

Modernist Belongings

Studies on Community, Identity, Adscription



Juan L. Pérez-de-Luque
Paula Martín-Salván
(eds.)

EDITORIAL COMARES



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Introduction

JUAN L. PÉREZ-DE-LUQUE AND PAULA MARTÍN-SALVÁN

The present volume aims at studying some of the key texts and authors of modernism in the English-speaking world through the key concept of ‘modernist belongings.’ ‘To belong’ indicates, etymologically, a lineal connection—long, *lang-* in Old English, *langa-* in Proto-Germanic—encapsulated in the meaning “to go along with.” What belongs where, to whom or what, in this sense of “going along with,” is our concern here in a double sense. First, because the essays here collected explore, in a variety of ways, the concerns of modernist authors with the ideas of belonging to different forms of community, either of a political or social kind (nation, family, class) or in an aesthetic sense (communities of readers, critics and translators who establish lines of continuity between a work and its contexts of reception). Second, because this collection aims at signifying the belonging of its contributors to an academic community of sorts, the type of community born in a classroom, joining together groups of students and professors in what Stanley Fish called “interpretive communities” (1980, 14). These essays are our visible homage to the community created around the lifework of Professor Luis Costa Palacios, who taught English literature, and especially modernist literature, to several generations of students at the University of Córdoba. With this book, we indicate our belonging to the interpretive community Prof. Costa managed to create in his classes.

It seems appropriate, moreover, that such a community was to be established around modernist literature, since many of these texts specifically pose the question of belonging, the problem of identifying whom to go along with. Modernism is often articulated, in critical discourse, around the ideas of solipsism, rupture with the dominant communitarian and ideological frameworks of the nineteenth century (the family, the nation, the Church...) and alienation from ‘the common.’ Georg Lukács set the grounds for such critical view in his dismissive assessment of modernist literature as characterized by the view that “man is by nature solitary, asocial, unable to enter into relationships with other human beings” (1963, 20). Later critics like Terry Eagleton or

Raymond Williams would shore up such depiction by invoking “isolated, estranged images of alienation and loss” (Williams 1989, 51) and focusing on the figure of the alienated individual: “the human subject is at once adrift, cast off” (Eagleton 2000, 40). In what amounts to a confirmation of this critical position, Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane defined modernism as “art consequent on the disestablishing of communal reality” (1991, 27). Yet, few aesthetics have been so deliberately constructed around collective processes of ascription or integration, understood as relational dynamics (see Rodríguez Salas *et al.* 2018, 1-20). While clearly departing from conventional models of community perceived as hegemonic social constructions (the family, the nation, the class system), many of the texts analyzed in what follows interrogate the very notion of community, and often propose alternative forms of belonging, shaped through enigmatic communitarian bonds, of the kind epitomized by the relationship between Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Smith in *Mrs. Dalloway*.

Even for authors such as Joyce or Beckett, whose disaffection with Irish nationalism marks their aesthetic identities as a radical break with their communities of origin, the search for commonality is reactively constructed as a process of reattachment: if I am not X, with whom or to what do I belong? The idea of belonging contains, in its three meanings—to be proper, to be an obligation, to be an integral part of—the relational gesture that becomes visible in the articulation of modernism through aesthetic determination and explorations of the *munus*. This would be the communal as defined by Roberto Esposito in *Communitas*, not as what is *proper* to members of a community, but the responsibility of an office, the giving away of oneself to others (2010, 4). In bringing together a series of canonical authors, the question of belonging, understood as aesthetic ascription to the movement, is posed from the perspective of the process of formation of the literary canon, and in the identification of key works such as *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), *Ulysses* (1922) or *The ABC of Reading* (1934) as texts that define the lowest common denominator of what will come to be called modernism. On the other hand, in response to the question of aesthetic ascription concerning authors such as H.P. Lovecraft, who are not usually identified as canonical modernists, the essay devoted to his works proposes the expansion of the mark of belonging, the search for common features that allow us to reposition the interpretation of their texts from the perspective of this modernist rootedness.

The different chapters in the collection have been organized in chronological order, considering the dates of publication of the texts discussed in each one. Yet, essays are also ascribed to a dual thematic orientation: On the one hand, several chapters analyze the dynamics of belonging or estrangement and disaffection regarding communities and identities of aesthetic or ideological nature. This is the case with the chapters devoted to *Dubliners* by James Joyce (Pilar Botías Domínguez), *Mrs. Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf (María Valero Redondo), Beckett's *Trilogy* (María J. López) or “The Displaced Person” by Flannery O'Connor (Paula Martín-Salván). On

the other hand, the other series of chapters focuses on issues of aesthetic ascription to modernism and the movement's reception. Belonging here is related to processes of transmission, interpretation and adaptation. Chapters that adopt such a critical perspective are the ones devoted to Ezra Pound's *ABC of Reading* (Leonor Martínez Serrano), H.P. Lovecraft (Juan L. Pérez-de-Luque), the translation and reception of E.E. Cummings in Spain (M^a Luisa Pascual Garrido), and the critical interpretation of Joyce's *Ulysses* (Julián Jiménez Heffernan).

CHAPTER SUMMARIES

Pilar Botías Domínguez: This first chapter in the collection aims to explore melancholia as portrayed in several stories from James Joyce's *Dubliners* (1914). The concept of melancholia which is analysed corresponds to the mental condition dissected in Sigmund Freud's seminal essay "Mourning and Melancholia" published in 1917. His description provides the conceptual framework to examine Joyce's characters. In each text analysed melancholia is a by-product of the paralysis Dublin and its inhabitants are experiencing. This physical and psychological paralysis is ubiquitously manifested in two stories: "Eveline" and "A Little Cloud." The protagonists share a common sense of stagnation and estrangement in their own lives. This individual instability leads to a series of melancholic behaviours which resonate with the present state of the country in Joyce's view. Through an individualistic representation of stagnation and despair, each protagonist typifies a Dubliner whose identity is enclosed in a melancholic routine.

Julián Jiménez Heffernan: This chapter, entitled "Jacques Derrida Reads Joyce's *Ulysses* at the Playground, circa 1955: Notes on Missed Echoes," discusses the interpretation, misinterpretation and overinterpretation of *Ulysses* (1922) in the context of poststructuralism. The essay opens by tracing Umberto Eco's critical interventions in debates around *Ulysses*, with *Le poétique di Joyce*, translated into English with the title *The Aesthetics of Chaosmos: The Middle Ages of James Joyce* (1989), almost thirty years after its original Italian publication as a section of *Opera aperta* (1962). Although received by Joyce scholars with polite praise, few bothered to note the important role this study had played in the renovation of Joyce studies in the very theoretical direction the discipline would end up taking after Jacques Derrida's two momentous interventions, the lecture on *Finnegans Wake* delivered in Paris 1982 and the opening address at the Ninth International James Joyce Symposium in Frankfurt in 1984. The dialogue, apropos of Joyce, between Eco and Derrida never took (historical) place, but its speculative occurrence remains pertinent. To prove this, Jiménez Heffernan's essay examines the theoretical assumptions and heuristic claims that underpin and articulate Eco's original study on Joyce. The most salient claim is that Joyce's narrative prose is inescapably determined by a *forma mentis* inherited from the architectonics

of Scholastic philosophy he was exposed to during his years as a student in a Jesuit institution. Because the experimental rearrangements Joyce managed to effect over this legacy were exclusively formal, the unshakable assumption, for Eco, is that there is a clear-cut difference between content and form, and that therefore, in the case of Joyce, “the forms of thought” came always “before content” (1989, 11). This transcendental assumption is further enhanced through the application of another critical prejudice, the neat distinction between the subjective and the objective. According to Eco, Joyce follows Aristotelian and Scholastic aesthetics by favoring the objective dimension of the artistic experience and practice. The upshot is a poetics of formalist perfection based on *proportio*, *integritas*, and *claritas*, at work in Joyce’s construal of the notion of epiphany. Thus emerges the figure of the modern creator who reconstructs old forms, putting new contents into them, by means of a poetics of disciplined formal perfection that is typically constructionist—where beauty, rather than given, is formally produced. This, the essay argues, is a poetics of construction, at most reconstruction, certainly not deconstruction.

María Valero Redondo: This essay on Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) aims at examining the tension between operative and inoperative communities—following Nancy’s and Blanchot’s terminology—in Woolf’s novel. Through the character of Clarissa Dalloway, Woolf sheds light on the dichotomy between “the commonly accepted model of community” (Miller 2005, 88), which Nancy calls “operative community” (1991) and which is based on social contracts and essentialist discourses, and an alternative, inoperative community, which is made up by singularities and which is based on the exposure to otherness. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Valero Redondo argues, the operative community is represented through the superficial and hypocritical social conventions of the London society after World War I. Clarissa’s constricted social role as “Mrs. Dalloway,” as well as her immersion into middle age, show that her identity is often perceived in relation to her husband, her maternal and social duties, and her role within the upper-class society of London. This organic community is constructed around the foundational myths of marriage, gender roles and the social hierarchy. The London society represented in the novel, with its social gatherings and artificial relationships, reinforces these myths. And yet, Valero Redondo claims, Woolf also shows glimpses of the inoperative community, particularly through the character of Septimus Smith, a war veteran suffering from shell shock. His death—and Clarissa’s epiphany after hearing about it—symbolizes “the negative community: the community of those who have no community” (Blanchot 1988, 24), a space where conventional social bonds are unproductive and which rejects an essentialist appropriation of death. Hence, despite Clarissa’s failed attempts to bring people together at her parties, it is only through her exposure to Septimus’s death that she finally achieves genuine communication.

Leonor M.^a Martínez Serrano: This essay explores Ezra Pound’s reflections on language as the medium of poetry, as well as on books and reading as expressed

in his essay “How to Read” (1931), his book-length meditation *ABC of Reading* (1934), and his ambitious *Guide to Kulchur* (1938), all of which give a measure of the boundlessness of Pound’s curiosity and desire to educate others. As a passionate lover of human cultures, books, libraries, and languages as the very fibre out of which life itself is spun, Ezra Pound felt a prolonged, life-long fascination with the material side inherent in the writing of poetry. It is no wonder that he devoted innumerable essays to prosody and the music of poetry and that he produced a portable literary vademecum for purposes of cultural enlightenment. From the very outset of his literary career, the poet’s commitment and devotion to his art was on a par with a kind of pedagogical impulse informing his prose writing, which constitutes the object of this chapter.

Juan L. Pérez-de-Luque discusses Lovecraft’s challenging relation with modernism in chapter 5. A curious parallel could be traced between Pound and H.P. Lovecraft (1890-1937). Though Lovecraft was mainly a writer of horror and science fiction literature, whose publications usually appeared in pulp magazines, he also wrote literary criticism, in his essays and correspondence, and often assumed a pedagogical role in texts like “Suggestions for a reading guide” (1936).. Despite being contemporary to the modernist movement, the writer always distanced himself from it. In one of his essays on literary criticism, he considered modernist writers to be “one loud and conspicuous faction of bards, giving way to the corrupt influences of a decaying general culture” (1915, 13). He despised modernism in the face of a much more canonical style, which evolved directly “from the poesy of the Georgian period” (1915, 13). However, Lovecraft’s relationship with modernism is complex, as his view of Yeats, whom he considers “undoubtedly the greatest figure of the Irish revival if not the greatest of all living poets” (1927, 116), attests. Starting from the various theories that set out the fundamental features of the modernist movement, this chapter seeks to explore how Lovecraft does, in fact, exhibit many literary patterns that can be ascribed to this literary tradition. Thus, the starting point may well be the writer’s inability to understand and assimilate the rapid social, political, and cultural changes in which the United States found itself at the turn of the century. In addition, aspects of his work such as the particular use of language, the ideological undercurrents, and the corrupt pastoral narrative are of particular significance.

M.^a Luisa Pascual: This essay on E.E. Cummings (1894-1962) is also concerned with reception and aesthetic ascription. It aims to describe Cummings’ poetic reception in Spain by reviewing existing anthologies of his work in translation. Translation has always been an indispensable instrument for the widening of ideological and aesthetic horizons and the renovation of literary repertoires. Before examining the dissemination of Cummings’ poetry in Spanish culture, its reception in the anglophone world will be first considered to try to account for the dissonance between the enormous popularity of the American poet and the mixed reactions his poetry

raised in academic circles. After delineating the most salient thematic and stylistic features of Cummings' verse, an assessment of the several versions of Cummings' poetry found in Spain will be undertaken, focusing on aspects of his work either foregrounded or silenced in the Spanish collections of his verse. Special attention will be paid to the most recent Spanish translations published in 2023. Pascual Garrido concludes that the different anthologies and the belated reception of his work in Spain have shaped significantly the gradual process by which this American poet has attained literary recognition in our country.

María J. López: This essay takes on another major author from the modernist canon, Samuel Beckett, in order to examine Beckett's *Trilogy* (1951-1953) in the light of theoretical and critical contributions coming from the field of "Critical Transparency Studies." A substantial body of work on the dialectics between secrecy and transparency has emerged in the recent past, in the realms of sociology, political theory and cultural studies (see Alloa and Thomä, 2018). These works tend to identify the hegemony of a rhetoric of transparency in public and political life (Birchall 2011) as "a defining feature of the contemporary *Zeitgeist*" (Boothroyd 2011: 42; see also Dean 2002; Horn 2011; Broeders 2016). López argues that the resistance to a hegemonic rhetoric of transparency also pervades a work like Beckett's *Trilogy*, which, in this way, engages with the historical manifestations of political totalitarianism and authoritarianism that characterized the European context from which the novels included in the *Trilogy* emerged. In these novels, the main characters must respond, in one way or another, to figures or collectivities that, however vaguely and uncertainly, seem to exert some kind of power or authority over them; that would be the case of the anonymous 'they' to whom Molloy hands in his texts, the organization to which Malone belongs, the asylum in which MacMann lives, or those whom the Unnamable calls his "delegates" (Beckett 1958, 297) and "tormentors" (347). López explores to what extent it could be argued that what these figures demand from Molloy, Malone or the Unnamable is transparency understood as self-exposure, obedience and conformity, and in relation to the atmosphere of surveillance and persecution that the *Trilogy* constantly evokes. As opposed to that demand, what we find is the constant dissolution of language and subjectivity. As the subject becomes increasingly anonymous and disembodied (Parsons 1966, 91), the possibility of making him accountable and transparent disappears. In this way, the *Trilogy* can be regarded as an anticipation of the contemporary concern with the dangers and risks of total transparency, illustrating the radical opacity that narrations and accounts of the self always entail.

Paula Martín-Salván: The last essay in the collection discusses the representation of communities in Flannery O'Connor's 1955 *novella* "The Displaced Person". The text narrates the arrival of a Polish family to a farm in Georgia in the aftermath of World War II. The "displaced person" in question is Mr. Guizac, who is hired as farm hand by Mrs. McIntyre, the owner. The Guizacs are Holocaust survivors,

granted admission into the United States by the Displaced Persons Act of 1948. Their resettlement in Mrs. McIntyre's farm gives O'Connor the opportunity to explore the power relations established in such setting around the class, race, and gender divides, and the way the newcomers upset the existing *status quo*. The essay discusses O'Connor's text several key aspects concerning the representation of communities in the ecosystem of Mrs. McIntyre's farm: 1) The metonymical representation of entire social groups through individual characters standing for them. 2) The communal dynamics established between different groups (white-black-men-women-rich-poor-American-European). 3) The use of narrative progression and point of view in the representation of the Guizacs' arrival. 4) The realignment of communal dynamics as a consequence of such arrival. Drawing on theoretical approaches to community by Jean Luc Nancy, Maurice Blanchot, Roberto Esposito and Jacques Derrida, Martín-Salván argues that communities are represented in the text as reactive entities, whose main constitutive mechanism is immunity. Communities in "The Displaced Person" are not fixed, despite the apparently immovable nature of the categories around which they establish communal identity. Rather, they constitute themselves as communities in the process of signaling out what is not themselves. The process, however, results in self-destruction, since the novella, as argued in this chapter, illustrates the auto-immunity dynamics of the Jim Crow era social system, and points to a central paradox: that no sense of community exists other than the balance between the immunity practices of the separate groups within the system, in their attempt to maintain their equilibrium.

All in all, this volume aims at contributing to critical debates around the interpretation of key texts in the modernist tradition in the English language, from the perspective of unconventional forms of belonging articulated in such texts. The book, moreover, is meant to be an homage, a recognition of belonging to a singular community, built around the figure of Professor Luis Costa Palacios, who has been teacher of modernist literature to all contributors in the volume. This book aspires to honor Professor Luis Costa, and to render visible the community built around his teachings and his loving attention to literary texts. Quoting another modernist, P.G. Wodehouse: "There is no surer foundation for a beautiful friendship than a mutual taste in literature."

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Ana Belén Martínez López y Pedro San Ginés Aguilar

This volume breaks away from traditional readings of literary modernism in English, offering a fresh and fascinating interpretation. Rather than viewing modernism solely as a movement of rupture and isolation, it explores its persistent search for community, integration, and belonging.

Through rigorous yet accessible essays, the book examines how major figures like Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, Ezra Pound, and E.E. Cummings, as well as seemingly peripheral authors such as H.P. Lovecraft, articulate a reactive need for belonging, even as they rebel against the constraints imposed by nationalism, social structures, and traditional narrative forms.

This volume offers:

- A renewed and critical vision of modernism, dismantling myths about the alienated subject and solipsism.
- The opportunity to understand modernism as a relational space, where belonging does not always mean conformity but rather the rediscovery of identity through new connections.
- An analysis of essential authors alongside a vindication of less commonly acknowledged voices, equally valuable to the movement.

Organized in a clear and structured manner, the book invites reflection on two major themes:

1. Dynamics of Belonging and Estrangement: Exploring canonical works such as *Dubliners*, *Mrs. Dalloway*, and Beckett's trilogy.
2. Aesthetic Attribution and Modernist Reception: Addressing how modernism is redefined through fundamental texts by Pound, Lovecraft, and others.

In short, this book not only sheds new light on modernism from an unprecedented perspective but also offers readers a powerful tool for understanding how dynamics of belonging continue to shape our cultural narratives.



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