

Out of Character: What Literary Modernism and Modern Psychology Can Take from Each Other

Review of Omri Moses, *Out of Character: Modernism, Vitalism, Psychic Life* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2014)

Let us deride the smugness of “The Times”:

GUFFAW!

—Ezra Pound, *Blast*

(1915)

Literary modernism, as Pound captures in this wonderfully weird little jeer, sprang less from a unified new aesthetic than from a free-wheeling urge to end the old smug. To Pound and his fellow modernists, the culture of the previous century had been too complacent, too tidy, too sure of things that ought to have been questioned long ago. While promising to build a better world, it had left the better part of a generation disenfranchised or dead, and as the modernists surveyed the social tolls of industrialization, imperialism, and mechanized warfare, they saw the need for a more experimental approach to literature, one that left the door open to greater truths, but took time to value the individual and the strange.

This exploratory ethos is what made modernism so fertile—but it is also what has made it so elusive, resisting the attempt of scholar after scholar to catch it in a tidy definition. And so the remarkable thing about Omri Moses’ *Out of Character* is that it manages to grab hold of literary modernism without crushing its special vitality, preserving the movement’s open-endedness while nevertheless teasing out some broader conclusions. The result is a sensitive and illuminating book that chronicles the efforts of Henry James, Gertrude Stein, T.S. Eliot, and other like-minded authors to reject the old moral certainties without abandoning all hope of shared ethical discovery. Taken together, Moses suggests, these labors yielded a richly eclectic group of literary

texts that worked to promote the view that “life is open-ended, unpredictable, filled with accidents, uncertainty, risk, impermanence.” And following on this, that: “ethics, which is about what is good for human life, must take into account attitudes and dispositions that allow individuals to change in accord with their circumstances, to adapt and self-regulate in the face of the unexpected” (p. 199).

Moses reconstitutes this modernist perspective on the good life by taking a pair of complimentary approaches. The first is historical. Literary modernists, he argues, borrowed widely from Darwin, Nietzsche, Bergson, William James, and other biologically-minded thinkers who had troubled the neat moral frameworks of the Victorians. These thinkers did not challenge Victorian morality in the same way, nor did they propose wholly compatible alternatives, but they all agreed that life was unstable and as such, that the only path forward for ethics was to embrace continual change. Instead of rooting ethics in a fixed moral “substance,” they therefore connected it to various forms of phenomenological process: shifting habits, streams of consciousness, non-rational feelings. And while these processes did not add up to a unified theory of human psychology, they helped the modernists sketch their way toward one, replacing the fixed archetypes of Victorian character with a set of provisional drafts of what a lived life could be.

The second of Moses’ complimentary approaches is aesthetic. As Moses demonstrates, the modernists did not parrot Darwin, Bergson, and their other influences, but extended ethics in new directions by drawing on two particular qualities of literature. First, they took advantage of literature’s capacity to probe the features of human psychology that eluded the more quantitative methods of contemporary science. As illustrated by Gertrude Stein’s *Melanctha*: “More and more now everyday Jeff found in himself, he felt more trusting. More and more everyday he did not think anything in words about what he was always doing” (p. 131). Here, Stein’s novel uses a poetic arrangement of language to capture a personal experience that seems beyond “words,” and as Moses describes, other modernist authors developed similarly innovative aesthetic techniques for exploring the qualitative side of brainwork. Second, the modernists took advantage of literature’s prerogative to be non-utilitarian. Where Darwin

and Bergson and James had measured the worth of an ethics in terms of its practical result—Does it lead to a better society? Make us happier? Improve our chances of survival?—modernist authors had license to adopt an attitude of ‘art for art’s sake’ that allowed their characters (and their readers) to wander around without clear instrumental goals. As a result, modernist literature could be more purely experimental than even science, unearthing and exploring psychological traits and tendencies that might otherwise be dismissed as maladaptive, anti-social, or just confused. Counterintuitively, that is, the instrumental value of modernist literature was increased by its disinterest in instrumentalism, for this disinterest made it a more open and inclusive observer of the possibilities of human life.

As Moses is well aware, his approach to modernism puts him at odds with recent trends in both the humanities and the psychological sciences. In the case of the humanities, many contemporary scholars have been wary of the notion of ‘character,’ viewing it as a relic of the uncritical and essentialist Victorian psychology that modernism set out to disrupt. To the extent that literary scholars now talk about character, it is thus usually either from a formalist perspective that restricts itself to the technical properties of texts, or from an old-fashioned psychoanalytic perspective that Moses (as he makes clear in a series of sharp critiques) has no wish to perpetuate. Meanwhile, in the case of the psychological sciences, literature has generally been treated—for example, by scholars such as Keith Oatley, Raymond Mar, David Castano, and Emanuele Kidd—as a social technology whose worth is to be gauged in terms of its quantitative results. Against this, Moses wants to embrace the messier side of a scientific worldview, using James’ experimentalism and Darwin’s rejection of teleology to open up a space in which ethics can join with literature in the spirit of free play.

Because Moses’ exploratory method resists quick truths, there is no ready means to prove its worth. But there are at least two ways in which scholars might find it fruitful. First, it opens new ways of appreciating the ethical function of individual modernist texts. Moses’ reading of Henry James’ *The Golden Bowl*, for example, tackles a novel that for all its stylistic intricacy, has invited fairly blunt interpretations of its characters’ minds. The novel involves an American woman (Maggie) who discovers

that her Italian husband is having an affair, prompting her to undertake a series of clandestine actions to end it. To many literary scholars, this sequence of events has suggested that Maggie's character is simple to the point of crudeness. Not only is she unable to think beyond her era's conservative obsession with marriage, but she engages in a relentlessly single-minded campaign to manipulate her husband. Yet against this line of reading, Moses points out that for much of the novel, Maggie seems to have no clear idea of what she wants. Rather than rigidly pursuing her matrimonial claims, she inches this way and that, opening up new possibilities for action while carefully making sure not to close down existing ones. Operating by "hunch" and "presentiment" (p. 110), she is thus able to balance and explore a proliferating set of ethical opportunities, until finally she discovers the ones that fit best with her own complicated set of personal interests, feelings, and tendencies: "It had operated within her now to the last intensity, her glimpse of the precious truth that by helping [her husband], helping him to help himself, as it were, she should help him to help *her*" (p. 115). Improvising her way into a new relationship with her husband, she does not assent to the traditional idea of marriage, but creatively jimmy-rigs her own.

And second, Moses' approach suggests a way to enrich the current relationship between literature and the psychological sciences. Of late, psychologists have become increasingly interested in literature, but their interest has generally taken one of two forms. Either they have seen literature as a tool for portraying known mental states and processes, or they have treated it as a tool for therapeutically managing egoism, aggression, and other behaviors that they perceive as anti-social. In both cases, in other words, they have valued literature as a way to reinforce what contemporary psychology already thinks or recommends. If Moses is right, however, literature can contribute something more original to modern psychology, for its capacity to engage in a disinterested, non-instrumental exploration of human experience allows it to map (and even create) forms of ethical activity that lie outside the frameworks of contemporary science. As Moses sees it, that is, literature can open up ethical possibilities that have not only gone undiscovered by psychologists, but will *never* be discovered by them. Moses' term for this capacity of literature is 'vitalism'—a word that has a long history of mystic implications, but in *Out of Character* does not imply anything numinous. Rather,

it simply refers to the parts of human experience that cannot be reduced to matter and mechanism because they exist in the space of our phenomenal consciousness. To explore this subjective-qualitative space, we need something other than objective-quantitative approaches, and while this admission seems to open the door to spiritualists, pseudo-scientists, and cranks, Moses suggests that the legacy of modernism instead points us toward the very different style of vitalism made possible by literature. As the modernists demonstrate, literature can help us chart the subjective side of human experience in a way that is as rigorously open-ended, engaged with the world, and experimental as scientific research. Rather than being opposed to the objective method of modern psychology, the subjective method of literature thus offers itself as a symbiotic partner, enriching our understanding of human character in its own biologically irreducible way.

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