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## Political Pressures and Modernist Musicology

GEMMA MOSS, *Modernism, Music and the Politics of Aesthetics*.

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James Joyce's works are often preoccupied with musical expression as a method to further his narratives and offer incisive political critique. It is intrinsic to his work, and, as a result, new interventions in the wider conversation about Joyce and music come with their own challenges. Gemma Moss's *Modernism, Music and the Politics of Aesthetics* addresses this challenge by centering its central premise on the question of how the politics of writers like Joyce, Ezra Pound, and Sylvia Townsend Warner pressure the larger aesthetics of their written works. Moss turns to Theodor Adorno's musicology to interrogate these authors' outputs, arguing that his treatment of musical aesthetics developed in tandem with the social context of the works. "Adorno shares with Pound, Joyce, and Warner," Moss contends, "the conviction that music can be used to contemplate different, non-lexical and anti-rationalist ways of thinking" (43). *Modernism, Music and the Politics of Aesthetics* ultimately works to bring the social and the aesthetic elements of modernist works into conversation. Adorno's musicology, for instance, "consider[s] the musical composition as a product of the consciousness of an individual which is itself produced by social relations" and, as a result, "draws conclusions from music that have political relevance without disregarding the complexity of the music's social mediation or the difficulty of putting musical experience into words" (37). Adorno—and therefore Moss—looks to musical structure and form as the best way to draw connections between art and social analysis.

In the second chapter of the work, "James Joyce, *Ulysses*, and the Politics of Musical Form," Moss examines concepts of musical and literary form to argue that Joyce was someone who "produced texts that were influenced by a particular education and traditions that became destabilised due to shifting social, economic and political conditions" (49). The chapter draws effective parallels between Adorno's theories, Joyce's works, and Arnold Schoenberg's musical theories. Moss's candid skepticism about many of Joyce's claims about musicality in his works is a refreshing way to approach a formal analysis. As

an exploration of politics and aesthetics, however, this chapter feels a little underdeveloped.

Moss starts with an examination of *Chamber Music* and Joyce's theories on the cross-over between the poetic lyric and a "suite of songs," as Joyce once described it (qtd. in Moss 51). She concludes that "*Chamber Music* presents a dichotomy: music is artfully constructed and pleasant, while noise is dangerous and sinister" (55). Joyce's perception of the overlap between the two modes is much more developed in *Ulysses*, in which structural form is now as much a priority as sound and must also be considered against the cultural context of modernism and politics as well. Many have considered "Sirens" to be something of a marvel for its formal attempt to represent myriad strains of music occurring simultaneously via the introductory leitmotifs for the range of characters, but Moss points out that the "simultaneity is not achieved, but it is suggested" (58). Instead, the "opening words and phrases come to signify characters *and* temporality" in a way that only makes sense via the work's own self-referential form (60). Bloom's contemplations of music as numerical and form-based ("Numbers it is.... Vibrations: chords those are" [*U* 11.273]) allow us to view other references in Joyce's works in the wider context of modernist music during the composition of *Ulysses*.

Moss's most exciting intervention in Joyce and musicology comes from her comparison between Schoenberg's twelve-note composition method and the dissonance of the "Cyclops" episodes. Schoenberg's method rigidly structures a musical composition, purposely denying a tonal center or harmonic development by making sure no single note is repeated more than any other. It's formulaic and exerts an immense amount of force on the composition process, as Adorno observes. Joyce was familiar with this method, and Moss draws parallels between the formulaic atonal music and the purposeful lack of continuity in "Cyclops," arguing that the

continuous twists and turns in the structure of the chapter perform an assault on conventional senses of time and place, since the banal and the mythical, as well as a different version of events, exist in the same narrative space.... Both Joyce and Schoenberg use tightly ordered structures to methodically destroy a sense of key, center or dominant. (78)

Joyce's refusal to provide a narrative dominant center is, according to Moss, a parallel to his refusal to advocate for a particular political position during Ireland's political turmoil. And while that is undoubtedly accurate—

Joyce deftly walks this line of political critique throughout his oeuvre—this chapter dedicates only a single paragraph to Irish politics. It is a missed opportunity, given the focus of this larger work.

In subsequent chapters on Pound and Warner, Moss strikes a much more effective balance between the framing of music, aesthetics, and politics. Chapter three, “Ezra Pound, Music and Fascism: Towards Canto LXXV,” strongly aligns with the book’s premise of inter-relations between these three concepts; Moss explains that Pound’s “aesthetic preoccupation with clarity and directness ... leads him to reductive simplification, and [with] his desire to regenerate art and society, comes a belief in natural hierarchies of individuals, and this makes hierarchical fascist thought possible” (119). Since Pound’s poetic goal was always to get as close as possible to the “thing” or object of the work with no excess, Moss points out that Pound’s move toward musical phrasing and visual depiction at the end of Canto LXXV might in fact work toward an “increasingly visual conceptualisation of music” (90). Moss further traces Pound’s pursuit of musical expression to his two primary theories on music: “absolute rhythm” and “Great Bass.” Both theories “devalue melody and traditional Western harmony, and assert the significance of rhythm in an attempt to approach music ‘scientifically’ in a broad sense, by focusing on the fact that music can be described as combinations of sound frequencies” (106). Pound’s concepts are deeply rooted in mathematical systems and with an aim to “manage and rationalise music, while also providing a methodology for measuring music’s value that claims to be objective” (113). Moss’s explication of Pound’s (flawed) mathematical theories of music, is a highlight of this work, deftly handling the application of the theories as well as contextualizing how Pound viewed these aesthetic interventions in his art.

The fourth chapter, “Sylvia Townsend Warner, Ideology, and Marxist Aesthetics,” takes a turn to the less-recognized works by Warner, who drew from a deep well of professional musicology in her writing. Her musical theories also closely align with her Marxist ideologies as expressed in her novels *Mr. Fortune’s Maggot* and *The Corner That Held Them*, as well as in works such as her short story “The Music at Long Verney.” Moss points out that “Warner’s texts are acutely aware of the material conditions in which music is produced and received, but they also explore how aesthetic experiences can work on people without their knowledge, transmitting values or abstract concepts that shape a person’s thinking” (140). In “The Music at Long Verney,” for example, music is presumed to carry cultural cachet by the protagonist who rents the Long Verney estate: he tries to fill the house with live performances of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century music since that is, apparently, what is expected of people who live in English estates. At the same time, the owners

of the estate happily live in the gatehouse, listening to jazz records, caring very little for the musical performances that the protagonist hosts. The connection to aesthetics, cultural politics, and music feels immediately accessible in this analysis.

Moss's work with the novels just gets better. *Mr. Fortune's Maggot* follows the protagonist Timothy to a fictional South Pacific island where he intends to do missionary work with the help of a harmonium. His project fails spectacularly, and Moss traces this failure "through music and mathematics" to demonstrate "what is at stake in the failure of the colonial enterprise: the (in)ability to maintain the superiority of Western rationality itself" (149). Moss shows how *The Corner That Held Them* is built, as Warner claimed, "on the purest Marxian principles, because I was convinced that if you were going to give an accurate picture of [historical] monastic life, you'd have to put in all the finances" (qtd. in Moss 160). The events are framed in a fourteenth-century monastery where music is a social interaction, an affective performance, but also a financial investment, so when the monks perform new music, with harmonies rather than monastic chants, they do not see the disconnect between the affective impact and the fact that they are neglecting the poor leper colony for which they are ostensibly caring. The "separation between the singers reflects the music's structure: the beautiful new harmonies and rhythm are reliant on a new degree of difference between each vocal part ... so that the structure of the music lies [*sic*] the truth that they cannot fully transcend the boundaries of their social positions" (169).

The final chapter, "Music and Twenty-first-century Modernism" examines works that still rely on Moss's method of the "application of continental philosophies of music to literary engagements with music" to explicate "political implications of aesthetic forms" (179). I appreciate the pressure Moss puts on definitions of modernism. She finds compelling parallels between Schoenberg's twelve-note compositions and Richard Powers's *Orfeo*, a retelling of Ophelia's story that is entirely reliant on the corpus of words spoken by Ophelia in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. And in *let me tell you*, by Paul Griffiths, characters constantly discuss modernist music as part of the narrative's frame. Both texts make inroads into ongoing conversations about what modernism is, while also pressing Moss's larger argument that music, form, and aesthetics are interrelated to political frameworks.

*Modernism, Music, and the Politics of Aesthetics* is a densely researched, deftly constructed interdisciplinary study of how the abstracts of aesthetics can be examined through musical and literary form. By using Adorno's nearly sociological method of musicology, Moss aligns these modern texts with contemporary theorists to tease out political narratives within their musical

explorations. The work's most effective moments are when Moss moves away from the densely packed theory to the more overt application of the methodology. There are times when the politics of the aesthetic get a bit overshadowed (the Joyce chapter is perhaps a weak link here), but when she draws connections to Pound's hierarchy of tones in systematic ways, it makes sense to draw connections to how this enables or reinforces his fascist ideologies. Same with her exploration of Marxist critique in Warner's works. The close readings are when this work shines brightest and gives us the full benefit of the exciting intersections of music, literature, and the politics of aesthetics.

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