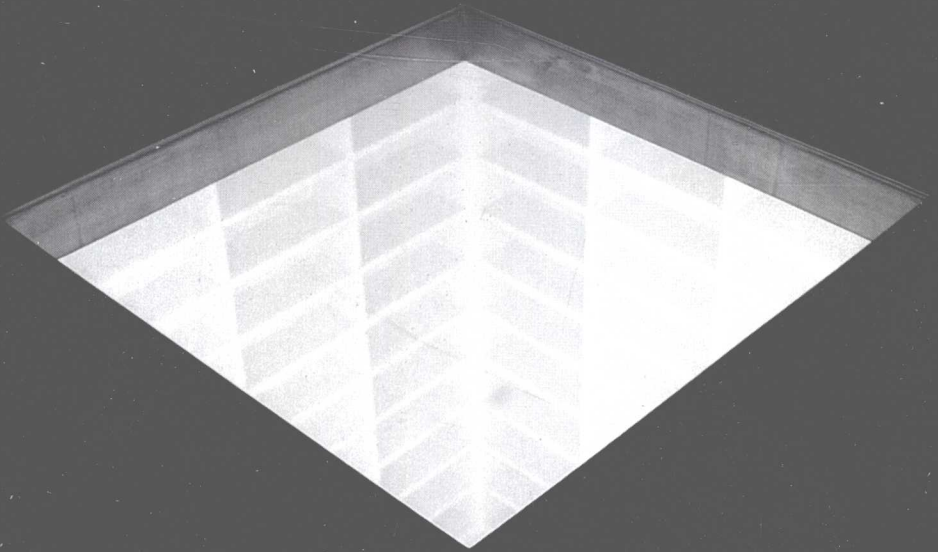



Modernist Literature

Challenging Fictions **Vicki Mahaffey**



4065339

 **Blackwell**
Publishing

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BLACKWELL PUBLISHING

350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5020, USA

9600 Garsington Road, Oxford OX4 2DQ, UK

550 Swanston Street, Carlton, Victoria 3053, Australia

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First published 2007 by Blackwell Publishing Ltd

1 2007

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Mahaffey, Vicki.

Modernist literature : challenging fictions / Vicki Mahaffey.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-0-631-21306-2 (hardcover : alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 0-631-21306-6 (hardcover : alk. paper)

ISBN-13: 978-0-631-21307-9 (pbk. : alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 0-631-21307-4 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. English fiction—20th century—History and criticism—Theory, etc. 2. American fiction—20th century—History and criticism—Theory, etc. 3. Modernism (Literature)—English-speaking countries. 4. Fiction—Appreciation—English-speaking countries. 5. Books and reading—English-speaking countries. 6. Authors and readers. 7. Reader-response criticism. I. Title.

PR888.M63M35 2007

823'.91209113—dc22

2006022479

A catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library.

Set in 12 on 13.5 pt Perpetua

by SNP Best-set Typesetter Ltd, Hong Kong

Printed and bound in Singapore

by Markono Print Media Pte Ltd

The publisher's policy is to use permanent paper from mills that operate a sustainable forestry policy, and which has been manufactured from pulp processed using acid-free and elementary chlorine-free practices. Furthermore, the publisher ensures that the text paper and cover board used have met acceptable environmental accreditation standards.

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Blackwell Publishing, visit our website:

www.blackwellpublishing.com

Preface

In James Joyce's *Ulysses*, Stephen Dedalus teaches a class on Roman history and Milton's "Lycidas" on the morning of June 16, 1904. His headmaster predicts that Stephen won't stay long at the school, remarking that he was not born to be a teacher. Stephen agrees, calling himself "a learner rather."¹ This book is addressed to learners, of all ages and backgrounds. Before you begin it, I would encourage you to examine your reaction to the question this book raises: is it important to challenge fictions and to be challenged by them in turn? Emerson once wrote, "The secret of Genius is to suffer no fiction to exist for us."² To have a more rewarding literary experience, we must first come to terms with common fictions that circulate about literature, all of which contain some truth, but that truth can be misleading because it is incomplete and contingent upon circumstance. Is fiction primarily entertainment? Does it reflect the world in which it was produced? Is it created by larger-than-life geniuses who differ in kind as well as degree from the rest of us? Or are authors just social misfits who wrote because they were ill suited for more materially productive pursuits? Was the difficulty of modern literature designed to make readers feel undereducated and inadequate?³ Or does formidable textual terrain promise to renew a reader's curiosity and intellectual energy? As a reader, do you typically read to find confirmation of what you already know or to destabilize that knowledge by discovering its limits — or both?

If I ask you to scrutinize your own attitudes toward the subject, it seems only fair that I disclose my own. The investment of an author in her subject is sometimes obscured by the scholarly objectivity that aca-

demics strive to project; however, it should be clear that anyone who takes the trouble to learn very much about a topic must have an emotional as well as an intellectual investment in it. My commitment to modernist literature arose out of a passionate interest in innovation and learning, and a conviction that modernism embodies and fosters a process of constant self-reinvention that, while difficult at the outset, is immensely rewarding in the end. The question to be answered is one proposed in Angela Carter's "The Lady of the House of Love": "Can a bird sing only the song it knows or can it learn a new song?"⁴ Modernist literature has defined learning in unconventional ways, ways that go beyond those of even the greatest educational institutions. Virginia Woolf, writing on the eve of World War II, asked her readers to concede that "education, the finest education in the world, does not teach people to hate force, but to use it"; rather than "teaching the educated generosity and magnanimity, [education] makes them on the contrary so anxious to keep their possessions . . . in their own hands, that they will use not force but much subtler methods than force when they are asked to share them." And she asks, "are not force and possessiveness very closely connected with war? Of what use then is a university education in influencing people to prevent war?" She proposes that what is needed is a new kind of education that is both experimental and adventurous, that teaches "the arts of human intercourse; the art of understanding other people's lives and minds."⁵ Modernist literature emerged out of this drive for a freer, less socially conservative form of education.

Modernist literature, as I am defining it, consists of works written between 1890 and 1940 that trace or inspire what Wallace Stevens in *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction* calls "freshness of transformation" in perception, thought, and feeling.⁶ Such works stimulate engaged readers to interpret more independently, more sensually, more thoughtfully, more joyfully, less deferentially. In this sense, modernist literature is pedagogical, but without the pretentiousness or superiority associated with pedagogues; it is concrete, experiential, and sometimes disorienting because it operates according to different laws than the ones that most contemporary readers unconsciously expect to govern literary works.

Sometimes modernist literary "instruction" begins with the disappearance of a textual crutch, such as the omniscient and trustworthy narrator upon whom we rely for guidance through a textual inferno; when, unlike Dante, we lack a Virgil (or narrator) to guide us through

what is unfamiliar, we have to pay more concentrated attention to style, sound, imagery, and form in order to flesh out and assemble those patterns we call “meaning.” Some works offer a different kind of guide, such as Sherlock Holmes, who teaches us to solve puzzles through his example, while exhorting us to sharpen our powers of observation, challenge our initial assumptions, and delay the process of drawing conclusions. In still other instances, we are encouraged to identify with unexpected heroes: a Jew in Dublin; a young black woman in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*; a hermaphrodite – the Greek prophet Tiresias – who blindly observes the modern war-torn world in *The Waste Land*.

Modernist literature instructs readers in still another way: because it is attuned to the movements of the unconscious mind as well as to conscious thoughts and intentions, it helps readers learn to hear the undertones of language as well as its conventionally agreed-upon meanings. As *Finnegans Wake* warns, working from an analogy between reading and watching a film, “if you are looking for the bilder [a word that when pronounced evokes the English word “builder,” but when spelled designates the German word for “pictures”] deep your ear on the movietone!”⁷ The phrase suggests that if you want to get a visual image of what you read (“bilder”), or if you want to hear the voice of the author (the “builder”), you must pay attention not just to what words mean, but more importantly to the way they *sound* and to what those sounds suggest.

Of course, good literature has always engaged different levels of meaning, but the innovations produced by modernist writers work to change the reader’s experience of the text by violating the implied contract between writer and reader. In a departure from the usual practice of the nineteenth-century novel, the modernist writer – by making the narrator untrustworthy, fallible, or absent altogether – simultaneously erased himself from the text and scattered himself throughout it.⁸ The most important difference between modernist literature and what preceded it, though, is not a difference of form. Rather, it arises out of some writers’ resistance to an important societal change. As cheaper methods of printing made it increasingly feasible to disseminate more texts to a larger reading public, that public demanded a different kind of fare. Readers developed an appetite for books that could be readily “consumed,” and many serious writers refused to standardize their works to

comply with the growing demand for writing that was familiar and easy to recognize. Instead, they continued to view literature as an art form that should be rich and strange and stimulate the reader's curiosity. If we try to *see and hear* that which is not immediately comprehensible instead of insisting upon understanding it from the outset, it becomes easier to perceive a subtext, with its traces of the buried emotions, memories, and associations that color and shape consciousness. By focusing too exclusively on the intentional meaning of a text, we blot out its poetry, its capacity to simulate the sensory power of lived experience.

In short, modernist literature demands that we approach it differently from the way we read other contemporary texts, such as the newspaper. Unless we do, we will miss half of its pleasure and most of its meaning. When we read books that are easy to understand and assimilate, we often forget that they are comfortable precisely because they share and confirm our preexisting assumptions, and sometimes even our prejudices (literally "pre-judgments"). Such reinforcement makes it easier for well-defined cultural communities to act on shared prejudices in ways that seem justified and fulfilling, even to the point of waging war against offenders. Naturally, better reading habits won't bring world peace, but they do provide a mechanism for individuals to examine and reevaluate their unconscious assumptions. Thoughtful reading develops the senses, sharpens perception, and affords unexpected pleasures that are often lost in the race for meaning and validation. Moreover, it has the capacity to strengthen the reader's sense of interpretive responsibility, which in time – if sufficiently widespread – could have useful repercussions for society as a whole.

Wallace Stevens alludes to the silent, delicate interdependence of the psychological and the social at the end of *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction*, when he compares the soldier's war with the "war between the mind/ And sky, between thought and day and night/ . . . The two are one. They are a plural, a right and left, a pair." He muses, "How simply the fictive hero becomes the real" (234). It is because of this ease with which fiction becomes real that we must labor to make our literary fictions more challenging, more textured and comprehensive. Fictions that countenance a reader's repression (of what she doesn't know or understand) make it easier for that same reader to overlook social policies of oppression (of *people* she doesn't understand). Moreover, when reading

is less oriented toward consumption and more oriented toward adventure, readers become less interested in what they can retain and more attentive to what they may discover.

Reading is a highly personal, potentially ethical activity as well as an intellectual one.⁹ If a reader feels implicated in what she or he is reading, the experience is almost completely different from one in which the reader feels detached and evaluative (inclined to judge what he reads). ("The partaker partakes of that which changes him," Stevens 219.) The same is true of writing: to understand how one is implicated in the problems one is analyzing promotes self-knowledge and replaces deference or defiance with responsibility. To treat a book as fundamentally alien to our own experience is no better than automatically assimilating it into what we already know and understand. A more rewarding alternative is to find a way in which we can use our own experience as a bridge to (but not an equivalent of) something that stands outside it.

One question that drives this book is how we recognize and learn to defeat our own unconscious suppositions of superiority (and fears of inferiority) that – when unquestioned – govern our lives. Both the desire for superiority and the fear of inferiority presuppose detachment from the other; dominance and submission are not postures that promote and sustain conversation or meaningful human intercourse. I claim that one's encounter with a book follows many of the same patterns as an encounter with other people, which is one reason why the Nazi burning of 25,000 books on May 10, 1933 in Berlin's Opernplatz (now Bebelplatz) was so deeply unsettling: it prefigured the incineration to come of millions of human beings who would be similarly rejected as "un-German," people with whom the Nazis denied having any connection (see Angelika Bammer's photograph on the front cover). As the poet Heinrich Heine once wrote, "Where you are burning books,/ You will also burn people."¹⁰ The book burnings serve as a vivid portent of the holocaust to come, signaling a crucial aspect of my argument: that our way of engaging with books is predictive. The book preserves the voice of its author, acting as her emissary, but with its "spine" and through its connection with an author's *corpus*, or body (of work), it is also a symbolic representation of an author's physical being. When specific books were selected for burning in Berlin, that act was a test, a forerunner of the selection and silencing of people that would shortly follow. The book

burning was also preemptive; symbolically, the fire consumed a means of “reading” or interpreting the future, of understanding the full human meaning of what was about to happen.

I would like to recount two stories from my own childhood to demonstrate the two complementary pitfalls of defining one’s relation to the unfamiliar (and unfamiliar). The first challenges the urge to demonize groups of people (in this case the German people who had supported Hitler). The second is an example of the opposite problem: the tendency to identify too deeply with the experience of another (here a black American high school girl), to the point of forgetting one’s own problematic position relative to hers. I have included these experiences in France and Texas for two reasons: as an important reminder of the humanity and fallibility of the person writing this book,¹¹ and as a way of supporting my larger claim that we tend to read people in much the same way that we read books.

The first story – heard rather than remembered – begins on August 1, 1955. Imagine a converted World War II propeller plane, the Flying Tiger, a shark’s mouth painted on its nose, leaving from the airport then called Idlewild in New York (now JFK), bound for Paris. On board, as the result of a phone call to her Brooklyn hotel, is a woman, 24 years old, with her children, aged 1 and almost 3, who is to be reunited with her husband when they land in France. The trip takes eighteen hours. Upon arrival, the exhausted children promptly get sick as the reunited family drive from Paris to Luxembourg near the French Air Force base where the father is stationed. They spend the night at Mondorf-Les-Bains, close to the borders of both Germany and France, at an inn that has one featherbed for the four of them and a bathroom down the hall. The children are still sick, and the mother takes the older child in her arms and goes to the bar to ask for water. A dark-haired German man in his thirties or forties overhears her request, turns to her, and unexpectedly says – in heavily accented English – “Why should you and your daughter be allowed to live? Why are *you* alive when you Americans killed *my* wife and daughter?” The quest for water abandoned, the mother rushes back upstairs, distraught.

I was the older child, and this was my first uncomprehending experience of the complexities of war and its twisted aftermath. The German man’s dead daughter had been my enemy and counterpart; she too was a child, and her father was understandably still enraged and grief-stricken

at her loss. But any pity my mother might have had for this man would have felt uncomfortable, not only because Americans had killed his daughter, but because it was relatively easy to justify that action; after all, she was born into a nation that had both engaged in and justified crueler slaughters of innocent people on a much more massive scale.

Now, half a century later, it seems to me that for one uncanny moment in a chance encounter, the national antagonism between two people – an American and a German – was briefly balanced by a common bond: love for their families. This is a place where disidentification with an “enemy” becomes dishonest and dehumanizing. And this is where my interest in World War II begins: had it been easier for ordinary people to experience the kinship that subtends very real differences – difference of what the Nazis called “race,” difference of language, difference of sex – then the horror of a mid-century journey to the heart of darkness might have been a little different as well.

The scars of conflict were still apparent in Europe when my family moved there in 1955. We lived in a war-torn landscape, not only devastated by the events of ten years earlier but also strangely alive with still-dangerous munitions from World War I. The French Air Force base where my father worked was in Étain, which is near Verdun. If you were to drive along the eastern border of France, you could see acres and acres of land sealed off from the public because of unexploded bombs, shells, and mortars that been there for almost forty years. At one poorly maintained ossuary, a brick building with windows that had been painted over, some of the paint had peeled away, revealing the entangled bones inside, the remains of a mass grave of soldiers who had died at the battle of Verdun in the spring of 1916.

The village of Étain was rural and agricultural; the ground floors of most of the houses were used to store manure, which any passerby could see and smell. We lived on the base, in a trailer surrounded by other trailers filled with the families of officers. In the winter, ice would form on the ceiling of the trailer, and I would wake up in my top bunk bed with water dripping on my nose. There were mice in the trailer, too, and we would jump on the furniture when we saw one scurry across the floor. I went to a French nursery school, where no one spoke English, for which my father paid twenty-five cents a month. My parents bought wine at a local store where you could bring empty bottles and fill them up at large vats for about a dollar per case. They would chat with the

villagers, who asked them if it were true that the streets of America were paved with gold. Village life was frozen in time, but as you left the village you entered a world still bristling with the machinery of violence. When you crossed the border into Germany near Trier, you could see a multitude of pill boxes dotting the mountains on the German side, with the long barrels of their enclosed guns pointing at the traffic on the bridge that connects France and Germany. The uniformed German border guards still approached all cars with the distinctive goose-step that spoke of war. In Le Havre, you could still see huge submarine pens that had been hastily built by the Germans, and a railroad track that was used to reinforce concrete bunkers that were hit but not destroyed by bombs. St Sebaldus Church in Nuremberg, from which my mother's family (Sebald) derived its name, had been damaged in the bombing, and was slowly being rebuilt. In Inglestadt, Germany, NATO forces had taken over a German airfield, with serviceable runways and underground fuel bunkers that survived the war intact. My father's Air Force unit was on red alert because Hungary was in crisis, and America was anticipating the possibility of a new war with Russia. The Americans' strategy was to disperse their aircraft so that in the event of a war against Russia they could not be taken out by a few concentrated strikes.

Two wars over and yet still strangely, horrifyingly present; another war on the horizon — which mercifully never happened — with my father involved in the preparations for it. In this atmosphere of rural tranquility surrounded by threat and ruin, so near a country where Americans were blamed and sometimes hated for bringing the consequences of war home to civilian German families, I came to consciousness in several national languages, and learned to inhabit the landscape of a brutal history. Even our vacations were haunted; when we traveled to the Bavarian Alps, I was initially dazzled by the majestic heights and inspired by images of Heidi as we climbed to a tearoom on a mountaintop. That charming tearoom was Hitler's Eagle's Nest, where he met with Mussolini to design strategies of extermination and war. This vivid impression of an evil that runs contrary to appearance — an experience it took me years to put into words — became one of the stimuli that taught me to value careful analysis. As a practiced and even talented reader, and as someone who had witnessed firsthand the deceptive nature of superficial impressions, I grew increasingly convinced that none of us can read the signs of human desire and fear as well as we should, and must. This is partly

because we usually read to discover deliberate intent and literal meaning, despite the fact that other meanings — sometimes dangerous ones — lurk not in the text, but in the subtext, which we are often helpless (by training) to interpret.

Evil masked by tranquil appearances was not something we left behind when my father's tour of European duty was over. I was to reencounter it dramatically when at the age of 5 I moved with my family from France to the American South. The beauty of live-oaks festooned with Spanish moss along bayous in New Orleans and Houston, the brilliant blue of a sky that seemed bigger above the flat land: these were vivid images, hiding all but occasional traces of racial hatred. Those signs were illegible at the time to a white child in a segregated world. Although in overheard conversations, even a child might detect traces of fear or contempt directed against black, Creole, or Mexican Americans, the issue of American racism came sharply to the forefront of national attention in September of 1957, seven months after our return from France. I can't be sure exactly when I registered the horror of what happened in Little Rock, Arkansas, when nine black students attempted to enter Central High in the wake of the Supreme Court's 1954 decision to desegregate the schools. It seems likely that I wouldn't have absorbed the impact of what happened until I myself was in high school.

During my junior year of high school in Houston, I chose to perform a dramatic monologue from Martin Duberman's play *In White America*, which focuses on the standoff at Central High. I have a vivid memory of drama tournaments in which I played the role of a brave, frightened black girl. The experience required me to imagine and try to express the complex feelings of the Little Rock Nine, to re-create a love of learning and a hopefulness inspired by legislative change that would soon be severely tried by vicious, prolonged resistance. I discovered, too, that my eagerness to identify myself with these brave students by playing the role of a black girl was startlingly naïve: black and white observers alike deplored my exploration of cross-racial identification, for reasons it took me years to understand. I had no idea that race raised issues of allegiance, and that someone who seems to have questioned her racial allegiance would be viewed as a traitor by all.

Although I cannot say for sure when the fascination took root, I, like countless other schoolchildren across the nation, was riveted by the story of how these nine students were reviled, spat upon, and physically

attacked as they tried to enter a formerly all-white Southern school in the hope of receiving a better education. The fear and contempt that segregation had kept hushed and implicit were suddenly angrily articulated and acted out. On September 2, Governor Orval Faubus called out the Arkansas National Guard to prevent the students from entering Central High. Jeering segregationist crowds surrounded the school, some protesters waving Confederate flags; one of the besieged students, Elizabeth Eckford, related that her dress was wringing wet with spit. On September 20, a federal judge ordered the National Guard to withdraw, and three days later police escorted the nine students into a side entrance of the school, but the students had to leave before the day was even half over. The police were afraid that they couldn't control the mob outside, which was demanding that the police give them one student to lynch or hang as an example. That night, the editor of the *Arkansas Gazette* tersely summed up the situation by saying, "I'll give it to you in one sentence. The police have been routed, the mob is in the streets and we're close to a reign of terror." Finally, on September 25, after three weeks of conflict, paratroopers belatedly called out by Eisenhower took control of the National Guard and, armed with bayonets and rifles, escorted the students up the steps of the school. Once inside, the students were met with a chorus of children yelling "the niggers are in . . . get them out." A black effigy was burned across the street. The students, however, did not give in to intimidation; they stood their ground, despite abuse that continued all year. Then in 1958, Ernest Green — one of the nine — became the first black student to graduate from Central High.

These memories of national and racial hatreds demonstrate the ease with which one may demonize or identify too closely with the experience of someone else, dangers that also affect one's way of reading, imbalances to which modernist writers have themselves fallen subject in different ways. To name just the most dramatic example, Ezra Pound's anti-Semitism — his radio speeches against Jews and his identification with Mussolini's position during World War II — landed him in a cage near Pisa, charged as a traitor to the United States, and then in a lunatic asylum. Pound's protégé James Joyce, in dramatic counterpoint, cast a half-Jewish Irishman as the cuckolded hero of his twentieth-century version of the *Odyssey*, but many readers were outraged, not only by the sexual explicitness of Joyce's epic, for which it was banned, but also by

the careful way Joyce qualified – and thereby humanized – the heroism of his everyman. By neither demonizing his protagonist nor worshipping him, and thereby respecting the balance between sameness and difference I have been prescribing, Joyce drew almost as much fire as Pound. Moreover, Joyce viewed his books as the envoys of his person, respecting with almost superstitious seriousness the bond between the book and the living individual. He was determined, for symbolic reasons, to publish *Ulysses* on his birthday, and when the Maunsell edition of *Dubliners* was destroyed by its printer, he identified it with his own body. The proofs of *Dubliners* had been burned or guillotined in Ireland, which is why Joyce decided never to return there, writing that Ireland had crucified him once by proxy, and the next time would do so in the flesh.

The connection between books and living people brings me back to the Nazi book burnings in Berlin's Opernplatz in 1933. Angelika Bammer (whose hauntingly beautiful image of the Israeli artist Micha Ullmann's memorial to the book burnings, *The Library of Burned Books*, is reproduced on the cover of this book) writes that one of the biggest problems in contemplating a violent event is "the distance between it and us, the very distance that is the ground of memory."

We are either too removed, so that loss is registered as mere fact and the dead become just numbers. Or we are too close and falsely identify ourselves with those we purport to be remembering. This problem is critical in both social and personal terms. For while detachment and identification can be problematic in just these ways, resulting in indifference or sentimentality, they are, at the same time, indispensable elements in our relationship to troubling pasts, as detachment is necessary for critical thought and identification is necessary for empathy. The search for a proper balance between the two thus has ethical, psychological, and political urgency.

Memorial art makes this search its mandate. It struggles for words that, as Franz Kafka famously wrote, will shatter the frozen sea within us that is our feelings. At the same time, it works to create forms that will channel the flood of feeling, once released, to ends that will be productive.¹²

Micha Ullmann's memorial to the book burnings captures that haunting, tremulous balance between the presence and absence of those "offensive" books that were destroyed by students celebrating the end of an "intel-

lectualism" they called "exaggerated" and "Jewish":¹³ books by Freud, Hemingway, Heine, Brecht, Helen Keller, Chagall, Dreiser, Klee, Jack London, Thomas Mann, Marx, Upton Sinclair, H.G. Wells, and many others. The installation is an underground library with empty shelves, and in Bammer's photograph, that buried, empty library, stripped of its contents, is luminous in the darkness. The photograph adjures the viewer to look beneath the surface for what is no longer there: this is also a way of reading, a method that those missing books – like modernism more generally – encourages and rewards.

Bammer's photograph of Ullmann's memorial serves as a poignant reminder that World War II was a war of one category of people (or books) against other categories, and that those categories were defined and perpetuated by reductive images of the self and others. The media – literature, art, music, as well as the popular press, television, and film – serve as the main conduits through which such perceptions are disseminated or refuted, which is why books – books of the sort the Nazis burned – are central to the discussion of my own book.

If we are to consider how people are classified or characterized – politically, legally, and in literature – it might be helpful to turn briefly to the implied "contract" between writer and reader as a more compact instance of other social contracts. Shortly after the turn of the twentieth century, experimental writers such as Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, and Gertrude Stein reformulated the implied contract with their readers in the hope that, by doing so, they could promote greater equality between writer and reader. Such presumptive equality is congruent with other ideals of equality, especially the equality of women and men, and of gentiles and Jews. In many different social arenas, contracts were increasingly seen as a way of formalizing the competing claims between employer and worker, man and wife. They were also a more liberal alternative to slavery and to outdated marriage laws. Any discussion of freedom in the modern period is likely to invoke at some point the ideal of a contract, which rested on "principles of self ownership, consent, and exchange."¹⁴ If, as Charles Taylor has persuasively argued, "human identity is created . . . dialogically,"¹⁵ developing partly through its unconscious response to the ways it is represented or reflected by others, then our identities are shaped by our "contractual" dialogues, including the tacit pact between author and reader. The most effective means of identity

formation are not coercive, because coercion is easily identified and can therefore be resisted, mentally if not physically.

According to the implied reader–writer contract of the nineteenth-century novel, the reader’s self-image is shaped – perhaps even distorted – through the use of flattering and shaming reflections that speak to the reader’s fears and desires. Oscar Wilde alluded to the power of art to reflect the reader in the preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), when he wrote, “It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors.” Wilde indicts the propensity of readers to look for flattering rather than realistic reflections of themselves (and not others) when, casting the reader as the brutish native enslaved by Prospero in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, he asserts that “The nineteenth century dislike of Realism is the rage of Caliban seeing his own face in a glass,” and “The nineteenth century dislike of Romanticism is the rage of Caliban not seeing his own face in a glass.”¹⁶ Wilde taunts the nineteenth-century reader by suggesting that, like Caliban, he or she is an unformed, not yet fully socialized being who looks to art for an acceptable (and partially recognizable) self image. This would change, beginning in the 1890s, as books and poems increasingly came to embody the multiplicity, changeability, unknowability, and potential treachery of a heterogeneous and imperfect self. Book in hand, author and reader are plunged into the midst of what might be called life/art together; privileged vantage points – in the form of omniscient perspectives – are few and suspect, but authors and readers who accept the new “contract” experience a fresh exhilaration at the prospect of engaging less predictably in the flux of experience (both literary and actual). One of the most succinct examples of this new immanence of perspective is Ezra Pound’s “In a Station of the Metro”:

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
Petals on a wet, black bough.¹⁷

Although the title of Pound’s poem identifies the setting, no one describes it, introduces the speaker, or explains the connections between the two lines and the two impressions (urban and natural, respectively) that are implicitly equated via a semicolon. The reader is given a sensual and aural puzzle without a key; we can only “solve” the puzzle by being willing to experience it imaginatively, by using our own resources to connect the two images; the author refuses to do it for us.

I would like to look more closely at the assertion that the attitude of the reader toward a writer represents the more general stance of an individual toward authority, exploring the connection it assumes between how we read and how we behave in a larger social setting. Modernist literature provides valuable insight into how the implied contract between author and reader serves as a template for our unconscious contract with what James Joyce in *Finnegans Wake* called “awethorrority” (authority: the “awe” and “horror” with which subjects are conditioned to regard those in control; 516.19). Authority designates that system through which meaning is defined and legislated, usually by someone or something perceived as exempt from its own laws. When people read in an uncritical way, they are also – often without realizing it – deferring to the author’s authority. This is vicarious reading – unconsciously accepting the author’s or narrator’s judgment of what is right and wrong. Many books relieve us of the responsibility of ethical choice, which is part of their value as entertainment. But what do we lose when we habitually abdicate our capacity to interpret? Our independence of mind. Our ability to engage on an equal footing with the author. Our responsiveness as ethical subjects. Moreover, when we don’t practice our interpretive skills, they lose sharpness and flexibility.

As you read this book, I hope you will think about the implied contract between us. I would prefer that you explore these ideas *with* me, instead of thinking of them as something imposed on you *by* me. Although I am loosely referring to modernist literature in historical terms, as a set of movements that took place between 1890 and 1940, my intention is not to define modernist literature at all, but to create an atmosphere that enables you to interpret these works more freely, more honestly, and more meaningfully for yourselves. What most attracts me about modernist literature is the faith expressed by its most daring practitioners in the responsibility and capacity of the reader to interrogate and interpret an increasingly illegible world with insight, precision, humor, and flexibility. That is why I have chosen to focus on their most challenging fictions, together with the romanticized fictions of individual freedom that they challenged.