and multiperspectival narration; narrative involution and self-referentiality; stylistic ostentation; use of large-scale symbolic forms; dramatization of states of consciousness, including the author’s own. In contrast, the disruptive effects of the figural tend to appear most evidently in genres other than the novel: in avant-garde poetry like that of William Carlos Williams; in the invented or wholly reinvented genres employed by Gertrude Stein (her “portraits,” “tender buttons,” “geographies,” “operas,” and “plays”); in the unstable mixtures of critical discourse, prose poetry, and narration characteristic of surrealist antinovels like André Breton’s Nadja and Louis Aragon’s Paris Peasant; or in the aphoristic “thought-pictures” of Walter Benjamin’s One-Way Street and Ernst Bloch’s Traces.

I want to underscore, moreover, that this dual aspect of modernist writing is not just a retrospective fantasy of literary theorists, critics, and historians. Indeed, as a way of thinking about modernist writing, it adopts and sharpens to a critical schema the less systematic views of modernist writers themselves about their artistic field and their role in it. This self-understanding can be detected in Joyce’s lingering doubt, recounted approvingly to Richard Ellmann by Samuel Beckett, that he “may have oversystematized Ulysses.” Similarly, in a letter from the summer of 1930 to his friend Thomas MacGreevy, Beckett would remark of Marcel Proust, “He is so absolutely the master of his own form that he becomes its slave as often as not.” Both remarks show Beckett thinking about his high modernist predecessors and zeroing in on the fissile point of the high modernist work, the tension between global form and molecular detail. In a more far-reaching example, we can gauge the breadth of modernism’s artistic field by juxtaposing two extremes: Eliot’s famous essay “Ulysses, Order, and Myth,” published in The Dial in November 1923, and Beckett’s diary entry from January 1937, a text that amounts to an implicit commentary on the whole project of a modernism crowned by its masterpieces Ulysses and The Waste Land. Eliot predicts the end of the novel as a literary genre on grounds that the age demands a stricter form and finds in Ulysses the lineaments of that rigor. As Eliot adumbrates it, Joyce’s “mythical method” is a technique of disciplining and unifying the anarchic, senseless whirl of splinters that characterizes contemporary history. Beckett, in contrast, writes: “I am not interested in a ‘unification’ of the historical chaos any
more than I am in the ‘clarification’ of the individual chaos, and still less in the anthropomorphisation of the inhuman necessities that provoke the chaos. What I want is the straws, flotsam, etc., names, dates, births and deaths, because that is all I can know.”

Eliot’s appeal to myth is at once epistemological and religio-political. It offers the possibility of aesthetically mastering a plethora of desacralized, fragmented facts, turning them into singular works of art; in turn, it also conjures the formal authority by which these facts may be selected, shaped, and re-invested with sacred meaning. By contrast, Beckett’s antimythic, pessimistic positivism, which heightens the ineluctability of facts precisely in their multitudinous facticity, forecloses in advance any such aesthetic putschism in life, literature, or politics. It matters little in this context whether Eliot’s characterization of *Ulysses* accurately describes either Joyce’s intention or the functioning of the text itself, or whether Beckett could relinquish formal mastery so totally in his strategic celebration of the smithereen. I take Eliot’s and Beckett’s antithetical views as ideal types, marking out a field, and as striking signs of the underground historical passage being negotiated—in letters, notebooks, conversations, unpublished works—throughout the years between the world wars, a long labor of cultural transformation largely hidden until the whole development surfaced one day to stay.

If these historical considerations are taken together with Nicholls’s claim that Anglo-American modernism decidedly tended toward an aesthetic of formal mastery centered on the novel, they lay the basis for both a formal and a historical understanding of late modernist writing. Late modernism was, in the first instance, a reaction to a certain type of modernist fiction dominated by an aesthetics of formal mastery, and it drew on a marginalized “figural” tendency within modernism as the instrument of its attack on high modernist fiction. It is crucial here to underscore the term “tendency,” for late modernist writing is not defined by a rigidly defined set of formal features, as if suddenly at the turn of 1927 all poets began writing sonnets of thirteen lines. Indeed, late modernist writers energetically sought to deflate the category of form as a criterion for judging literary works. For the latter-day reader, their works reveal how contingent was the modernist buildup of form and formal mastery, crucially important to the advances of a small, prestigious group of writers and critics, but by no means coextensive with the field of modernism as such—particularly when one began to consider writers outside the canonized mainstream for political reasons, as was Wyndham Lewis; for reasons of gender and sexuality, as were Djuna
Barnes and Mina Loy; and for national reasons, as was Beckett. If modernist poetics are a mesh of interrelated statements, evaluations, and judgments, then late modernist writing is the product of the pressure of historical circumstances on that mesh, which threatens to fray or break at its weakest points. Late modernism does indeed deform and change the shape and function of that network; yet it also heightens latent strains within it. Like a red-headed child in a family of blonds, the recessive traits of this body of works reveal what lay hidden in modernism’s genetic past all along—an unassimilated heritage of the continental avant-gardes; a pariahed corpus of works tainted with satirical, documentary, or argumentative elements; the unsung and often unpublished works of founding modernist women like Gertrude Stein and Mina Loy.

In their struggle against what they perceived as the apotheosis of form in earlier modernism, late modernist writers conjured the disruptive, deforming spell of laughter. They developed a repertoire of means for unsettling the signs of formal craft that testified to the modernist writer’s discursive mastery. Through a variety of satiric and parodic strategies, they weakened the formal cohesion of the modernist novel and sought to deflate its symbolic resources, reducing literary figures at points to a bald literalness or assimilating them to the degraded forms of extraliterary discourse. They represent a world in free fall, offering vertiginously deranged commentary as word, body, and thing fly apart with a ridiculous lack of grace. Three snapshots of this hilarious descent:

“I am so terribly glad you like me—I like you very much!”

The delicious confession because of the exciting crudity of words thrills him, it has the sanctity of a pact that a kiss alone could properly seal and he pauses in confusion; then big burning Gretchen he yodels on putting into clumsy brazen words all the sentimental secracies coveted by the Fausts with jammy and milky appetites in the dark ages of simplicity.²⁹

She had a beaked head and the body, small, feeble, and ferocious, that somehow made one associate her with Judy; they did not go together. Only severed could any part of her have been called “right.” . . . Her body suffered from its fare, laughter and crumbs, abuse and indulgence. But put out a hand to touch her, and her head moved perceptibly with the broken arc of two instincts, recoil and advance, so that the head rocked timidly and aggressively at the same moment, giving her a slightly shuddering and expectant rhythm.³⁰

Then Watt said, Obscure keys may open simple locks, but simple keys obscure locks never. But Watt had hardly said this when he regretted having done so. But then it was too late, the words were said and could never
be forgotten, never undone. But a little later he regretted them less. And a little later he did not regret them at all. And a little later they pleased him again, no less than when they had first sounded, so gentle, so cajoling, in his skull. And then again a little later he regretted them again, most bitterly. And so on.\textsuperscript{31}

The object of derision here is so closely intertwined with the order and choice of words used to enact the ridicule that they merge in a single rhythm of phrasing just below the threshold of laughter. As I will suggest in my next chapter, these texts dramatize a particularly violent discombotulation of body and thought, a mirthless comedy of bodily discomposure. They hover at an unstable point between one extreme, the author’s capture of laughter and reduction of it to literary representations, and the other, its liberation once more from the text through the reader’s laughter. Through such means, too, late modernist works dramatized the comic fragility of modernist attempts to contain contingency and violence aesthetically, through literary form. Within the late modernist novel, the formal “lapses” bound to laughter allowed expression of those negative forces of the age that could not be coaxed into any admirable design of words: its violence, madness, absurd contingencies, and sudden deaths.

Late modernist writing thus coheres as a distinctive literary “type” within the historical development of modernist literature, serving as an index of a new dispensation, a growing skepticism about modernist sensibility and craft as means of managing the turbulent forces of the day. Viewed from the narrow perspective of literary form, late modernist writing weakens the relatively strong symbolic forms still evident in high modernist texts. It reopens the modernist enclosure of form onto the work’s social and political environs, facilitating its more direct, polemical engagement with topical and popular discourses.\textsuperscript{32} From the point of view of the external context, it also registers the ways in which intense social, political, and economic pressures of the period increasingly threatened the efficacy of high modernist form. These converging historical vectors are powerfully evident in the literary texts of those authors on whom the second part of this study focuses, authors who wrote their primary works of fiction after the modernist “boom” of the early twenties. Emerging in Lewis’s \textit{The Apes of God} and \textit{The Childermass}, in Barnes’s \textit{Ryder} and \textit{Nightwood}, and in Beckett’s \textit{More Pricks Than Kicks} and \textit{Murphy}, late modernist fiction took a detour from the high modernist road and consciously struck out on the byways and footpaths where the modernist movement had begun to stray.
IV

I must acknowledge from the outset the problem of inclusion that any such term as "late modernism" entails. Like its parent concepts "modernism" and "postmodernism," the notion of "late modernism" suffers from two notable difficulties. First is the problem of defining its chronological boundaries. Period terms tend to suggest, even when this assumption is not made explicit, an essential correspondence between the "spirit of the age" (or, for the historical materialist, the social history of a period) and representative works of art. Modernist works are, in this view, synecdoches of "the modern age"; postmodernist works likewise express the "postmodern condition." But when exactly, skeptics often ask, do these begin and end? And why can we find works that seem "postmodern" in the "modern" age or even earlier? The second problem is related but of even greater practical consequence for the critic: the problem of selection. What is included by the category, and what is left out? On what basis does the critic select a "representative" canon of "late modernist" works?

The selection of a representative canon, I would argue, can never be unassailable, given the selectiveness that haunts even the most careful and detailed exposition of a period. Moreover, as I have already remarked, I am quite consciously engaging in a labor of critical advocacy, of "making the case" for a body of works, and in that sense, also of trying to establish a canon for which "late modernism" would be a legitimate and illuminating critical and historical designation. Canons may be either consciously shaped or unconsciously adopted; with respect to the surprisingly stable canon of modernist authors and works, I seek to tip the balance toward a knowing partiality. In turn, my readers will have to judge whether they find compelling the reasons I offer for preferring a "bad new" modernist canon, stood up on still-tottering feet, over a "good old" one, squatly resting on a plinth of tacit beliefs and received ideas. Lest, however, my attempt to define a distinct late modernist mode and to heighten divisions within the broad field of modernist art and literature appear a mere critical coup-de-main, I will make my claims as clear and explicit as possible.

First, the writers I discuss as representative late modernists are directly linked only by loose affiliation. They shared certain common influences, read and published in some of the same or similar journals, and had some friends and associates in common. They do not, however, represent a "movement" in the sense of having self-consciously formulated goals
and formal organization to implement those goals. Here, it is useful to remember that terms like "modernism," "late modernism," "postmodernism," and so on, are the tools of the historians, professional assigners of labels not always chosen by the original participants. As C. Barry Chabot remarks on the provenance of the term "modernism": "‘Modernism’ is not a term equivalent to ‘Imagism,’ ‘Futurism,’ ‘Surrealism,’ ‘Vorticism’ and the like, which refer to specific schools or movements; instead, it is the term invoked to suggest what such particular and divergent programs have in common. It is a period concept; and its use involves the claim that in the end, and whatever their obvious difference, the individual energies of the time possess enough family resemblances that it makes sense to refer to them collectively."33 “Late modernism,” like “modernism,” refers to a significant set of family resemblances between writers during a certain period of time. It is a construction of the work of analysis, which allows these resemblances to be disclosed and judged. As a historical category, it stands and falls on the persuasiveness with which it helps bring these resemblances to light. Second, as already suggested, literary modernism has a number of divergent tendencies. As Chabot aptly notes, literary modernism “possesses nothing comparable to the Seagram Building” (34), a clear-cut monument of the modernist aesthetic in architecture. To speak of a late modernist reaction to modernism, then, requires the prior establishment of just what modernism the late modernists were attacking. In my interpretive chapters, I seek first to discover the process by which the individual writers came to break with modernism as they conceived it. Each had a different position within the broad circles of Anglo-American modernism; each understood “modernism” in somewhat different but nonetheless related ways. I consider the particularity of their reactions to their own individual conception of modernism but with an eye toward the “family resemblances” they share with other late modernists. Third, I attempt to reveal how the responses of late modernists to modernism, individually inflected as they were, were decisively shaped by common biographical and contextual factors. These commonalities account for the clustering of late modernist works within a limited number of years and justify the use of a periodizing term. Moreover, they legitimate a central aspect of my interpretive procedure: the reading of formal and figurative characteristics as indices of the author’s relation to his or her context. Fourth, the late modernist response to modernism is inseparable from its emergence as a historically codified phenomenon. Modernism had to
have aged, had to have become in a way "historical," had to have entered into a certain stage of canonization, for the kind of writing I discuss to be possible. By the twenties a canon of modernist authors and evaluative judgments about their works had begun to find general acceptance among critics and even among the general reading public. Joseph Conrad, for example, writes in his 1920 preface to *Under Western Eyes* (published originally in 1911) how the book was a failure with the English public when it first appeared, because of the modernist "detachment" of its narration. He received his "reward," he notes, only six years later, when the events in Russia created a context for his work to be understood and positively reevaluated. Not just from Conrad, however, but also from Henry James, Ford Madox Ford, D. H. Lawrence, James Joyce, and Virginia Woolf, among others, a positive and broadly accepted image of the "modern novel" in English emerged at this time. Late modernist fiction can, in fact, be understood as a reaction to a nascent canon of modernist writers and the aesthetic they represented. Late modernism makes self-conscious the limits of this model of modernism, centered on what Nicholls calls discursive mastery, and hence forecloses it as a dominant tendency. This sense of bringing modernism to a close reveals itself, allegorically, in the authors’ different handling of literary form and in their works’ less unified but more direct response to the historical currents in which they were written and read.

Fifth, this allegorical significance is available largely in retrospect, to the critic and historian. From a latter-day perspective, individual works of late modernist fiction can be interpreted as allegories of the end of modernism. While no single work exhaustively defines this historical phase of modernist writing, each represents a radiant fragment of the whole. Moreover, as allegories of the end of modernism, works of late modernism can be interpreted as anticipations of a time after modernism, literally "postmodernism." Understood as fragments of a future to be fulfilled, they can be, and often have been, crucial influences on later writers.

V

In the preceding pages, I have attempted to define why the works of the later 1920s and 1930s deserve a second, more systematic look by readers and scholars of modern writing. I have also made the case for reopening the conceptual pigeonholes into which we have been encour-
aged to put twentieth-century writing, housing in separate chambers the caged eagle of modernism and the spangled parakeet of postmodernism. But if late modernism is no more than a passageway between these two cages, which otherwise remain closed worlds, it still has relatively little to offer readers of today, outside specialists in the field.

Peter Bürger, however, has argued that the very relevance of the arts in the contemporary world is at stake in understanding the fate of modernism: “One could . . . claim that all relevant art today defines itself in relation to modernism. If this is so, then a theory of contemporary aesthetics has the task of conceptualizing a dialectical continuation of modernism.” By rethinking in this book the aesthetics of modernism and the question of its relevance in light of its undeniable historical “decline,” I seek to rise to Bürger’s provocating challenge. I place late modernist writing in the early-twentieth-century context of shifting hierarchies within the arts, intensive development of the mass media, and traumatic events of social and political history—historical trends that were incipient for high modernist writers, yet not so ineluctably part of the “weather” as they would become during the 1930s. These developments opened new fault lines in both individual and collective experience, splits that today we have reinhabited but hardly repaired; late modernists laid the foundations for this dangerous way of dwelling. Taking their stand upon the shifting seismic plates of European society between two catastrophic wars, late modernist writers confronted no less an issue than the survival of individual selves in a world of technological culture, mass politics, and shock experience, both on the battlefield and in the cities of the intervening peace.

As I will show, these writers perceived as a general state of affairs a kind of all-pervasive, collective, and incurable shell-shock, from which all suffer and which need not have trench experience as its precondition (though for many, of course, it did). Everyone, they suggest, has a bit of the automaton about him or her; it follows from the conditions of history within which we must make our selves, our lives, our cities. The distinction between the vital and the mechanical had become less sharp in the interwar years; the world of things had never seemed more animated, while the question “Does life live?” lost its apparent nonsensicality for masses of people. Yet the late modernist writers also discovered the ethical ground of their work in a seeming imperfection in the process: the arrested state of this movement toward the efficient robot, the failure to complete this mechanization of the body through to its end, the comical inability of humans to consummate the man-machine.
This ethical impulse was inseparable from a kind of bitter comedy. Laughter, itself a kind of spasmodic automatism only marginally distinct from the laughable mechanism of our embodied existence, can help serve to convince us that a self, however minimal, is still there. *Rideo ergo sum*. The self confirms itself in laughter, persists in the interval between automatism and its comic reflex. It is within this inescapable comedy that all are compelled to play—this condition in which, as Wyndham Lewis put it, “everyone should be laughed at or else no one should”—that both solidarity and difference must find their future ground. These literary works of late modernism represent the initial, tentative steps in its exploration. Accordingly, in the chapter that follows, I attempt to provide readers with a broad topographical map of this terrain, this “riant spaciousness,” before passing on to examine in detail some of its specific zones and features in the latter half of the book.