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From Conrad to Beckett: How Modernist Fiction Wrote the Postmodern

ADAM MEEHAN, *Modernism and Subjectivity: How Modernist Fiction Invented the Postmodern Subject*.
Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2020.
\$45.00 hardcover; \$19.95 ebook.

Andrew V. McFeaters

Adam Meehan's *Modernism and Subjectivity: How Modernist Fiction Invented the Postmodern Subject* successfully argues for the continued relevance of modernism to contemporary academic studies, demonstrating how modernist fiction is much more than a sounding board against which to explore the latest critical variant or descendent of Marxist, psychoanalytic, or poststructuralist theory; rather, Meehan shows that many of the reigning theories found in the late twentieth century and beyond find their antecedents in the ways in which modernist writers constructed and deconstructed notions of subjectivity in fiction. Through his close readings of works by Joseph Conrad, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Nathanael West, Aldous Huxley, and Samuel Beckett, Meehan excavates how prewar writing had exposed the linguistic and ideological makeup of subjectivity well before postmodern thinkers were credited for decentering signification and selfhood. As such, the ideational and historical convention that postmodernism represents a rupture from modernism—the latter of which is often erroneously reduced to a searching for a lost condition or grand narrative—or that postmodernism radicalized ideas latent in modernism, is a misrecognition of the already active ideas developed in modernist writing.

In foregrounding his close readings, Meehan is careful to point out the scope of his discussion, choosing depth over breadth by selecting fiction writers over poets and other artists, and by focusing on a limited selection of authors. As he writes, “I am more interested in exploring *how* particular authors write about subjectivity than in creating a catalog of all the authors who do” (17). Even so, his selection is meant to illustrate aesthetic and philosophical preoccupations shared among modernists at large. In terms of the critical and theoretical framework in his book, Meehan grounds his analysis in critics from Ihab Hassan—calling into question Hassan’s oft cited binaries between the modern and postmodern—to Peter Nicholls, the latter of whom speaks in terms of modernisms rather than a monolithic modernism. Meehan draws heavily from the ideas of Jacques Lacan, Louis Althusser, and Slavoj Žižek, albeit other theorists, like Frederic Jameson, Jacques Derrida, Julia Kristeva, and Judith Butler play significant roles in Meehan’s argument that subjectivity, as a linguistic, ideological, and fluid construct, is first articulated in modernism.

In Chapter One, Meehan’s discussion of Conrad’s *Nostromo* sets up his later chapters. He shows how the novel repeatedly fleshes out the ideological subject, of which some characters are partially aware, in ways that anticipate Lacan’s concepts of the real, the imaginary, and the symbolic as well as Žižek’s reformulation of Marx’s ideological critique in his *The Sublime Object of Ideology* and “The Spectre of Ideology.” According to Meehan, “Conrad not only shows us the ideological dimensions of subject formation in remarkably prescient ways that anticipate theoretical formations that come about decades later but also provides a model of how the ideological mechanisms that interpellate us *as* subjects can be meaningfully critiqued” (46).

In Chapter Two, Meehan moves on to unpack how Joseph Conrad, James Joyce, and Virginia Woolf each represent Lacanian sublimation through the elevation of art, as opposed to

science and religion, in response to the void that structures the formation of subjectivity. For Lacan, “religion [is] an attempt to fill the void, science [is] an attempt to reject the void, and art [is] an attempt to create something around the void” (50). Through close readings of the “Proteus” episode in Joyce’s *Ulysses* and of Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*, Meehan shows how each writer elevates the aesthetic moment of creation as a means of determining meaning in a world in which grand narratives have failed, even if that moment is fleeting. Likewise, “Truth, for Conrad, is more like an impression, hence the impressionistic style that he adopts in his fiction” (54). Although this chapter in Meehan’s book elucidates ways in which Conrad, Joyce, and Woolf thought out (and represented) the fluidity of subjectivity, it could perhaps expand further on how their aesthetics connect to the book’s larger argument.

The next two chapters of Meehan’s book focus on largely American writers who, although less experimental than their abovementioned Irish and British counterparts, prefigure postmodernism by exposing identity as process and performance. First Meehan excavates how F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* “anticipates both Lacanian understandings of subject formation and the psychoanalytic dimensions of racial identity,” connecting Gatsby’s mysterious origins to a Jewishness veiled by his upper-class, Protestant surroundings and submerged in a fantasy of acceptance (88). For Meehan, Gatsby reacts to his Oedipal drama by fixating on Daisy as a way to both reconstruct and repeat his origins. He writes, “Daisy is only an object manifestation of Gatsby’s deeper desire; because it is not Daisy, but a reconstituted version of *himself* that he seeks, Gatsby’s dream inevitably ‘fails’” (97). Meehan’s psychoanalytic reading of *The Great Gatsby* ultimately uncovers desire as the driving force behind language and the performance and repetition of identity. Meehan repeatedly evokes Nick Carraway’s description of Gatsby’s personality as an “unbroken series of successful gestures” in his critique, which sets the stage for his discussion of not only character but place in his readings of Fitzgerald’s *The Lost Tycoon*, Nathanael West’s *The Day of the Locust*, and Aldous Huxley’s *After Many a Summer Dies the Swan*. (Aldous Huxley, though British-born, later made California his home.) Each prewar novel portrays Los Angeles (and Hollywood) as a world of pastiche and simulation, qualities typically assigned to the heyday of postmodernism, and the chapter ‘argues that the city’s geographical decenteredness intersects with the individual subjectivities that inhabit it in the novels’ (110).

The penultimate chapter draws heavily on the ideas of Frederic Jameson as well as Jean Baudrillard, showing how each novel portrays characters trapped by their own performed identities against a backdrop of simulated place. In *The Lost Tycoon*, “what makes it so difficult for Stahr to ‘escape himself’ is that his sense of his own identity is so firmly entrenched in his work in the film industry, which ensnares him in a world of illusion and deception” (126). On *The Day of the Locust*, Meehan writes, “For West’s characters there is no contentment to be found in leading ‘ordinary lives’; their entire existence is premised around ‘making it’ and living out their fantasies of what show business ought to be. His characters, like many of Fitzgerald’s, are so obsessed with their projected images of themselves that they become mere simulations” (133). Finally, Meehan says of *After Many a Summer Dies the Swan* that “Huxley’s characters appear to be doing something meaningful, but upon deeper examination there is in fact nothing behind the facade; the facade itself produces the illusion of meaning” (140). Meehan’s close readings of these novels, contextualized within the architectural and entertainment history of Los Angeles, deftly demonstrates how critical ideas normally associated with postmodernism already had currency in modernist fiction. Jameson’s notion of pastiche (wherein disparate histories are reduced to images) and Baudrillard’s hyperreality (wherein simulation transplants reality) resonate throughout the West Coast milieu depicted in these novels.

In Chapter Five, Meehan’s final close reading focuses on Samuel Beckett’s *Murphy*. Acknowledging that *Murphy* disrupts the otherwise chronological trajectory of his readings, Meehan concludes with *Murphy* because it functions as the “ultimate deconstructionist modernist novel”

(161). While his previous choices demonstrate that modernist fiction evinces so-called postmodern concepts by exposing subjectivity through a process of construction, laying bare the ways in which subjectivity is contingent upon the symbolic order, Beckett's *Murphy* practices a form of negation. Working through Murphy's impossible quest for ontological negation, Meehan writes that "Beckett deconstructs desire in its role as the fundamental element in structuring language and ends not by envisioning a new conception of subjectivity but by reaffirming an essential truth: That language inevitably casts us into the process of desire [. . .]. There is no 'conscious' escape from this, as Murphy would hope; the only escape is death, or eternal negation" (161). The titular character succumbs to his demise in his attempt to negate his self and, as Meehan points out, Beckett's critique of desire rests in the ironic distance between the narrative voice and the protagonist.

Meehan's collective close readings certainly draw into question many of the convenient and facile demarcations between modernism and postmodernism still prevalent in criticism today. It isn't difficult to recall other literary movements—Dadaists or even Symbolists in poetry, for example—that expose the fluidity of desire and language behind the seeming fixity of meaning, perception, self, and society. Meehan's focus on a handful of fiction writers, however, serves to sharpen his argument. Whether a reader is interested in one of Meehan's selected authors, or in modern or postmodern studies more generally (pardon the regressive binarism), his book provides a valuable take on the literary innovations in progress before World War II. He also reminds us of the continued relevance of modernism to more recent critical trends anchored in post-structural interpretations on identity and politics.

—*University of New Mexico-Gallup*