

## FILM, POPULAR ENTERTAINMENT, AND THE MELTING POT THROUGH THE LENS OF MODERNIST CULTURE

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Richard Pells, *Modernist America: Art, Music, Movies & the Globalization of American Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011)

Sarah Wilson, *Melting-Pot Modernism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010)

Few topics within intellectual history have received as much attention lately as modernism. It was not always this way. Thirty-five years ago no more than a handful of scholars on both sides of the Atlantic were exploring the relatively unmapped terrain of modernist culture. Then came the publication in 1976 of *Modernism: 1890–1930*, a pioneering collection of essays edited by Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane covering not only literature, but architecture, art and general patterns of thought as well. The term “modernism” had been employed since the 1920s, but always in reference to specific fields of artistic endeavor with no attempt to make the seemingly obvious connections and conceive of modernism as a gestalt that encompassed the entire cultural and intellectual landscape. The Bradbury and McFarlane symposium, along with Peter Gay’s 1978 book on Sigmund Freud as a modernist “master,” represented the first significant attempts to redefine modernism as a major culture that had spread throughout the world during the twentieth century much as Victorianism and the Enlightenment had done in previous eras.<sup>1</sup>

The torrent of scholarship that followed has still not let up. It soon became clear that modernist thinking, far from being confined to the arts, shaped both the natural and social sciences in the twentieth century, and much more. One could speak of modernist physics, modernist anthropology, or modernist legal

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<sup>1</sup> Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, eds., *Modernism: 1890–1930* (New York, 1976); Peter Gay, *Freud, Jews and Other Germans: Masters and Victims in Modernist Culture* (New York, 1978).

theory, to take a few examples. The time frame likewise expanded, with the first stirrings of the new culture traced back to the 1860s in Europe and “late modernism” still alive and well as the twentieth century came to a close. Adding to the conversation is the arrival of “postmodernism,” whose advocates claim it as a major historical culture in its own right that operates with a high level of theoretical sophistication and manages to encompass popular culture in a way modernism supposedly never did. Those whose scholarly focus remains modernism itself would respond that postmodernism represents little more than a dressing-up of basic modernist values and precepts, and that its ultimate goal of moving culture “beyond oppressive binary categories,” to borrow E. Ann Kaplan’s phrase, is something modernists have been engaged in since the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>2</sup>

To survey this ever-expanding empire of research on modernism, a new journal, *Modernism/Modernity*, was launched in 1994, followed four years later by the formation of the Modernist Studies Association with its stated aim of facilitating “the development of more supple—and ultimately more complete—historical models” of the culture.<sup>3</sup> The organization has grown far beyond its founders’ expectations, holding well-attended annual meetings notable for the experimental formats of their sessions. The global reach of the field can be seen in the rise of a British Association for Modernist Studies, along with the European Network for Avant-Garde and Modernist Studies and, as of 2009, the Australian Modernist Studies Association. Clearly, modernism has become a very sizable scholarly industry.

What, then, is modernism? With all the expanded interest in the subject that central question has become increasingly important, but unfortunately exact answers remain elusive. A host of erroneous preconceptions linger on the scene, the most virulent of which equates modernism with “modernization.” According to this notion, modernist culture refers to the bright new world brought about by industrial development, urban growth, and expanding technology, especially new forms of transportation and communication. It happens, however, that many modernist thinkers over the years have expressed strong opposition to the contemporary technological order, complaining that its tenets violate their fundamental ethos of authenticity. Beyond that, modernization represents a process of social and economic development while modernism, as a pattern of beliefs and values, comprises a culture; they are very different.

The other notable mistake involves confusing modernism with the radical bohemian setting in which it first appeared. A sizable number of writers continue

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<sup>2</sup> E. Ann Kaplan, “Introduction,” in Kaplan, ed., *Postmodernism and Its Discontents: Theories, Practices* (New York, 1988), 1–4.

<sup>3</sup> see [www.msa.press.jhu.edu/about/index.html](http://www.msa.press.jhu.edu/about/index.html).

to follow the lead of Lionel Trilling, who referred to modernism as an “adversary culture,” based on a “canonization of the primal, non-ethical energies,” that took shape primarily through fierce opposition to bourgeois society and has no core beliefs of its own.<sup>4</sup> There is a degree of truth to this view: modernism did come into being by way of rebellion against nineteenth-century Victorian culture and has always harbored an impulse to challenge authority and upend conventional practices. But it has also become increasingly clear that modernists fashioned a complex belief system of their own, stemming from their bedrock assumption of a universe marked by ceaseless change. Where the Victorians, as modernists viewed them, sought shelter from that basic fact of existence in a set of social illusions, the new culture sought to achieve the closest possible contact with reality through direct experience—all the while acknowledging that our ability to apprehend that fast-changing reality will always be imperfect and that we are destined to live with a large element of uncertainty as a result. This led in turn to a fundamental paradox. According to modernists, humans must accept the chaotic and fragmentary conditions in which they live while simultaneously making every effort to pull together the disparate elements of their environment in order to impose a temporary semblance of order on it. As Margaret Davies aptly puts it, a modernist seeks to acknowledge “the multiple, random, simultaneous disorder of lived experience, and at the same time to find ever more supple and subtle ways of containing it.”<sup>5</sup> This urge to bring together that which was previously separated found its ultimate expression in the attempt to integrate races, classes, genders, and world views—all major modernist projects of the twentieth century—as well as the rational and irrational components of the self. This powerful integrative impulse at the heart of the modernist moral sensibility is, to be sure, invariably a dynamic one in which the elements being brought together are never fully consolidated but remain to some extent in continuous tension. Complete and final integration would result in stasis, which to modernists represents the equivalent of death. That has led some to argue that modernism centers primarily on incessant conflict and a process of pulling things apart. Modernism surely has had that aspect to it, but it is hard to survey the sweep of modernist achievements during the twentieth century—ranging from the revolution it set off in the visual arts and architecture, to its role in creating a more liberated status for women, to its efforts to replace the absolute moralism

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<sup>4</sup> Lionel Trilling, *Beyond Culture: Essays on Literature and Learning* (New York, 1968), 3, 19–25.

<sup>5</sup> Margaret Davies, “Modernity and Its Techniques,” in Monique Chefdor, Ricardo Quinones and Albert Wachtel, eds., *Modernism: Challenges and Perspectives* (Urbana, IL, 1986), 146–58, 153.

of the nineteenth century with a far more flexible system of ethical values—and not regard it as primarily constructive in nature rather than merely oppositional and destructive.

While that much seems clear, a great deal nonetheless remains to be done in terms of pinning down the structure and meaning of modernism—a process made even more difficult given the many guises this protean culture has assumed over the years. Accordingly, the place to start when assessing any work that directly tackles this subject is the author's representation of modernist culture, asking in particular whether it is convincing and consistent. Does it strike out in new and valuable pathways, or help confirm existing conceptions of modernism, or fail to mark much of an advance at all?

The chief contribution of *Modernist America*, the latest book by Richard Pells, is to detail how extensively American modernism has been interconnected with the rest of the world. It attempts to show how Americans in a number of artistic fields imported modernist assumptions and practices from Europe, transformed the culture by making it more accessible to a popular audience, and then sent it back out to the far corners of the earth, causing it to become a global phenomenon. Pells means this sequence quite literally. “Hollywood directors,” we are told, “enlisted the techniques and the vision of the European modernists—particularly the disjointed time frames and perspectives of the Cubists, Surrealists, and German Expressionists—to produce a popular culture that conquered the world” (401). Established in the early twentieth century, this pattern, in his view, has lasted until the present time.

Beyond any doubt Pells is correct in seeing modernist culture as a frequent international traveler, with the United States as a major hub. Americans borrowed a great deal from Europe, and American cultural products and influences for better or worse have blanketed the planet, especially from World War II onward. But was the process always as simple as Pells portrays it? Were Americans primarily engaging in repackaging European modernism for export, or did they make significant contributions of their own to the transnational dialogue? It is telling, for example, that Pells never once mentions William James, a highly original American modernist whose work had a major impact on his contemporaries abroad. Like Jamesian pragmatism, jazz music represents a largely homegrown invention that tends to complicate the model Pells seeks to establish. He tries his best to construe jazz as an American reassembly of various European musical sources, including “German and Italian marching bands, British hymns, Scottish ballads,” and even “Polish polkas,” but those styles of music can hardly be called modernist and their impact on jazz was minimal compared to African American blues and spirituals (132). Moreover, jazz evolved in the opposite direction from that suggested by Pells's thesis, going from a style of music with broad popular appeal to a highly complex art form aimed at the cognoscenti. Equally important,

the sharp division Pells keeps imposing between “American” and “foreign” is troubling in relation to modernism, a true international movement in which ideas and artistic advances moved so rapidly across borders that their initial provenance is often hard to determine.

Pells begins with three chapters covering the impact of modernism on American fiction, painting and architecture. Unfortunately his treatment of these areas tends to be sketchy and often inaccurate, as if he is getting them out of the way before moving on to his true interests, music and film. F. Scott Fitzgerald is dispatched in one short paragraph in which we learn that *The Great Gatsby* “was at heart a thriller” (20), Ernest Hemingway merits two and a half pages mostly focused on his style, and William Faulkner barely gets mentioned, while such important American modernist writers as Saul Bellow, Philip Roth, Don DeLillo and Thomas Pynchon are omitted entirely. In the field of painting, the abstract expressionists would seem to run counter to Pells’s thesis in that their work never left the abstruse realm of the avant-garde. Nonetheless he bends them to his purposes by treating them improbably as the moment when modernist art began to reach a mass audience. “What had begun with the Impressionists as an uprising against conventional painting,” he writes, “was turning into a hit with the public—in the United States and all over the world” (59). As is typical in this book, Pells supplies no evidence to back up this claim. Were people in the American heartland hanging Robert Motherwell prints in their living rooms? Were large numbers of ordinary folk turning out in Europe and Asia at the many US government-staged exhibits of abstract expressionism, or was it mainly art connoisseurs? Pells never addresses such questions.

The chapter on modernist architecture seems especially jerry-built, with one factual error after the next. We are told that the major European architects who fled Nazi rule for the United States “arrived as supplicants” (64). That statement would have astonished Walter Gropius, who on disembarking immediately took up the position of dean of the Harvard Graduate School of Design, or Mies van der Rohe, who found a similar post waiting for him at the School of Architecture at the Armour Institute (soon to become the Illinois Institute of Technology), along with an enviable commission to design a new campus for his employer. Likewise it is woefully wrong to say that Frank Lloyd Wright’s Prairie Houses “consisted of one floor” when almost all of them had two or three stories, that Wright was mainly influenced by Japanese models when so many crucial sources from the Viennese Secession movement to Meso-American prehistoric structures converged in his work, or that Wright spent “half” of the 1930s on his utopian Broadacre City project without so much as one word about his two masterpieces of that decade, Fallingwater and the Johnson Wax Building (68–9). Indeed, very little that Pells has to say about America’s leading modernist architect makes sense.

Things improve notably when Pells turns to film, the subject which occupies virtually the entire second half of the book. Here—and in the section on musical comedy that precedes it—his argument about the supposed popularization of modernism in America rests on more solid ground, primarily because he is dealing with art forms that were intended to serve as entertainment. He also seems far more knowledgeable, supplying a generous helping of engrossing details and anecdotes. The capsule history of film he provides shows how German filmmakers in the 1920s developed an expressionist cinema that involved “[s]harp contrasts between ribbons of light and insidious shadows, distorted camera angles and disconcerting perspectives,” allowing them to convey “images of abnormality, alienation, and terror” (238). And it was precisely those potent cinematic images that conveyed the film’s central message rather than plot or characters. The contrast to the movies coming off what Pells calls “the Hollywood assembly line” was all too obvious (241). As he notes, the European films “seemed more serious, more ambiguous in their narratives, more willing to highlight the director’s vision, less concerned with resolving every problem in the final reel” (235). Or, to put that another way, the European films tended to fall largely within the modernist canon, while the more simplistic films being churned out in Hollywood did not.

The European cinema enjoyed this initial advantage, but, Pells maintains, it suffered from a fatal weakness in the way its films were targeted at the relatively homogeneous population within the country in which they were made. By contrast, thanks to American demographics, Hollywood’s domestic audience was far more heterogeneous, in terms of both ethnicity and social class, which motivated the studios to create a product with widespread appeal that also played well abroad, allowing American films to overwhelm their European competition in nearly all foreign markets. Adding to that success, according to Pells, was the belief of most overseas filmgoers “that the Americans simply made better movies. The plots seemed more absorbing, the ‘look’ was more luxurious, and the stars were more magnetic” (215). Those traits, of course, had nothing to do with modernism.

Here Pells’s treatment of American film becomes highly contradictory. On the one hand, he regards film, with its frequent use of montage, as an inherently modernist medium, no matter where it is made. Moreover, we are told that there was “no contradiction, at least in American movies, between culture and commerce” since “the economic requirements of the studios often coincided with, rather than obstructed, the artistic ambitions of the director” (236). On the other hand, Pells enumerates how Hollywood repeatedly undercut modernist influences and artistic quality in favor of box-office success. He observes, among other things, that the studio bosses prior to World War II demanded that imagery and technique “always be subordinated to” character and narrative and that

directors sustain the illusion that what the viewers were seeing on the screen was reality rather than a work of art, thus violating the modernist ethos of authenticity. He also notes how the industry production code of 1934 “censored any allusions to the more authentic aspects of human behavior” such as sex and politics (225) and how filmmakers were required to defer to everyone from producers to set designers who “could interfere with the director’s plans at any moment” (241).

The notable exception, which Pells treats at length, was *Citizen Kane*, directed by Orson Welles in 1941. Given total artistic control as the price of luring him to Hollywood, Welles “borrowed heavily from foreign sources,” using multiple perspectives and frequent shifts in chronology in a highly self-referential fashion to ensure that his viewers knew “they were looking not at life but at a movie.” But this remarkable experiment in American cinematic modernism did not last long. “After *Citizen Kane*,” Pells tells us, “Welles never again had the liberty to make a movie on his own terms” (229–32). The obvious conclusion would seem to be that the studios regarded modernist technique as a threat to their financial bottom line and had little interest in the art of cinema as such. But Pells sidesteps that verdict, maintaining that “there was no inherent divergence between art and entertainment” in Hollywood (398).

Even so, modernism did eventually find its way into the American film industry. In what is clearly his best chapter, Pells recounts how a bevy of highly talented European directors, who were either fleeing Hitler or seeking new opportunities, came to Hollywood in the 1930s and 1940s and drew on their background in expressionism to create film noir. Because these auteurs were often initially relegated to making low-budget “B” pictures destined to become the “bonus” film on a theater’s double bill, they tended to escape close supervision and were able to indulge their creativity. The result was some of the best cinema the United States would ever produce, much of it borrowing heavily from European modernism. However, as these men and their American counterparts became better known and started to work on more expensive projects, their freedom was increasingly constricted. Although a few exceptional films got made on occasion, Hollywood after its brief flirtation with film noir in the 1940s fell into the doldrums until the late 1960s and its films “seemed once again . . . artistically inferior” (265).

In the meantime, “foreign filmmaking” entered its “golden age” with the emergence of the Italian realists, the French new wave, Swedish directors like Ingmar Bergman, Japanese practitioners such as Akira Kurosawa, and the brilliant Satyajit Ray in India (282). Their films “looked utterly different from Hollywood’s products,” with “techniques that were experimental and spontaneous,” Pells admits, but their innovations would prove too successful, for in due course they were widely imitated in Hollywood and “helped transfigure the American cinema

so that it became a more dominant force in the world by the 1970s than it had been before” (285–86, 293). That Hollywood new wave, as he describes it, would entail the familiar story of the United States digesting modernist advances, applying them to themes and plots “that were intrinsically American,” and then selling the hybrid work to a global audience at a high profit (295).

In the Hollywood films of the late 1960s and early 1970s Pells at last has firm support for his thesis, but unfortunately at this point he becomes so enthusiastic that he casts scholarly objectivity aside, turning into an unabashed cheerleader for what he regards as the clear superiority of this new breed of American movies based on their ability to combine modernism with mass appeal. His claims depend to a considerable extent on his personal taste in cinema, since he does not engage in extended analysis of these films that might demonstrate why they should qualify as artistic triumphs, and at times his choices are not self-evident. While there would likely be widespread agreement that directors like Robert Altman and Martin Scorsese have produced remarkable work, not everyone would concur about *Easy Rider*, *The Godfather*, *Jaws*, or *Titanic*. Yet to Pells the artistic value of these films ought to be self-evident—except, that is, to intellectual snobs, who are found mainly outside the United States. “In the eyes of foreigners, no movie as trendy as *Titanic* could be an aesthetic masterpiece,” he informs us. “Art and profits weren’t supposed to be compatible” (378). We are left to infer that, for Pells, *Titanic* was indeed “an aesthetic masterpiece.”

Foreign-made films, by contrast, are put down as *too* complicated and unpredictable, and thus unforgivably inaccessible to the masses. “Why try to decipher *Jules and Jim* or *L’Aventurra*,” he asks, “when you could savor *The Graduate* or *Five Easy Pieces*?” (295). What he seems to be saying is that the French and Italian films, because they appeal to the intellect as much as to the emotions, seem excessively modernist and therefore not entertaining enough to be commercially successful, a crucial requirement for him in judging a film. “American movies were fun, unburdened by the obligation to improve minds or change society,” we are told, while European directors remained mired in the “self-indulgence . . . of the exalted auteur.” “Why bother with such trivia as stories, characters, and performances,” he goes on, “when you could concentrate on being avant-garde?” (389–90). This seems a strange question to ask in a book whose purported subject is modernism.

Sarah Wilson’s study of the relationship between modernist culture and the debates over the assimilation of immigrants into American society in the early twentieth century almost goes to the opposite extreme. A literary scholar by training, Wilson supplies in-depth discussions of four fiction writers—Henry James, James Weldon Johnson, Willa Cather and Gertrude Stein—while touching on a number of additional Progressive era figures who deal with immigration and ethnicity in their work, among them Jane Addams, John Dewey, Robert Park,



Charles Horton Cooley, the less well-known sociologist Sarah Simons, Franz Boas, Randolph Bourne, and Israel Zangwill. Highly analytic, with abundant textual evidence, *Melting-Pot Modernism* teaches us a lot about its subject and raises intriguing questions, despite its periodic tendency to resort to the convoluted, theory-ridden language that so often blights her discipline these days.

Above all, Wilson makes a significant contribution by establishing that, for many of those who engaged in it, the style of thinking we have come to characterize as “melting-pot” was profoundly shaped by modernism. The members of her cast of characters did not accept the image of immigration popularized by Zangwill’s play *The Melting Pot*, in which those arriving in the United States were quickly and involuntarily blended into one homogeneous Americanized mass. Rather, they saw the process through the lens of modernist integration as a two-way exchange between newcomers and native-born, rendering “both individuals and cultures . . . flexible, multiple, and continually changing.” Melting-pot modernists assumed that the self, far from becoming permanent and rigidified once it matured, was endlessly open to incorporating new influences as it came into contact with new cultures. Thus Jane Addams, according to Wilson, “compared experience at the settlement [house] to travel and higher education” since the exposure to freshly arrived immigrants could lead the settlement worker to “a new, more multiple, more constructed self” (30, 33).<sup>6</sup> Fierce debates arose about the cultural heritages the immigrants brought with them—whether they should be preserved, shared, amended, or cast off—which connected directly to wider disputes regarding the nature of the past in a modernist world. Issues of ethical and racial justice came to the fore, along with concerns about the social and cultural implications of individualism and the free market. As Wilson demonstrates, the intellectual melting pot contained a very rich stew.

The point Wilson stresses is that much of this dialogue took place within the figurative language of literature. The reality of immigration, she explains, tended to be so fluid, with long-standing boundaries constantly being transgressed and new patterns taking shape, that it proved impossible to talk about what was happening in precise scientific terms. As a result, even Progressive era sociologists kept resorting to narratives and metaphors to describe their subject matter and so “left a body of work that demands literary interpretation” (25). Repeatedly she finds her writers not only at odds with each other over basic issues, but holding

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<sup>6</sup> Although Wilson doesn’t mention it, this notion of a continuous interchange among cultures, especially those tied to ethnic groups, bears a strong resemblance to David A. Hollinger’s concept of “cosmopolitanism.” See Hollinger, *In the American Province: Studies in the History and Historiography of Ideas* (Bloomington, IN, 1985), 59.

self-contradictory positions, making it impossible to sum things up in terms of “a neat picture” (8). That, she argues persuasively, is why the study of melting-pot thought requires “a scholarship that attends to the nuances of the discursive realm” by applying a “careful, poetry-grade analysis,” which is what she attempts to do (201, 198).

In her strongest chapter, Wilson explicates the remarkable response of Henry James on returning to his native country in 1904 after a long absence and finding it utterly transformed. The elderly gentleman, accustomed to the peaceful existence of his British country house, reacted with predictable shock to the infusion of newcomers in New York City, his home for most of his childhood, but he also savored that shock. Armed with modernist attitudes toward immigration and pluralism thanks to the tutelage of his brother William and friends like Stephen Crane, James, as Wilson shows, plunged into the often uncomfortable experience because, as a modernist, he valued it *as experience*. He treasured the omnipresent sense of change, along with the vibrancy, warmth and color he found in settings where large numbers of immigrants were present. The luxury hotels in which he stayed depressed him because they lacked “the danger, ambivalence, and play of feeling” that James valued so highly, while Central Park, overflowing with immigrant families enjoying themselves, became his favorite haunt. “You are perfectly aware,” James wrote in *The American Scene*, “that you *have*, as a travelled person, beheld more extraordinary scenery,” but “none of those adventures have counted more to you for experience, for stirred sensibility” than Central Park, leaving him “thrilled at every turn” (73, 76–7, original emphasis). It was precisely his prior immersion in modernist culture that led to his positive response to the newcomers; otherwise, Wilson suggests, he might have reacted like Spencer Brydon, his alter ego protagonist in the short story “The Jolly Corner,” who is overcome with terror and denial on his return to New York.

Even so, the magnitude of the change was not always easy for James. Wilson correctly senses his ambivalence in his visit to the teeming Jewish ghetto of Rutgers Street. His “dehumanizing references to animals and insects ‘swarming’” confirm the elements of “racism, nativism, and nostalgia” that previous critics have detected, she concedes, but she also notes how James’s language simultaneously conveys the degree to which he perceived himself occupying the same marginal role as the residents, leading him to empathize with them (66). If anything, she underplays that empathy. The most astonishing passage of his Rutgers Street visit, which Wilson unfortunately never mentions, comes when James is taken by his guide to a beer hall frequented by writers and intellectuals and, listening to the intense conversation taking place in Yiddish accents, begins to speculate on how the American literature of the future will almost certainly grow out of it. Although aware that its language would not resemble the English of his day, he forecasts that it “may be destined to become the most beautiful on the very globe

and the very music of humanity.”<sup>7</sup> These newcomers might totally recast his art, but James, as a modernist, was prepared to embrace it, although with a certain sense of loss.

Wilson goes on to connect James’s encounters with the New York immigrant community to a notable shift in his own writing. The revisions he made to his work in the New York edition, along with the extraordinary prefaces he produced for it and his late autobiographies, all reflect melting-pot modes of thinking. Revision for him became a radical process of assimilation in which “‘myriad’ new ‘channels’ slice through divisions, creating ‘chains of communications’ between old versions (of selfhood, of form) and new ones.” James himself now repeatedly spoke of the novelist’s primary task as immersing himself in “that perpetually simmering cauldron his intellectual *pot-au-feu*” in order to allow the morsels of his imagination to gain “a new and richer saturation” and emerge “a different, and, thanks to a rare alchemy, better thing” (82–3). For James, it is clear, the melting pot and modernism were closely intertwined.

Her treatment of James Weldon Johnson for the most part seems equally original and persuasive. She views him as an exponent of the melting pot, convinced that African Americans were already major contributors to American culture through their musical and literary gifts, but also as a critic of the racial exclusion and violence that he believed assimilationist liberals too often tended to condone. Johnson’s sharpest attack on them came in his novel *The Autobiography of an Ex-colored Man*, in which his narrator, an African American who appears to be white, displays a chameleon-like capacity to assimilate to whatever cultural site he enters, from a whites-only Pullman car to a Cuban American cigar factory in Florida, only to become traumatized on witnessing a lynching in the South. Confused and terrified, he finds that his constant role playing has left him without a solid identity that might serve as a basis for ethical judgment and so opts for security by taking on the white identity of the lynchers. “The narrator’s judgment-neutral, culturally fluid version of selfhood proves totally unable to resist or even properly interrogate a cultural form like lynching,” Wilson sums up (111).

That seems a fair reading of Johnson’s message, but Wilson never questions whether it makes sense. Why, she might have asked, does melting-pot mobility necessarily have to be “judgment-neutral?” Is it because of modernist relativism, with its attendant desire to exercise tolerance toward diverse cultures and values? That seems to be what she has in mind. But might a better explanation lie in the fact that the people she studied were Progressives who lived at a time when racism was far more widely accepted than it would be just a few decades later? By contrast, modernism, with its powerful thrust toward integration, would prove

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<sup>7</sup> Henry James, *The American Scene*, ed. W. H. Auden (New York, 1946), 138–9.

in time to be among the most significant forces combatting racism in American life. Racism, after all, is an absolutist position based on fixed racial types, which is why modernists by the 1930s were hardly “judgment-neutral” about it. Certainly that quintessential modernist anthropologist Franz Boas was not, and yet we find Wilson strangely insisting that “Boasian anthropology, here, is with the lynchers” (112). At such moments in her book one wishes she had a deeper background in intellectual history.

The final third of *Melting-Pot Modernism* consists of chapters on Willa Cather and Gertrude Stein that seem less pertinent since neither author made the assimilation of immigrants a central topic. On Cather, Wilson claims that “in novels where no discernible, or at least traditional, immigrant figure appears, the historiographical crisis of the melting pot nonetheless registers, at an aesthetic level” (131). If so, it registers faintly. Wilson does treat us to a sophisticated discussion of Cather’s shifting conception of how human beings should relate to the past, culminating in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, where Father Latour on his deathbed moves beyond the linear perspective bequeathed by the Enlightenment to experience his personal history in terms of “a dizzying multiplicity, in which no moment dominates, and alternate selves proliferate” (156). But this is a modernist, not a melting-pot, vision of time, and Wilson by this point in her book often conflates the two. They did coincide during the period prior to World War I, but even then melting-pot thought represented no more than a subset of modernism—a fact that Wilson understands but nevertheless tends to lose track of.

The same problem appears in the final chapter on Gertrude Stein. Stein certainly wrote about immigrant families in *The Making of Americans* and *Three Lives*, but her main interest, as Wilson’s account shows, concerned the innovative modernist literary style she took such pleasure in inventing. To the extent Stein can be cast as a melting-pot thinker, it is because of her focus on the individual self as, in Wilson’s words, “a container of historical material . . . and of unexpected combination” as different nationalities blended together (178). What especially concerned Stein, we learn, was maximizing the effective social range of individuals so that they would not find themselves trapped within restrictive domestic relationships such as a traditional marriage, but rather could circulate widely and build the richest possible self—or rather, series of selves. In effect her model of the melting pot depended on insuring what could be called a free market of social intercourse for each individual.

As Wilson points out, that individualist model comported well with the reigning national ideology prior to World War I, and it was shared by many other leading melting-pot thinkers, but it did not fit the intellectual climate at all when Stein returned to the United States for an extended visit in the 1930s. The articles she published at that time condemning government spending and

taxation because they impinged on individual freedom made her suddenly seem a political reactionary. Wilson astutely observes that Stein took this position because the free market was never more than a metaphor for her; what she cared about was her imagined literary world and not actual socioeconomic conditions. If so, “why bother fussing with the market, if it was only ever a figure for the free circulation one aspired to?” (196). All of this serves to underscore how for Stein literary modernism came first, while her application of modernist thinking to real-world issues, including the plight of immigrant women, came second.

Wilson closes her work with a spirited defense of melting-pot Modernism, arguing that it still has relevant lessons for present-day intellectual discourse. “In their wilful resistance to the programmatic, to closure, to ideological certainty, melting-pot thinkers open critical debates that we have not yet succeeded in concluding.” But again, does “this project of boundary destabilization” (200–1), as she describes it, really refer to the melting pot or to modernism more generally? One hopes she will revisit that question, perhaps with a stronger historical background to go along with her considerable literary acumen and with a resolve to express her valuable insights in clear, straightforward prose.