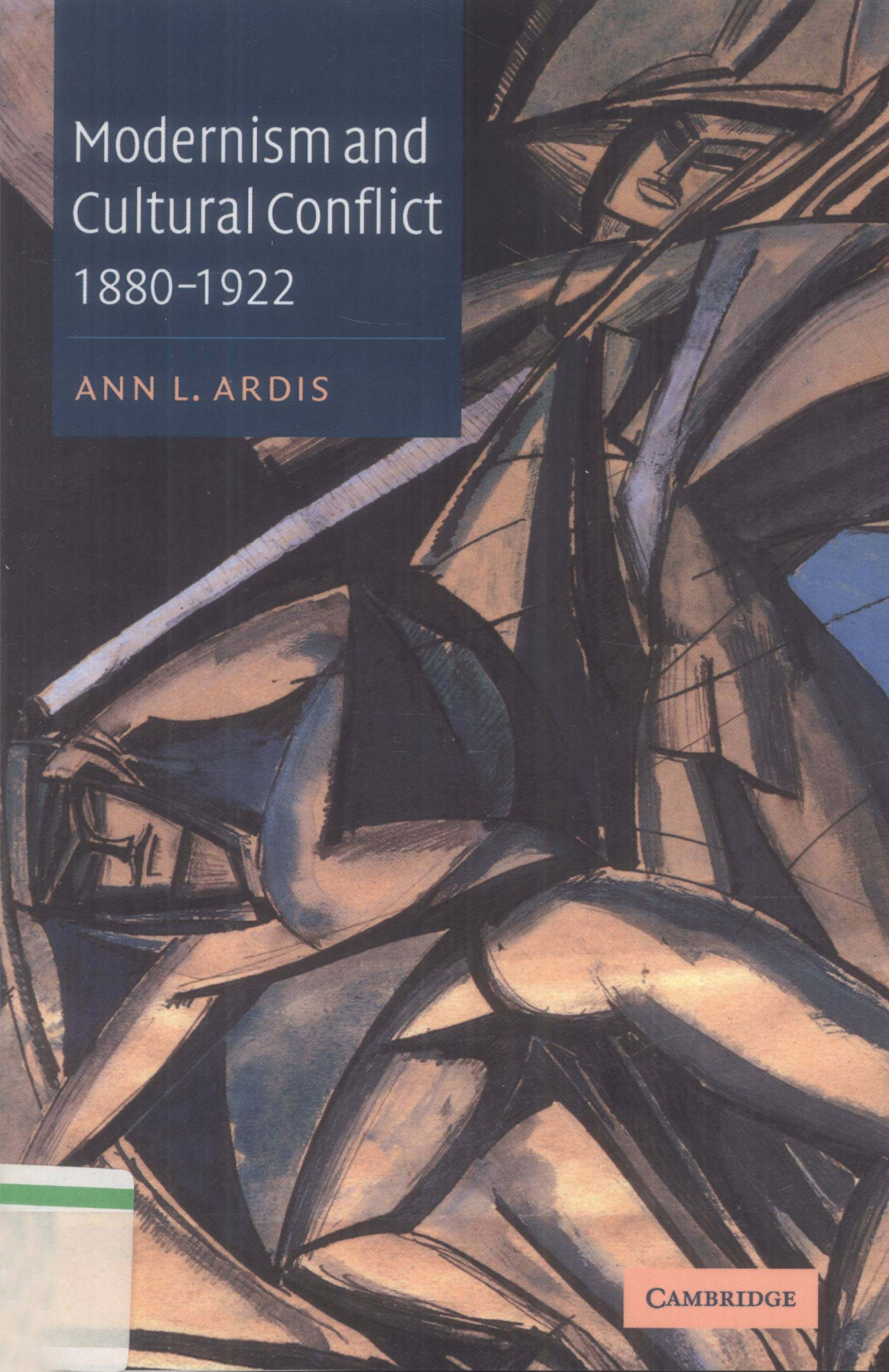
Modernism and Cultural Conflict 1880–1922

ANN L. ARDIS



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MODERNISM AND CULTURAL CONFLICT, 1880–1922

In *Modernism and Cultural Conflict*, Ann Ardis questions commonly held views of the radical nature of literary modernism. She positions the coterie of writers centered around Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, and James Joyce among a number of groups in Britain intent on redefining the cultural work of literature at the turn of the twentieth century. Ardis emphasizes the ways in which these modernists secured their cultural centrality by documenting their support of mainstream attitudes toward science, their retreat from a supposed valuing of scandalous sexuality in the wake of Oscar Wilde's trials in 1895, and the conservative cultural and sexual politics masked by their radical formalist poetics. Recovering key instances of opposition to modernist self-fashioning in British socialism and feminism of the period, Ardis considers how literary modernism's rise to aesthetic prominence paved the way for the institutionalization of English studies through the devaluation of other aesthetic practices.

ANN L. ARDIS is Professor of English and Director of the University Honors Program at the University of Delaware. She is the author of *New Women, New Novels: Feminism and Early Modernism* (1990) and coeditor (with Bonnie Kime Scott) of *Virginia Woolf Turning the Centuries: Selected Papers from the Ninth Annual Conference on Virginia Woolf* (2000) and (with Leslie Lewis) of *Women's Experience of Modernity, 1875–1945* (2002).

Phil (again)
Rachel and Alex

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Introduction: rethinking modernism, remapping the turn of the twentieth century

Rachel Vinrace, the heroine of Virginia Woolf's first novel, *The Voyage Out* (1915), reads "modern books, books in shiny yellow covers, books with a great deal of gilding on the back, which were tokens in her aunt's eyes of harsh wrangling and disputes about facts which had no such importance as the moderns claimed for them."[1] She reads Ibsen and George Meredith's *Diana of the Crossways* as well during her three-month stay in South America, but the narrator's physical and thematic characterization of this reading matter in Chapter Ten strongly suggests that she is reading *fin-de-siècle* British titles: Bodley Head publications such as John Lane's "Keynotes" fiction series, bound volumes of the *Savoy* with bold yellow covers and gilding on the covers and spines.[2] Such texts were touchstones in the British debates about New Women, New Hellenism, and the cultural work of literature in the 1880s and 90s. Yet Rachel is encouraged by everyone she knows to read *something else.*

Her aunt, for example, encourages her to read "Defoe, Maupassant, or some spacious chronicle of family life" (130), and Mrs. Dalloway gives her Jane Austen. Her uncle allows her unlimited access to his library, while St. John Hirst lends her his copy of Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, hoping thereby to begin the process of making up for her lack of a public school education and Oxbridge training. Most telling for my purposes is Terence Hewet's advice the morning he interrupts her piano-playing to demand that she listen while he reads aloud his own notes "under the heading Women" (323). As her fiancé, and as an aspiring young novelist intent on writing a book about Silence, Hewet is annoyed with Rachel in this scene for refusing to endorse his revelations concerning "the secrets of her sex" (324). When she objects to his interruption, he responds by chiding her, not for her piano-playing but for her reading habits: "Rachel, you do read trash!... And you're behind the times too, my dear. No one dreams of reading this kind of thing now – antiquated problems plays, harrowing descriptions of life in the east

end – oh, no, *we've exploded all that.* Read poetry, Rachel, poetry, poetry, poetry!" (325, emphasis added).

Who is "we" in this context? And why is Hewet so determined to extricate Rachel from the *fin de siècle*?[3]

Louise DeSalvo has suggested that *The Voyage Out*, which Woolf worked on from 1905 to 1913, "bristles with social commentary and impresses one with Woolf's engagement with the most significant problems of Edwardian and Georgian England." Specifically, DeSalvo notes that Woolf comments upon

> the trade union movement, labor unrest, the suffrage movement, Balfour and Lloyd George, the Lords' rejection of the budget, the conflict between humanism and empire building, changes in religion, the Irish nationalist movement, protectionism, class, the education of women, the excitement over airplanes, the prospect of war with Germany, the Moroccan crisis, revolution in Portugal, and the issue of the Dreadnoughts. (xiv)

In light of Hewet's conversation with Rachel, however, a crucial omission from this catalogue of Edwardian and Georgian concerns is the "blasting and bombadiering" about aesthetics through which the London-based Anglo-American avant-garde began catapulting itself – and, not quite coincidentally, the discipline of English studies – to cultural prominence during the pre-war years.[4]

In other words, Hewet's "we" might well be the "men of 1914": the coterie of writers and artists centered around James Joyce, Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, and Wyndham Lewis who credentialed themselves, each other, and the literary field through reference to the scientific precision of poetic observation, the a-politicization of aesthetics, and the elevation of individual consciousness over social action/interaction.[5] On one side of the binary oppositions Hewet deploys so belligerently in this scene lie poetry, Hewet's own as yet unwritten *écriture feminine*, and his aesthetic alliance with St. John Hirst. On the other lie hack writers of study guides (Miss Allen), female readers who either read books they presume are "modern" but which Hewet doesn't countenance as such (Rachel Vinrace) or reject the privileging of art over social action (Evelyn Murgatroyd), and the "entire 'gay' circle associated with 1890s book design."[6]

> We've exploded all that.

Hewet's phrase, "all that," encompasses quite a wide array of "modern" phenomena: "harrowing descriptions of life in the east end," problem plays and controversial 1890s fiction, late Victorian aestheticism,

(radical) politics. His linked binaries not only create hierarchies within the contemporary social world (poetry versus the novel, high art versus "trash," aesthetics versus politics). They also operate temporally, severing "us" from all things "antiquated." Thus, from Hewet's perspective, Rachel's "modern books" are in fact not modern at all. She's "behind the times" in her reading habits. "No one dreams of reading th[at] kind of thing now" (325). No one, that is, who is one of "us." Carving chasms between the past and the present, and between (male) aesthetic experts and both (female) common readers and the homosocial literary subculture of the 1890s, Hewet positions the poetry he values as *the* aesthetic of modernity, proclaiming its symbolic capital in the process.[7]

He seeks as well Rachel's agreement with him on these matters. Rather than endorse his views, however, she retreats into what Woolf terms elsewhere the "primitive" "sensuality" of illness.[8] In unexpected tandem with Signora Mendoza, the South American prostitute who is asked to leave the hotel at Santa Marina shortly before Rachel falls ill, she withdraws from the social system at this point rather than be interpellated by it. Thus, in the novel's closing scene, we are left to view the world through the eyes of Mrs. Flushing and St. John Hirst. That is, we are left to view the world through the eyes of two modernists. Mrs. Flushing, *The Voyage Out*'s "wildly eccentric patroness of the avant-garde," is based on Lady Ottoline Morrell, as DeSalvo has suggested (xiii). St. John Hirst, modeled, as any number of critics have noted, after Lytton Strachey, espouses a Bloomsbury-ite's disdain for the grotesque fleshiness (read femaleness) of the material world. Having once explained very carefully to Rachel his repulsion for the female breast, St. John now, "[w]ithout any sense of disloyalty to Terence and Rachel," "ceas[es] to think about either of them" in the last scene of the novel (415), focusing instead on the abstract patterns of sounds and images that he builds as he sits in the hotel drawing room while Mrs. Flushing admires the afterglow of a tropical rainstorm: "The movements and the voices seemed to draw together from different parts of the room, and to combine themselves into a pattern before his eyes; he was content to sit silently watching the pattern build itself up, looking at what he hardly saw" (415).

And yet, even though *The Voyage Out* thus charts a voyage *into* a modernist world view, Woolf's text enables a reading of this particular historical "progress" against the grain. Recent criticism on the novel has focused elsewhere: on Rachel's voyage toward death, Woolf's critique of British imperialism, and the novel's relationship to travel writing and anthropology.[9] I choose instead to foreground these liminal details, the

characterization of Rachel's books and Hewet's criticism of her reading habits, because they emblematize so beautifully the dynamics of modernist literary and cultural historiography that my own book seeks to denaturalize.[10] Woolf's fictional representation of the process by which, to borrow Raymond Williams's phrasing, "a highly selected version of the modern" comes to stand in "for the whole of modernity," provides a useful point of entry into the turn-of-the-century debates about literary domain that this book maps as it offers a "thick description" of the Joyce–Pound–Eliot nexus of literary modernism.[11]

The influence of contemporary cultural geographers extends far beyond the boundaries of geography as a discipline. "Mapping" is this project's central conceit because it so usefully glosses not only the social constructedness of literary history but also the extent to which a reading of literary history, like that of a landscape, employs vertical, horizontal, and temporal scales and comparisons. Much recent work on modernism emphasizes the plurality of modernisms and the countercurrents, disagreements, and contestations *within* modernisms. By contrast, following Bonnie Kime Scott's lead, I continue to find a use for the "men of 1914"'s self-labeling as an exclusive coterie – if only as a means of helping us understand their exclusionary moves and anxious territorialism. Following the lead of critics such as Rita Felski as well, rather than use modernism as a more expansive or inclusive category, I would prefer to retain the specificity of the term as a designation for texts that display "formally self-conscious, experimental, [and] antimimetic features... while simultaneously questioning the assumption that such texts are necessarily the most important or representative works of the modern period."[12] My effort to "recover"[13] a turn-of-the-twentieth-century cultural landscape in which modernism did not (yet) throw gigantic shadows thus situates this project in conversation with the work of any number of revisionary critics of modernism whose research has "disclosed... territories previously forgotten or unknown" in "the all too familiar terrain of Edwardian and Modernist literature"[14] and reclaimed texts that were "exiled by genre"[15] when the modernist avant-garde garnered institutional backing for mapping modernity through a series of "great divides."[16]

I use the term "when" here deliberately – and intend for my readers to hear a reference to Raymond Williams's important essay, "When Was Modernism?," in this phrasing. As Williams notes, dating modernism isn't simply a matter of identifying beginning and end dates for a particular kind of artistic experimentation. Instead, understanding the

"when" of modernism entails understanding the "machinery of selective tradition": the long and complex process by means of which the work of an international set of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century artists in self-imposed exile from bourgeois culture has been "comfortab[ly] integra[ted]" into the academy, into museum culture, and into an international capitalist economy of art.[17] Rethinking modernism in this manner "as a discursive and historical field" thus involves tracking reception as well as production and recognizing modernism as an "evolving product of a continuing struggle for certain kinds of symbolic power."[18]

I will have more to say in specific chapters about my indebtedness to other scholars whose work is invoked in the previous paragraph. The reference above to "great divides" invites further comment, however, as it registers my considerable debt to Andreas Huyssen's *After The Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (1986) as well as my sense of its limitations as a model for this study.

Huyssen's work has been tremendously influential in modernist studies. Even focusing exclusively on Anglo-American modernism (in other words, ignoring for the moment Huyssen's own focus on German literature and critical theory), it is fair to say that his 1986 study initiated what amounts to a paradigm shift in the conceptualization of modernism's relationships, respectively, to mass culture and science. As David Chinitz has suggested, a "reappraisal of modernism as a whole" is being achieved through the pursuit of Huyssen's suggestion that mass culture has always been the hidden subtext of the modernist project.[19] As Susan Squier has argued, Huyssen was "one of the first to suggest that the modernist commitment to scientificity may originate in a masculine reaction-formation against feminized mass culture." "With the modernism/modernity/masculinity nexus called into question, we are now able to rethink the hitherto unexamined relations among modernism and science, which has itself been understood as an equally, and unproblematically, masculine territory."[20]

Without discounting the productiveness of Huyssen's thesis or his status as the author (in Foucault's sense) of a new discourse about literary modernism, I would suggest that the reappraisal of modernism Huyssen initiated has not yet gone far enough. Huyssen's brilliant study has shown us that high modernism was never as "modernist" about its uniform hostility to mass culture as its earliest academic promoters might have liked, and it has given us a means of understanding the feminization of all things "other" to a modernist world order. While I endorse without reservation Squier's commitment to rethinking the "hitherto unexamined

relations between modernism and science," I would not credit Huyssen with having pursued this insight very far. Rather, when Huyssen describes the need to place modernism in a "larger socio-historical framework" (*After the Great Divide*, p. 4), I am struck by what is missing: modernism's defense of high art is *not* recognized as one component of a very complex network of binary oppositions distinguishing "Literature" from non-literary writing, culture from science and nature, and "progressive" from "degenerate" evolutionary trends in human history. Modernism's relationship to mass culture is *not* framed in relationship to the pursuit of disciplinary specificity and integrity driving the (re)organization of the human and natural sciences at the turn of the twentieth century. The tendency to treat science as something beyond the pale, outside the cultural critic's horizon of interests is, I would venture to suggest, one of the most unfortunate legacies of the Frankfurt School in Huyssen's work.[21] Technology has a key role to play in his conceptualization of modernism and modern life, yet the model of cultural analysis he inherits from Adorno encourages a rather dismissive characterization of science as the epitome of the enlightenment project's problematic faith in rationality. Thus, as Susan Squier has noted, rather than conceptualizing science sociologically, Huyssen reproduces while rendering invisible the "divide between scientific practice and the feminized discursive fields of literature [and] poetry" (Squier, 303–4). As a consequence, *After the Great Divide* provides an exemplary instance of what has been described as the "perplexin[g] stabi[lity]" of modernist categories of literary analysis in the late twentieth century.[22]

We have not yet managed "to *rethink* or *rechart*... modernism in terms other than those [it] narrated/laid out for itself," Deborah Jacobs has argued (277). We continue "to read modernism from within its own politics and prejudices" – even sometimes, I would add, when we think we're doing something else (288). Rather than "contin[uing] to settle for the 'thin' definition of modernism" derived from "dominant modernist narratives," Jacobs urges us to imagine "a larger discursive and highly politicized field of inquiry – a field wherein the 'literary' [is recognized as] only one of many newly specialized discourses struggling for legitimation," in the early twentieth century (288, 289). Questioning whether "the privileges and powers of *the subject position* we've inherited from modernist intellectuals" (276, emphasis in the original) are challenged by certain kinds of recovery work, Jacobs invites modernist studies to attend to "the cultural politics of the move toward expertise itself, the elite positioning of 'high' modernist art in relation to its 'others,' [and] the self-interested

privileging of experimentation with technique over other ways of 'making it new.' " She goes on to suggest that "a commitment to transforming the category 'the literary' (and 'art,' 'the artist,' etc.) – especially as defined and privileged in/through/by modernist discourse – is precisely what we need more of right now" (277). Although substantial new work in modernist studies rises to the challenge Jacobs posed so eloquently in 1994, her point still holds today.[23] Keeping in mind the concerns she and scholars such as Bruce Robbins and Thomas Strychacz have raised regarding late twentieth-century criticism's investments in the reproduction of modernist categories of literary analysis, this study will ask: how did modernism come to be perceived as *the* aesthetic of modernity? What *other* aesthetic and political agendas were either erased from cultural memory or thoroughly discredited as the literary avant-garde achieved cultural legitimacy and English studies charged itself with disciplinary credibility? How are the edges, the margins, and even the limitations of modernism revealed once we start paying attention to the ways this literary movement intersects with, borrows from, and reacts against other cultural enterprises?

My study thus contributes in three ways to "the new modernist studies."[24] It positions the "men of 1914" as one among a number of interest groups in Britain at the turn of the twentieth century intent on redefining the cultural work of literature. It emphasizes the backdrop of disciplinary (re)structuring in the context of which the Joyce–Pound–Eliot strand of modernism either secured its own cultural legitimacy or – as in the case of T. S. Eliot's redaction of Ezra Pound's cultural writings into "literary" fare – had disciplinary legitimacy thrust upon it. And it calls into question some very basic and commonly held views of this particular nexus of modernism's radicalness by documenting the following: its support of mainstream attitudes toward science (Chapter 1); its retreat from a supposed valuing of scandalous sexuality in the wake of Oscar Wilde's trials (Chapter 2); the conservative cultural and sexual politics masked by its radical formalist poetics (Chapter 3); and its opposition to key forms of resistance to middle-class values at the turn of the century such as "New Woman" feminism and Guild Socialism (Chapters 4 and 5).

In *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Peter Bürger distinguished the historical avant-garde from modernism on the basis of the former's critique of the institutionalization of art in the nineteenth century and the latter's investment in its own monumentalization. In the past ten years, scholars have usefully complicated Bürger's distinction by showing how the historical avant-garde, at least in Britain, functioned as what I term here a *modernist*

avant-garde: an avant-garde as interested in creating as in defying institutional affiliations. Studies such as Kevin Dettmar and Stephen Watt's *Marketing Modernism*, Michael Coyle's *Ezra Pound, Popular Genres, and the Discourse of Culture*, Joseph Kelly's *Our Joyce*, Gail McDonald's *Learning To Be Modern*, and Lawrence Rainey's *Institutions of Modernism* have detailed the very complicated processes by means of which the aesthetics and reading practices put forth by modernists and their earliest academic supporters became the dogma of the new professionals of literary studies, thus guaranteeing an honored place for modernism in the academy for decades to come.[25] Yet, as I hope to demonstrate in the chapters that follow, the new modernist studies will continue to be informed by modernist categories of analysis, and the "reappraisal of modernism as a whole" that scholars such as David Chinitz have called for will remain in fact quite limited, unless we are willing to more effectively de-naturalize both modernist protocols of literary analysis and the modernist mapping of turn-of-the-twentieth-century British literary and cultural history.

What follows, thus, is a set of case studies that invites us to rethink the Joyce–Pound–Eliot paradigm of modernism's highly restrictive and exclusionary mapping of culture and the literary field. I begin by looking at two figures who are, paradoxically, both liminal and central to British modernism: Beatrice Potter Webb and Oscar Wilde. In Chapter 1 Pound's dismissive characterization of Webb and her husband Sidney in "The Serious Artist" (1913) provides an occasion to reflect on the changing rhetorics of fiction, ethnography, and social science in the 1880s and 90s. Careful attention to the professional and disciplinary anxieties fueling both Pound's caricature of the Webbs as Fabian Socialists who believed "that the arts had better not exist at all"[26] and his defense of "serious" art's scientific values reveals some perhaps surprising similarities between these two seemingly antithetical figures. The female social scientist who is accused of being "poetry-blind," "fiction-blind, and drama-blind"[27] and the male modernist aesthete who proclaims the "scientific" value of art's "data" are both, I argue, byproducts of the renegotiation of disciplinary boundaries that began in the closing decades of the nineteenth century.

Chapter 2 considers a second strategy through which the London-based modernist avant-garde sought to shore up literature's symbolic capital in the face of the rising authority of the (social) sciences: the invention of a literary tradition in which "classic" works of art are deemed to have universal, transhistorical aesthetic appeal. I seek here to understand how Oscar Wilde's status as an ambiguously gendered *fin-de-siècle*

father-figure to literary modernism is related to celebrations of William Shakespeare as a writer who provides access to ahistorical and universal human truths, and thus can function as the centerpiece of a newly invented national literary tradition.

Chapter 3 focuses on two writers, D. H. Lawrence and Wyndham Lewis, who in certain regards lie "outside" the specific nexus of literary modernism that this study recontextualizes historically. A close reading of Lawrence's *The Lost Girl* (1920) emphasizes the mapping of "modern" culture and the literary field that influential early academic advocates of literary modernism such as F. R. Leavis found so appealing in Lawrence's work, while consideration of a key scene in and early modernist reviews of Lewis's *Tarr* (1918) leads to discussion of the excess of hostility toward bourgeois culture, representational art, and women that powers both Lewis's own and his earliest reviewers' championing of modernist "experimental writing."

Taking a cue from the late Raymond Williams, Chapters 4 and 5 counterpose "alternative traditions" "taken from the neglected works left in the wide margins of the century" against the Joyce–Pound–Eliot vector of modernism's self-serving narratives of cultural centrality.[28] Chapter 4 surveys the work of an Edwardian middlebrow feminist novelist who "talks back" to the modernist avant-garde in order to demonstrate the latter's radical simplification of the scene of literary production in early twentieth-century Britain through its insistence upon a high/low mapping of culture. And Chapter 5 immerses us in the open, spirited, and frequently acrimonious debates about art and art's role in culture among modernists and Guild Socialists in the *New Age* under A. R. Orage's editorship. Although the *New Age* is frequently described as a modernist journal, in fact its editors and contributors point up, over and over again, the cranky narrowness and rather sectarian views of any number of influential modernists as they promote "a revival of the arts"[29] that was never satisfied by or contained by modernist experimentalism.

"We've exploded all that," announces Virginia Woolf's fictional wanna-be modernist, echoing the violent, pugilistic rhetoric of *real* modernist avant-gardists, dismissing "all that" "trash" reading from the Victorian *fin de siècle* he finds in Rachel Vinrace's study – and reminding *us* of the gendered dynamics of power at play in the production and dissemination of a modernist world-view. Refusing identification with Hewet's (or T. S. Eliot's, or Ezra Pound's) "we," this study seeks to tell a different story, a more complex and less teleologically directed story, about the competition among emergent aesthetic and political traditions