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Liesl Olson

Modernism and the Ordinary

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Liesl Olson

OXFORD  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

2009

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Published by Oxford University Press, Inc.  
198 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10016

www.oup.com

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data  
Olson, Liesl.

Modernism and the ordinary / Liesl Olson.  
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-19-536812-3

1. Modernism (Literature) 2. Realism in literature. 3. Literature,  
Modern—20th century—History and criticism. 4. Literature,  
Modern—19th century—History and criticism. I. Title.

PN56.M54O47 2009

809.'9112—dc22 2008035628

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2  
Printed in the United States of America  
on acid-free paper

For my family

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The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. (One is unable to notice something—because it is always before one's eyes.)

—Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* §129

Perhaps

The truth depends on a walk around a lake . . .

—Wallace Stevens



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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book began at Columbia University in New York City and was finished at the University of Chicago. I am indebted to many wonderful people at both institutions—and beyond—who read and responded to the manuscript at various stages in its development. My deepest gratitude goes to Sarah Cole, whose generosity and intelligence are dazzling. As a mentor and a friend, Sarah has sustained me through the many years it has taken to write a first book. I thank Kevin Dettmar as well for his excitement about the project from start to finish. His perspective on all things—“the very life we’re living, which is so excellent”—has deeply shaped my own. At the crucial beginning so long ago, Ursula Heise inspired me and made sure that the book would be ambitious and comprehensive; I am very grateful to her. I also thank Pericles Lewis for his detailed review of the manuscript; his suggestions have greatly improved my argument. Special thanks also go to Michael Seidel for his sage wisdom about all things Joycean; to Nick Dames for expanding my knowledge of the everyday and the nineteenth-century novel; to Jonathan Levin for contributing to my ideas about Gertrude Stein and William James; to Jim Shapiro for his professional advice; to Jonathan Arac for the clarifying discussions that arose out of his seminar; and to Martin Puchner for helping me think about the general sweep of my introductory chapter.

At Chicago I have learned a great deal from being part of the Program in Poetry and Poetics, an especially dynamic community. One of my intellectual models is Bob von Hallberg. I am tremendously thankful for his interest in my work and his encouragement. Members of the Poetry and Poetics Workshop helped to sharpen my thinking about Wallace Stevens in ways that range from helping me to hear the music of a particular line to tracing the shape of his career. I especially want to thank two terrific friends who stand apart as poets and are, together, one of the best things about my life in Chicago: Suzanne Buffam and Chicu Reddy. They spent time with chapters of this book when it was most needed. I am grateful to a number of people here and elsewhere who have offered

me advice and who have helped me think outside of my own field. In particular I thank Crisi Benford, Rebecca Berne, David Bevington, Judith Goldman, Oren Izenberg, Alison James, Sarah Kareem, James Lilley, Nancy Luxon, Ann Mikkelsen, Jeff Rees, Lisa Ruddick, Olga Sezneva, and Richard Strier. I also want to thank the teachers who first inspired me. From “my younger and more vulnerable years,” Mark Fudenberg stands out; and from my time at Stanford, Michael Tratner, Jody Maxmin, and Alexander Nemerov.

Over the years I have benefited from a variety of grants and fellowships and the generosity of libraries and foundations. I would like to thank the Whiting Foundation for a year of support, the Henry Huntington Library for an idyllic summer of work in the Stevens archives, and Columbia University for five years as a President’s Fellow and a dissertation fellowship. I also thank the Manuscript Division of the New York Public Library. In the Special Collections Research Center at the University of Chicago, David Pavelich is a librarian above all others. His incredible knowledge of the poetry archives and his lack of pretension have been extremely welcome. Parts of this book have been published previously as articles, and I thank the editors of the following journals for granting me permission to use this material: *Journal of Modern Literature*, *Twentieth-Century Literature*, and the *Wallace Stevens Journal*.

Many close friends have been crucial to me as I wrote this book. At Columbia, Sarah Gracombe read and commented on every chapter in early versions. Her insights always raised the most important questions. I wish also to thank Nadia Colburn, whose friendship I value and whose commitment to writing and raising children I truly admire. Special thanks goes to Allison Wade for her deep friendship over many years. I am privileged to have her artwork grace the cover of this book. My gratitude also goes to Linsay Firman for her lovely perspective on all things; to Mark Levine and Emily Wilson for letting me treat them as family; to Matty Lane for his hilarity; and to Kim Gilmore for just knowing me so well. Two friends are impossible to thank enough: Brian Soucek, who makes “working” seem like one long, interesting conversation; and Megan Quigley, to whom I will say it again—from the window table at Queen’s Lane to venturing beyond the aisle chairs at the NYPL, it is truly wonderful to be in this together.

Finally, I wish to thank—and give thanks for—my entire, expanding family, especially John Everett McGuire and Teddy Olson McGuire. I work in the security of my father’s sheer optimism (“you’re an Olson!”) and my mother’s belief that every day deserves attention, and maybe a chocolate. My family makes everything possible. This book is dedicated to them.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

The following frequently cited works are referred to parenthetically with these abbreviations. See the bibliography for complete textual information.

*JL* 1–3 James Joyce, *The Letters of James Joyce*, Vols. 1–3

*SH* James Joyce, *Stephen Hero*

*Portrait* James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*

*U* James Joyce, *Ulysses*

*WL* 1–6 Virginia Woolf, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, Vols. 1–6

*WD* 1–5 Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, Vols. 1–5

*MD* Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*

*TTL* Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*

*Lectures* Gertrude Stein, *Lectures in America*

*WWJ* William James, *Writings of William James*

*CP* Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poems*

*SL* Wallace Stevens, *Collected Letters of Wallace Stevens*

*NA* Wallace Stevens, *The Necessary Angel*

*OP* Wallace Stevens, *Opus Posthumous*

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## Introduction

### The Paradox of the Ordinary

Literary modernism takes ordinary experience as its central subject. Yet the predominance of ordinariness has often been overlooked, largely because critics have overwhelmingly considered literary modernism as a movement away from the conventions of nineteenth-century realism and toward an aesthetic of self-conscious interiority. This line of thinking emphasizes how modernists sought to shed the heavy furniture of the realist and naturalist novel in order to render inner perception, the “atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall,” in Virginia Woolf’s famous words (“Modern Fiction,” 160). On this account, the most famous moments of literary modernism are moments of transcendent understanding; most modernists describe something of this kind: Woolf’s “moment of being,” James Joyce’s “epiphany,” Ezra Pound’s “magic moment,” Walter Benjamin’s “shock,” T. S. Eliot’s “still point of the turning world,” or Marcel Proust’s explosion of memory, triggered by such events as the taste of the madeleine. These extraordinary moments magnify an awareness of the self, a coming into being of the individual, and an opening up of interior states of knowing. The modernist preoccupation with the extremities of self-consciousness, located most strikingly in such moments as these, has been praised and criticized but only rarely challenged.<sup>1</sup> One argument of this book is

that this conception fundamentally obscures modernism's commitment to the ordinary, to experiences that are *not* heightened. The ordinary sometimes may be internalized, but it is never transcendent; it is what Wallace Stevens describes as "round and round, the merely going round, / Until merely going round is a final good" (*CP* 405). The ordinary is not always transformed into something else, into something beyond our everyday world; the ordinary indeed may endure in and of itself, as a "final good."

The modernist proclivity to dwell in the regularity of the ordinary often emerges out of a response to what is represented as the hollowness of modern life, the loss of abstract ideals in which to believe, and the difficulty of really knowing another person. Ordinary experience, in this sense, resembles Wittgenstein's conception of ordinary language. Wittgenstein does not suggest that ordinary language is something other than what we know it to be, nor that words have some purer, more abstract meaning detached from our usage; "but ordinary language is all right," as he states in *The Blue and Brown Books* (28). The meaning of what we say, according to Wittgenstein, lies in *how* we say it, in the grammar of language. Wittgenstein's *ordinary* consists of the language that we actually use when communicating with each other. "A word hasn't got a meaning given to it, as it were, by a power independent of us, so that there could be a kind of scientific investigation into what the word really means," Wittgenstein writes. "A word has the meaning someone has given to it" (28). Ordinary experience, similarly, can be understood as the things we do every day, meaningful in their usefulness.

The common logic about modernism, however, is that this state of beingness, what Heidegger calls "ready-to-hand," must be radically shaken up; it must be re-seen or seen anew. "Modernism," writes Rita Felski, "with its roughened verbal textures and often startling juxtapositions, can inject a sense of strangeness and surprise into its portrayal of the most commonplace phenomena. It makes the familiar seem newly uncanny, jolting us out of atrophied perceptions" ("Everyday," 608). The Russian Formalists called this technique *ostranenie*, or defamiliarization—art's ability to upset habitual modes of perception. In "Art as Technique" (1917), Victor Shklovsky claims that all art aims to undermine habit in habit's broadest sense, as both an affective experience of the world (perceiving the world in habitual ways) and as a way of organizing one's life. In his most famous passage, Shklovsky argues that art recovers what habit obscures: "Habitualization devours works, clothes, furniture, one's wife, and the fear of war. . . . And art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*" (4). Shklovsky does not denounce ordinary objects in and of themselves; he questions how we sense and order the ordinary world. Art's heightened attention to the everyday, therefore, may ultimately sanctify

the ordinary rather than cause a rupture with it. It is exactly these two modes of defamiliarization that the ordinariness of modernism resists.

Shklovsky was nineteen when he wrote “Art as Technique,” the same age as Samuel Beckett when he wrote his 1930 essay on how habit and memory function in Proust’s work. Not surprisingly, a critique of the ordinary—and bourgeois convention in particular—often originates in the questioning outlook of youth. Being suspicious of the ordinary might even be regarded as a commonplace condition of youth itself. But this kind of critique is not always sustained. That is, for many literary modernists, the ordinary possesses particular values at various times, including the values of stability, efficiency, and comfort. The representation of the ordinary *as* ordinary counterbalances the understanding of it as something that demands aesthetic defamiliarization. Beckett’s body of work, for instance, displays an attraction to the physical and the concrete, in the solid immanence of both objects and repeated habits, despite his sharp awareness that habits can also have a deadening quality. Many other modernist works are marked by a pull toward the overlooked, forgotten, and insignificant elements of experience, and the representation of them as such. Ordinary experience, to modify Wittgenstein, can be all right.

The aesthetic of the everyday that characterizes modernism may seem to share something with an aesthetic that is resolutely postmodern, one that composer and writer John Cage summed up when he said that his “intention is to affirm this life, not to bring order out of chaos nor to suggest improvements in creation, but simply to wake up to the very life we’re living, which is so excellent” (Cage 95). But my argument revises postmodern accounts of modernism as a period when writers turned away from the everyday or represented it in entirely negative terms. The modernist works that I address do not attempt to “bring order out of chaos” in the mode of “The Waste Land.” The structure behind *Ulysses* or the “pattern” that Woolf sees beneath what she calls “the cotton wool of daily life” is always counter-balanced by a valued interest in the diffuse and messy particularities of that life. Moreover, modernist writers do not always “affirm” the ordinary—in Cage’s sense—but they are always interested in how it operates. This said, modernism is still generally committed to modes of realism and coherence that could be called an aesthetic order. Modernism is not so “sunk in banality” as to have lost the power of aesthetic interest, as much postmodern art has done, according to the distinctions made by Arthur Danto in his exploration of what defines contemporary art (*Transfiguration*, vi). But modernist writing does take an enormous aesthetic risk.

Valuing the ordinary takes on three specific manifestations in the literary texts explored in this study, although the ordinary has not always been so distinctly

categorized—the ordinary’s theoretical appeal, in fact, derives from the capaciousness with which it can be invoked.<sup>2</sup> First, the ordinary is an affective experience of the world characterized by inattention or absentmindedness rather than Shklovsky’s heightened *ostranenie*. This kind of ordinariness allows for a reader’s own affective disinterest: the great risk that modernist literature takes is to *bore* its readers, pulling us into the very ordinariness that the text represents and embodies. Inattentive reading is not a mode that would seem to suit high modernist texts, with their complicated stylistic structures that demand to be systematically studied. But there is no doubt that a modernist novel such as Gertrude Stein’s *Mrs. Reynolds* or Joyce’s *Ulysses* allows a reader to lapse and tire, to feel a “negative emotion” like boredom rather than grand passion.<sup>3</sup> Thus reading, like countless other activities, might in fact be ordinary, depending upon the kind of attention we pay to it.

Second, the ordinary also consists of activities and things that are most frequently characterized by our inattention to them. This definition considers the ordinary as a *genre*: unheroic events and overlooked things, neither crucial moments of plot development nor temporal points that signify accomplishment. The ordinary can include mass-produced objects or the everyday errand, an event that is not always an Event. When Proust’s narrator trips on uneven paving stones in the last volume of *In Search of Lost Time*, the moment cannot be called ordinary: it is conspicuous and pivotal, for both the narrator and our understanding of the novel’s structure and meaning. In contrast to a moment like this one, the insignificance of events and objects that flood Joyce’s *Ulysses* calls attention both to the material thingness of what we encounter when we enter a room or walk down the street, and to the overwhelming wealth of information about these things available to the modern individual. While early Joyce critics (and first-time readers of Joyce) frequently look to Joyce’s “mythical method” or moments of “epiphany” as readerly guides to signify what is most important in the text, more recent critics have explored how Joyce constantly works to ironize the epiphanic. Joyce attempts to equalize events and objects in an environment chock-full of everyday *stuff*.

Third, the ordinary can be a mode of organizing life and representing it; it is a *style*, best represented by the routine, and aesthetic forms such as the list, or linguistic repetition, both of which attempt to embody the ordinary, to perform it. In “Portraits and Repetitions” (1934), Stein defends the innovative style of her portraits by explaining that her use of repetition is an attempt to get at “the rhythm of anybody’s personality” (174). Rather than embrace a narrative structure of beginning, middle, and end—rather than tell a story—Stein’s portraits re-create the “existence,” as she calls it, of an individual. Routine and habit, enacted by linguistic repetition, become more important than heightened or chronologically

ordered events. And in this sense, what characterizes an ordinary style is its openness: modernist literary forms are remarkable for the ways that they turn back upon themselves, for their refusal to move toward a teleological end.

These three principal aspects of the ordinary are interdependent. For instance, valued in opposition to other kinds of experience, the ordinary in its second manifestation as a genre nonetheless eludes qualitative defining: it is marked by its nonimportance; it is not worth noticing.<sup>4</sup> To say *this is ordinary* is to give significance to what is insignificant. Although many literary modernists may allude to the ordinary (it becomes a catchword for Woolf), actually representing it in fiction is a tricky task. If the ordinary is the nonrepresented, the overlooked, then the writer's objective is paradoxical: How does a writer replicate what is overlooked, if the nature of literary representation is to *look* closely at its subject? Modernist styles aim to embody this difficulty. To represent events and objects of common quality, Joyce's language of lists in *Ulysses* attempts to catalog and contain the ordinary's wide-ranging scope. This feature mimics the making of *Ulysses* and ultimately, its sheer size: Joyce edited and enlarged the novel by one third in proof (Ellmann, *Joyce*, 527). Chapter 1 of this book examines how *Ulysses* drowns what could be most important in a flood of insignificant stuff; "encyclopedic," as Joyce called *Ulysses*, the novel wants to contain it all.

But the proliferation of lists in *Ulysses* should be considered in light of its novelistic progenitors, from the timetables and balance sheets of *Robinson Crusoe* to the almanac of occupations in *Bouvard and Pécuchet*.<sup>5</sup> Joyce's catalogs of course also parody the epic catalogs of Homer, whose myth-making is a model for Joyce. In this sense, the inclusive impulse is not a particularly modern feature of the novel, though the varied ideological aims of modernist writers certainly reshape the way narrative inclusion functions. Along these lines, in chapter 2, I discuss how Woolf's theory about the modern novel illuminates her attraction and resistance to the narrative effect of "facts" in fiction. Despite Woolf's disparaging of Edwardian materialism (specifically the novels of Arnold Bennett, H. G. Wells, and John Galsworthy), she does not entirely reject their materialist techniques, striving instead to render a tactile, textured world in which her characters might be rooted in the urban landscape of London, or in the certainties of family genealogy, or in the historical specificity of post-World War I England. Woolf's emphasis on "facts" emerges out of her experimentation with how to create a palpable sense of what constitutes a person's life. In this context, I look closely at *Mrs. Dalloway*, a novel grounded in Woolf's desire to render the ordinary as an affective experience, what she called "moments of non-being," of prosaic, ongoing life.

The political valences of this nonheroic mode of experience, in both Joyce's and Woolf's works, suggest that to deflate heightened experience is not always to