

Introduction

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“Now the current flows, now we rush faster than before.”
—Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*

This issue of *intervalla* is entitled “Modernist Currents.” Through seven diverse essays, the issue aims to both shed light and reflect upon the current state of modernist studies by offering a selection of emerging and important approaches to modernism. Many words have already been dedicated to the state of modernism as a field of study (indeed, this project of critical self-reflection is, in no small part, the subject matter of Copland and Peat’s essay here), but the intention of this issue of *intervalla* is not to solve or even engage with what Sean Latham and Gayle Rogers have called in their introduction to *Modernism: Evolution of an Idea*, the “problem” of modernism (1). What this issue intends is at once more modest and wider ranging: to showcase seven “currents,” each of which might offer a different route into modernism. As the epigraph from Virginia Woolf suggests, currents can flow at different speeds, and they can also flow in multiple, sometimes overlapping, sometimes even opposing directions. Thus these essays are purposely diverse in both approach and theme, even as each author engages with the common question of how his or her work resonates with broader contemporary trends in the study of modernism.

There is, of course, another obvious sense of “current”—that which is contemporary, which belongs to the present time. As this issue explores some of the questions that are currently preoccupying modernist scholars, it offers insight into what modernism means to us today and a snapshot, albeit necessarily partial, of the state of modernist criticism in 2016. Broad ranging in both topic and theoretical approach, the essays in this issue reflect emerging and evolving critical trends, including print culture, aging studies, race and ethnic studies, object-

oriented ontology, and young adult fiction; and, at the same time, they offer reconsiderations of more established tenets of modernist studies, including conceptions of mimesis, *bildung*, and modernist “difficulty.” The essays cross multiple genres (poetry, fiction, fantasy, journalism, and literary criticism) and they also follow the trans-disciplinary spirit of *intervalla* by transgressing disciplinary boundaries as they consider, for example, the intersection of art and science or the role of the modernist marketplace.

Yet, while the issue as a whole might be concerned with what is “current,” many of these essays reveal a persistent engagement with ideas of history and the past in the form of literary and book history, genetics or genealogy, inheritance, mourning, or even fantastical memories. As Glenn Clifton observes in his essay here, to be current need not entail the “rejection of the past wholesale” but rather the “ability to reconsider and transmit the past after critical consideration” (92). Each essay thus offers a reconsideration of a particular modernist text or tradition but, taken together, they also suggest a view of modernism as a movement made up of multiple overlapping and multi-directional currents and counter-currents. As a whole, then, this issue invites readers to reflect upon the currents (in both senses of the word) that come to constitute both the modernist canon and our own critical community of modernist scholars.

The first essay, Sarah Copland and Alexandra Peat’s “Mending Walls and Making Neighbors: Spatial Metaphors in the New Modernist Studies,” serves to both open and frame this issue of *intervalla*. Copland and I explore the project of definitional enquiry that is central to the New Modernist Studies and, in the process, identify the predominance of spatial metaphors and, particularly, metaphors of walls, borders, and boundaries in the discourse of modernist criticism. In order to think further about such representations and conceptions of walls, we turn to Robert Frost’s “Mending Wall,” a famously hard to pin down modernist poem which ambiguously depicts walls as not only borders, but also points of contact and exchange, and which, moreover, is perhaps most interested in the relationships between the people who build the walls and live both within and without them. The essay ends by turning attention to a related

metaphorical construct that is equally central to Frost's poem, that of the neighbor. It is tempting to apply the neighborhood model of modernism advanced in this essay to the collection of essays in this issue of *intervalla*, and to see the individual essays as well as the various modernist writers and thinkers addressed therein as metaphorical neighbors. For Copland and me, the neighborhood model is appealing in the way that it draws attention to "the territory we share" while at the same time allowing "multiple and perhaps seemingly incompatible approaches" (22).

The next two papers explore modernism's own complex relationship with the past in order to complicate simplistic discourses of progress. In "Plot Counter Plot: Genetics and Generic Strain in the Modernist Novel of Formation," Daniel Aureliano Newman is interested not in neighbors but in families, particularly in the tension between biological notions of hereditariness and literary conceptions of individualism. He explores how modern scientific theories of genetics disturbed received ideas about inheritance and, in turn, narrative constructs of individual development. Newman surveys modernist *bildungsromane* that overtly engage with questions of reproduction and heredity (including works by Samuel Becket, James Joyce, and Nella Larsen), coining the term *genic* in order to describe novels specifically interested in genetics. Noting that past modernist scholarship has tended to "emphasize if anything [biology's] sinister applications," Newman draws our attention instead to the "richness and critical power modernists might have recognized in the science" (31). In "The New Old Woman of the 1930s: Aging and Women's History in Woolf, Sackville-West, and Holtby," Glenn Clifton explores similar questions of inheritance and intergenerational connection, but he places them in the context of gender politics, noting how women modernists of the 1930s imagined new models of inheritance at a time when "material inheritance" had long been "an emblem of patriarchy" (79). In a richly historical reading of novels by Woolf, Vita Sackville-West, and Winifred Holtby, Clifton convincingly counters the notion that modernism was predominantly concerned with the new and the young by showing how older female protagonists engage with their younger

counterparts, and become both representations of an alternative women's history and critical emblems for progress.

Following these essays are pieces by Jennifer Sorensen, Claire Battershill, and Alyson Brickey, which can be roughly grouped together as sharing an interest in modernist print culture and textual artifact. Sorensen's "Female Embodiment in the Marketing of Modernism" is, like Clifton's essay that precedes it, about the New Woman. Sorensen reads the hypervisible women's gendered bodies circulated and displayed in modernist print culture, paying close attention to photographs and pictorial representations of women modernist writers in highbrow little magazines, popular print venues, and book dust jackets and frontispieces. Sorensen notes how the gendered marketing of modernism capitalized on the "glamour" of the woman writer in a way that, for some writers, could feel like a misrepresentation, if not violation. As she reads between the texts and images of women writers such as Katherine Mansfield and Djuna Barnes, she considers authors' concerns about the blurring of private and public versions of their selves, and Sorensen's consideration of "readerly desires for authorial bodies" (118) might also make us question some of our current constructions of modernist women writers. In "Metaphor and the Limits of Print in Ezra Pound's *Cantos*," Claire Battershill refigures the famous "difficulty" of Pound's poem as textual as much as interpretive when she describes it as "an essentially unpublishable epic" (126). Battershill notes the fundamentally fragmentary nature of *The Cantos*, tracing the itinerant paper trail of an epic that was published in parts, in little magazines, newspapers, and various book editions. She explores Pound's own use of textual metaphors in the poem, suggesting not only how these offer "the reader ways of seeing the mutable textual form of the long poem" (127), but also how both these textual metaphors and Pound's attention to speech and modes of orality point to the "limits of print" (128). By the end of Battershill's essay, the "unpublishable," unreadable epic emerges as an exploration of the limits of both print culture and readerly attention. Alyson Brickey's "Faulkner's Coffin" is interested in both narrative form and the book as an object. She reads *As I Lay Dying* as "a kind of textual

carpentry” (144), specifically a perspectively 6-sided narrative construction that resembles the fictional coffin the Bundren family carry with them throughout the novel. As Brickey explores William Faulkner’s novel through the frame of Frederic Jameson’s *Antinomies of Realism*, she claims the text as a “realist modernist object” that is simultaneously “built and destroyed” (147, 146). Like Sorensen and Battershill, Brickey is interested in readers and reading; her analysis of Faulkner’s novel shows how scholarship’s evolving interest in material objects can reshape our ideas about mimesis, realism, and ekphrasis as well as, more broadly, “art’s relationship to the external world” (163).

This issue of *intervalla* concludes with an essay by Jennifer Reimer entitled, “Darkening the Dream: The Fantasy of History and the Reality of Difference in Libba Bray’s *The Diviners*.” At first glance, this essay might seem to take us away from the field of modernism, as it explores a young adult fantasy novel published in 2012. However, Reimer examines the interwar Harlem setting of Bray’s novel, paying particular attention to depictions of race, ethnicity, and social class in order to suggest how the interwar era made and shaped the world that we have inherited. Reimer argues that “Bray uses the possibilities of historical fantasy not only to re-imagine US history from the borders, but also to comment back on the US’s present moment” (191). Bray’s imaginative re-engagement with modernist writers such as Langston Hughes allows Reimer to explore what modernism means to us now. Her essay can productively be placed in dialogue with the essay by Copland and Peat that opens the issue. However, whereas the latter focuses on modernist criticism and scholarship, Reimer opens up room to consider modernism’s continuing impact on popular culture as well as contemporary politics and models of ethics. This suggests, therefore, one more way in which the “currents” of modernism continue to flow and reverberate into the world in which we live today.

WORKS CITED

Latham, Sean and Gayle Rogers. *Modernism: Evolution of an Idea*. London: Bloomsbury, 2015.