

***Modernist Commitments: Ethics, Politics, and Transnational Modernism.*** By Jessica Berman. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011. vii + 372 pp. \$29.50 paper.

In this rigorous and theoretically nuanced study, Berman argues persuasively that a “*rapprochement*” between politics and ethics is necessary, and that modernist narrative is the means by which such a move might occur. Furthermore, in reframing our thinking about modernism as a repertoire of responses to modernity, she broadens what we might consider “modernist” narratives, techniques, conventions, and strategies to be. Most crucial to this

reframing is defining modernism as committed, and narrative acts of modernism as *engagé*, both politically and ethically, in a transnational context.

In her introduction, "Imagining Justice," Berman situates her study within the realm of ethics, specifically the work of Emmanuel Levinas and Jean-Luc Nancy, in order to show that current and historical theorizing of ethics does not extend to political action, relationships, or explicitly political awareness, nor does it always or necessarily account for a vision of community predicated on justice. What she refers to as "narrative action," conceptualized in light of the work of Paul Ricoeur, is a means by which the "*rapprochement*" between politics and ethics might occur: narrative moves and techniques in texts taking an explicitly *engagé* stance become political actions and the means by which we imagine community and justice. Modernist texts working through ethical and political responses to modernity become sites of interrogation and resistance through the very act of narrative and formal experimentation. The negotiation of multiple perspectives and discursive frameworks that features so prominently in modernist texts allows for the "modulat[ion of] possible global meanings of modernism and modernity even as they remind us of the political challenges to which they respond" (8). Modernist texts as read by Berman are characterized by the "interconnection of narrative experimentation with commitment" (10), as she calls on us to broaden our understanding of modernism to include works of a dramatically "committed" nature, circulating in transnational contexts and conversations. By placing works by Cornelia Sorabji, Max Aub, and Meridel Le Sueur in conversation with Virginia Woolf, for instance, one might see that modernist technique is deployed throughout our moment of modernity and in many contexts as a response to its ethical demands and political pressures.

A strength of this study is Berman's close readings of the texts she has chosen to exemplify her re-theorization of modernism through ideas about ethics and justice; form follows function here, as she builds a convincing case that modernist narrative structures and strategies are actually necessary as responses to modernity in terms of critiquing colonialism, class, race, and gender, and their structures of power. Comparing works that share techniques like the destabilization of generic boundaries, narrative perspective, and time and space which characterize both "high modernist" writers like Woolf and Joyce and writers not typically considered under such a rubric, like Max Aub or Jack Conroy, allows Berman to discern common ethical and political concerns.

The structure of Berman's book enacts this dialogue, putting canonical modernist texts into conversation with slightly less canonical works in Part One and then expanding the conversation to texts that are rarely, if ever, considered to be "modernist." Part One is deliberately comparative, essentially teaching us how to read modernism through Berman's framework,

using modernist texts we are already familiar with—not defamiliarizing them for us, exactly, but showing how even novels we think we know open up under Berman’s eyes and making a forceful case for a modernist ethics; this section of the book is conceived as “a discursive proving ground for an alternative modernism” bound to “social and political position[s]” (143). A sort of reverse-osmosis then takes place with Part Two, wherein texts that are not considered modernist, and are even more or less unknown, are then read through that same lens. Focusing on their shared affinities with the novels Berman reinterpreted in Part One, we learn how to read new works, and we learn how to read them as modernist. Thus Berman takes on the bigger question, raised in recent years by the reconfiguration of modernist studies by scholars like Laura Doyle, Rebecca Walkowitz, and Mark Wollaeger, of how to read modernist texts: not as connected to particular metropolises (London, Paris, Berlin); not as defined by particular technical or stylistic characteristics (stream of consciousness, warped chronologies, etc.)—but as an interrogation of the ethical self shaped by an experience of modernity and its “formal *and* political challenges” (112; italics added).

One might have wished for more interweaving of these two parts, as the two-part structure reinforces somewhat the conventional critical split between “high modernism” and everything else; nevertheless, the readings are persuasive and substantiate Berman’s argument. Furthermore, the range of chosen texts—the interplay of fiction, documentary, and autobiography, the collaging of visual and archival material, the new imagining of space and geography—all make for exciting reading. Fundamental to Berman’s discussion of modernist literature as transnational and engaged is Hannah Arendt’s notion of “enlarged thinking” (93); Berman calls on readers to think through the self as part of a web of relationships, an intermingling of voices, and she suggests that modernist narrative “responds aesthetically to changing social structures, economies, interpersonal relations, and ethical obligations...inscrib[ing] anxieties about subjectivity and voice...and concern about changes in social and political life into its experimentations with chronology and emplotment” (144-45). So, in Part One, theories of space and geography link readings of Woolf’s *Orlando* and *Three Guineas* with Jean Rhys’s *Voyage in the Dark* as Berman discusses the ethics of intimate space and the ways the representation of temporal and spatial dislocation permit an interrogation of power structures underlying class and colonialism. A reimagining of the genre of the bildungsroman and of narrative perspective connects discussions of Mulk Raj Anand’s *Untouchable* and *Coolie* with Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*; here, Berman focuses attention on the ways a radical new focus on “the geopolitics of empire and colonialism” opens up a new understanding of modernist genre and subjectivity (121).

In Part Two, Berman makes daring moves with chapters ranging

from the *zenana* of India to the battles of the Spanish Civil War to the cornfields of the American Midwest. The purpose of this section of *Modernist Commitments* is to exemplify modernist narrative acts that speak to and perform gestures of political and ethical engagement. Berman takes her readers out of the urban and Anglo-European spaces that characterize typical accounts of modernism in order to widen our understanding of aesthetic and ethical responses to modernity, and to posit a modernist ethics. “Modernism in the *Zenana*” (*zenana* referring to the “women’s sphere of the home” [140]) looks at the work of Cornelia Sorabji, Iqbalunnisa Hussain, and G. Ishvani with the purpose of making questions of female identity and private space integral to modernism; to do this Berman analyzes “formal hallmarks we have long associated with European modernism,” such as the relationship between inner life and the social world, nonlinear time, and experiments with perspective (143). A chapter on Max Aub and Spanish Civil War texts places such writing, what Aub called “transcendental realism”—reality filtered through subjectivity—in the context of “European narrative innovation” (196, 187), again raising the stakes for such experimentation first by connecting it to ethical and political commitment and second by the insistence that taking it into account must alter our understanding of modernism itself. Finally, “Arising from the Cornlands,” concentrating on Jack Conroy and Meridel Le Sueur, shows how working-class writing challenges ways of reading modernism via an embodied and textual resistance to modernity.

*Modernist Commitments* makes a convincing case that the stakes for narrative experimentation are quite high, and that the aesthetics of modernism have political implications. Both in terms of methodology and in choice of texts, this study enacts an engagement with ethical issues and ethical reading. For those interested in new interpretations of modernist texts, Berman’s book is invaluable. For those who recognize the urgency of rethinking modernism as a transnational response to the exigencies of modernity, it is a necessity.