

MODERNISM AND THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE

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Harlem is vicious
modernism. Bangclash.
Vicious the way its made.
Can you stand such Beauty?
So violent and transforming.
—Amiri Baraka, “Return of the Native”

THE TERM “MODERNISM” HAS SOMETHING OF THE CHARACTER OF KEAT’S COLD pastoral. Promising a wealth of meaning, it locks observers into a questing indecision that can end in unctious chiasmus. Teased out of thought by the term’s promise, essayists often conclude with frustratingly vague specifications. Harry Levin’s essay “What Was Modernism?”, for example, after providing lists, catalogues, and thought problems, concludes with the claim that modernism’s distinguishing feature is its attempt to create “a conscience for a scientific age” (630).¹ Modernism’s definitive act, according to Levin, traces its ancestry to “Rabelais, at the very dawn of modernity.”

Such an analysis can only be characterized as a terribly general claim about scientific mastery and the emergence of the modern. It shifts the burden of definition from “modernism” to “science,” without defining either enterprise.

Robert Martin Adams, in an essay bearing the same title as Levin’s offers a key to modernism’s teasing semantics.² Adams writes:

Of all the empty and meaningless categories, hardly any is inherently as empty as “the modern.” Like “youth,” it is a self-destroying concept; unlike “youth,” it has a million and one potential meanings. Nothing is so dated as yesterday’s modern, and nothing, however dated in itself, fails to qualify as “modern” so long as it enjoys the exquisite privilege of having been created yesterday. (31-32)

This essay is, in part, a direct excerpt from a book-length study of the same title that will be issued by the University of Chicago Press in the fall of 1987, and, in part, an abbreviated summary of claims argued at some length in that book. The principal aim of both the essay and the book is to suggest a problematic, or an analytical model, that will enable a useful reassessment of the Harlem Renaissance. Such an analysis would escape the pitfalls of a period analysis of Afro-American expressivity and take Harlem as a moment not in a developing and exclusive literary enterprise, but as a moment in a general and distinctive Afro-American discursive history comprised of a definable array of strategies. The presentation that follows will, hopefully, give impetus to such a reassessment. Versions of this essay were prepared and delivered as lectures for the English Institute (August 1985) and the Afro-American Studies Department at Yale University (November 1985). At Yale, I had the privilege of delivering the Richard Wright Lecture.

Adams implies that bare chronology makes modernists of us all. The latest moment's production—by definition—instantiates “the modern.” And unless we arbitrarily terminate modernism's allowable tomorrows, the movement is unending. Moreover, the temporal indeterminacy of the term allows us to select (quite randomly) structural features that we will call distinctively “modern” on the basis of their chronological proximity to us. We can then read these features over past millennia. Like Matthew Arnold in his Oxford inaugural lecture entitled “On the Modern Element in Literature,” we can discover what is most distinctively modern in works a thousand years old.

As one reads essay after essay, one becomes convinced that Ihab Hassan's set of provocative questions in a work entitled “POSTmodernISM A Paracritical Bibliography” are apt and suggestive for understanding the frustrating persistence of “modernism” as a critical sign. Hassan queries:

When will the Modern Period end?
 Has ever a period waited so long? Renaissance? Baroque? Neo-Classical? Romantic?
 Victorian?
 When will Modernism cease and what comes thereafter?
 What will the twenty-first century call us? and will its voice come from the same side of our
 graves?
 Does Modernism stretch merely to stretch out our lives? Or, ductile, does it give a new sense of
 time? The end of periodization? the slow arrival of simultaneity?
 If change changes ever more rapidly, and the future jolts us now, do men, paradoxically, resist
 both endings and beginnings?³⁽⁷⁾

Certainly it is the case that scholars resist consensus on everything—beginnings, dominant trends, and endings—where *modernism* is concerned.

Yet, for Anglo-American and British traditions of literary and artistic scholarship there is a tenuous agreement that some names and works *must* be included in any putatively comprehensive account of modern writing and art. Further, there seems to be an identifiable pleasure in listing features of art and writing that begin to predominate (by Virginia Woolf's time line) on or about December, 1910.

The names and techniques of the “modern” that are generally set forth constitute a descriptive catalogue resembling a natural philosopher's curiosity cabinet. In such cabinets disparate and seemingly discontinuous objects share space because that is the very function of the cabinet—to house or give order to varied things in what appears a rational, scientific manner. Picasso and Pound, Joyce and Kandinsky, Stravinsky and Klee, Brancusi and H. D. are made to form a series. Collage, primitivism, montage, allusion, “dehumanization,” and leitmotifs are forced into the same field. Nietzsche and Marx, Freud and Frazier, Jung and Bergson become dissimilar bedfellows. Such naming rituals have the force of creative works like *Ulysses* and *The Waste Land*. They substitute a myth of unified purpose and intention for definitional certainty. Before succumbing to the myth, however, perhaps we should examine the “change” that according to Woolf's calendar occurred on or about December, 1910.

Surely that change is most accurately defined as an acknowledgment of radical

uncertainty. Where precisely anyone or anything was located could no longer be charted on old maps of “civilization,” nor could even the most microscopic observation tell the exact time and space of day. The very conceptual possibilities of both time and space had been dramatically refigured in the mathematics of Einstein and the physics of Heisenberg. A war of barbaric immensity combined with imperialism, capitalism and totalitarianism’s subordination or extermination of tens of millions to produce a reaction to human possibilities quite different from Walt Whitman’s joyous welcoming of the modern. Whitman in the nineteenth century exalted: “Years of the modern! years of the unperform’d!”

For T. S. Eliot, the completed and expected performance of mankind scarcely warranted joy. There was, instead, the “Murmur of maternal lamentation” presaging:

Cracks . . . and bursts in the violet air
 Falling towers
 Jerusalem Athens Alexandria
 Vienna London
 Unreal.⁴

Eliot’s speaker, however, is comforted by the certainty that there are millennia of “fragments” (artistic shrapnel) constituting a *civilization* to be mined, a cultured repertoire to act as a shore against ruins. That is to say, Fitzgerald’s Tom Buchanan in *The Great Gatsby* seems to be a more honestly self-conscious representation of the threat that some artists whom we call “modern” felt in the face of a new world of science, war, technology, and imperialism. “Civilization’s going to pieces,” Tom confides to an assembled dinner party at his lavish Long Island estate while drinking a corky (but rather impressive) claret. “I’ve gotten to be a terrible pessimist about things,” he continues.⁵

Now, I don’t mean to suggest that Anglo-American, British, and Irish moderns did not address themselves with seriousness and sincerity to a changed condition of humankind. Certainly they did. But they also mightily restricted the province of what constituted the tumbling of the towers, and they remained eternally self-conscious of their own pessimistic “becomings.” Tom’s pessimism turns out to be entirely bookish. It is predicated upon Stoddard’s (which Tom remembers as “Goddard’s”) racialistic murmurings. What really seems under threat are not the towers of civilization, but rather an assumed supremacy of boorishly racist, indisputably sexist, and unbelievably wealthy Anglo-Saxon males. One means of shoring up one’s self under perceived threats of “democratization” and a “rising tide” of color is to resort to elitism—to adopt a style that refuses to represent any *thing* other than the stylist’s refusal to represent (what Susan Sontag refers to as an “aesthetics of silence”).

Another strategy is to claim that one’s artistic presentations and performances are quintessential renderings of the unrepresentable—human subconsciousness, for example, or primitive structural underpinnings of a putatively civilized mankind, or

the simultaneity of a space-time continuum. Yet another strategy—a somewhat tawdry and dangerous one—is advocacy and allegiance to authoritarian movements or institutions that promise law and order. Regardless of their strategies for confronting it, though, it was *change*—a profound shift in what could be taken as unquestionable assumptions about the meaning of human life—that moved those artists whom we call “moderns.” And it was only a rare one among them who did not have some formula—some “ism”—for checking a precipitous toppling of man and his towers. Futurism, imagism, impressionism, vorticism, expressionism, cubism—all offered explicit programs for the arts *and* the salvation of humanity. Each in its turn yields to other formulations of the role of the writer and the task of the artist in a changed and always, ever more rapidly changing world.

Today, we are “postmodern.” Rather than *civilization*’s having gone to pieces, it has extended its sway in the form of a narrow and concentrated group of power brokers scarcely more charming, humane or informed than Tom Buchanan. To connect the magnificent achievements, breakthroughs and experiments of an entire panoply of modern intellectuals with fictive attitudes of a fictive modern man (Fitzgerald’s Tom) may seem less than charitable. For even though Tom evades the law, shirks moral responsibility, and still ends up rich and in possession of the fairest Daisy of them all (though he ends, that is to say, as the capitalist triumphant, if not the triumphant romantic hero of the novel), there are still other modes of approach to the works of the moderns.

Lionel Trilling, for example, provides one of the most charitable scholarly excursions to date.⁶ He describes modern literature as “shockingly personal,” posing “every question that is forbidden in polite society” and involving readers in intimate interactions that leave them uneasily aware of their personal beings in the world. One scholarly reaction to Trilling’s formulations, I’m afraid, is probably like that of the undergraduates whom he churlishly suggests would be “rejected” by the efforts of Yeats and Eliot, Pound and Proust. It is difficult, for example, for an Afro-American student of literature like me—one unconceived in the philosophies of Anglo-American, British, and Irish moderns—to find intimacy in either the moderns’ hostility to *civilization* or in their fawning reliance on an array of images and assumptions bequeathed by a *civilization* that, in its prototypical form, is exclusively Western, preeminently bourgeois, and optically white.

Alas, Fitzgerald’s priggishly astute Nick has only a limited vocabulary when it comes to a domain of experience that I, as an Afro-American, know well: “As we crossed Blackwell’s Island a limousine passed us, driven by a white chauffeur, in which sat three modish negroes, two bucks and a girl. I laughed aloud as the yolks of their eyeballs rolled toward us in haughty rivalry” (69). If only Fitzgerald had placed his “pale well-dressed negro” in the limousine or if Joseph Conrad⁷ had allowed his Africans to actually be articulate or if D. H. Lawrence⁸ had not suggested through Birkin’s reflection on African culture that:

Thousands of years ago, that which was imminent in himself must have taken place in these Africans: the goodness, the holiness, the desire for creation and productive happiness must

have lapsed, leaving the single impulse for knowledge through the senses, knowledge arrested and ending in the senses, mystic knowledge in disintegration and dissolution, knowledge such as the beetles have, which live purely within the world of corruption and cold dissolution. (245-46)

Or if O'Neill⁹ had only bracketed the psycho-surreal final trappings of his Emperor's world and given us the stunning account of colonialism that remains implicit in his quip at the close of his list of dramatis personae: "The action of the play takes place on an island in the West Indians, as yet un-self-determined by white marines." If any of these moves had been accomplished, then perhaps I might feel, at least, some of the intimacy and reverence Trilling suggests.

But even as I recall a pleasurable spring in New Haven when I enjoyed cracking Joycean codes in order to teach *Ulysses*, I realize that the Irish writer's grand monument is not a work to which I shall return with reverence and charitably discover the type of inquisition that Trilling finds so engaging: "[Modern literature] asks us if we are content with our marriages, with our family lives, with our professional lives, with our friends"(7-8). I am certain that I shall never place *Ulysses* in a group of texts that I describe, to use Trilling's words, as "spiritual" if not "actually religious." Perhaps, the reason I shall not is because the questions Trilling finds—correctly or incorrectly—intimately relevant to his life are descriptive only of a bourgeois, characteristically twentieth-century, white Western mentality. As an Afro-American, a person of African descent in the United States today, I spend a great deal of time reflecting that in the world's largest geographies the question "Where will I find water, wood, or food for today?" is (and has been for the entirety of this century) the most pressing and urgently posed inquiry.

In "diasporic," "developing," "Third World," "emerging"—or whatever adjective one chooses to signify the non-Western side of Chenweizu's title "The West and the Rest of Us"—nations or territories there is no need to pose, in ironical Audenesque ways, questions such as: Are we happy? Are we content? Are we free?¹⁰ Such questions presuppose, at least, an adequate level of sustenance and a faith in human behavioral alternatives sufficient to enable a self-directed questioning. In other words, without food for thought, all modernist bets are off. Rather than reducing the present essay to a discourse on underdevelopment, however, or invoking a different kind of human being, what I want to evoke by emphasizing concerns other than those of "civilization" and its discontents is a discursive constellation that marks a change in Afro-American nature that occurred on or about September 18, 1895. The constellation that I have in mind includes Afro-American literature, music, art, graphic design, and intellectual history. It is *not* confined to a traditionally defined belles lettres, or, to Literature with a capital and capitalist "L".

In fact, it is precisely the confinement (in a very Foucaultian sense discovered in *Madness and Civilization*) of such bourgeois categories (derivatives of Kantian aesthetics) that the present essay seeks to subvert.¹¹ Hence, there will be few sweeps over familiar geographies of a familiar Harlem Renaissance conceived as an

enterprise of limited accomplishment and limited liability—"Harlem Renaissance, Ltd." Instead, I shall attempt to offer an account of discursive conditions of possibility for what I define as "renaissancism" in Afro-American expressive culture as a whole. I am, thus, interested less in *individual* "artists" than in areas of expressive production. It is my engagement with these areas of Afro-American production (intellectual history, music, graphic design, stage presence, oratory, etc.) that provides intimacy and that leads me, through a specifically Afro-American modernism, to blues geographies that are still in search of substantial analysis—and liberation.

* * *

The affinity that I feel for Afro-American modernism is not altogether characteristic. Scholars have been far from enthusiastic in their evaluation of the "Harlem Renaissance" of the 1920s—an outpouring of Afro-American writing, music, and social criticism that includes some of the earliest attempts by Afro-American artists and intellectuals to define themselves in "modern" terms. Few scholars would disagree that the Harlem Renaissance marks a readily identifiable "modern" movement in Afro-American intellectual history, and most would concede that the principal question surrounding the Harlem Renaissance has been: "Why did the renaissance fail?"

Scarcely four years after "Black Tuesday," that awful moment which plummeted American into depression, a prominent intellectual and contemporary of the renaissance wrote:

It is a good thing that [the editor] Dorothy West is doing in instituting a magazine [*Challenge*] through which the voices of younger Negro writers can be heard. The term "younger Negro writers" connotes a degree of disillusionment and disappointment for those who a decade ago hailed with loud huzzas the dawn of the Negro literary millennium. We expected much; perhaps, too much. I now judge that we ought to be thankful for the half-dozen younger writers who did emerge and make a place for themselves.¹²

James Weldon Johnson's disillusionment that the Harlem Renaissance "failed" finds its counterparts and echoes in the scholarship, polemics, and popular rhetoric of the past half-century. An avatar of Johnson's disillusionment, for example, is the scholarly disapprobation of Nathan Huggins' provocative study *Harlem Renaissance* (1971).¹³

Huggins charges that the *Harlem Renaissance* failed because it remained provincial. Its spokespersons unfortunately accepted the province of "race" as a domain in which to forge a New Negro identity. Mired in this ethnic provincialism, writers like Countee Cullen, Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, Alain Locke and others failed to realize that they did not have to battle for a defining identity in America. They needed only, in Huggins' view, to claim "their *patria*, their nativity" as American citizens (309). The Harvard historian believes that Afro-Americans

are—and have always been—inescapably implicated in the warp and woof of the American fabric. In fact, he holds that they are nothing other than “Americans” whose darker pigmentation has been appropriated as a liberating mask by their lighter complexioned fellow citizens. Hence, Afro-Americans are fundamentally bone of the bone—if not flesh of the flesh—of the American people, and the intricacies of minstrelsy and the aberrations of the Harlem Renaissance are both misguided, but deeply revelatory, products of the way race relations have stumbled and faltered on the boards of progressive optimism in the United States.

While Huggins adduces provinciality and narrowness as causes for a failed Harlem Renaissance, his contemporary and fellow Afro-American historian David Levering Lewis takes a contrary view.¹⁴ Lewis ascribes Harlem’s failings to a tragically wide, ambitious, and delusional striving on the part of renaissance intellectuals. Writing ten years after Huggins, Lewis describes the appearance of Alain Locke’s compendium of creative, critical, and scholarly utterances *The New Negro* (1925) as follows:

its thirty-four Afro-American contributors (four were white) included almost all the future Harlem Renaissance regulars—an incredibly small band of artists, poets, and writers upon which to base Locke’s conviction that the race’s “more immediate hope rests in the revaluation by white and black alike of the Negro in terms of his artistic endowments and cultural contributions, past and prospective.” To suppose that a few superior people, who would not have filled a Liberty Hall quorum or Ernestine Rose’s 135th Street library, were to lead ten million Afro-Americans into an era of opportunity and justice seemed irresponsibly delusional. (117)

Lewis suggests that this delusional vision was a direct function of a rigidly segregated United States. Unlike Huggins, who assumes *patria* as a given, Lewis claims that Afro-Americans turned to art during the twenties precisely because there was no conceivable chance of their assuming *patria*—or anything else in white America. Art seemed to offer the only means of advancement because it was the *only* area in America—from an Afro-American perspective—where the color line had not been rigidly drawn. Excluded from politics and education, from profitable and challenging areas of the professions, and brutalized by all American economic arrangements, Afro-Americans adopted the arts as a domain of hope and an area of possible progress.

Lewis’ stunningly full research reveals the merits of his thesis. He provides a grim look at dire economic and social restrictions that hedged blacks round everywhere in the United States during the 1920s. Exceptional art—like effective and liberating social strategies—was, perhaps, a quite illusory Afro-American goal. In the end, all of Harlem’s sound and flair could not alter the indubitably American fact that black men and women, regardless of their educational or artistic accomplishments, would always be poorer, more brutally treated, and held in lower esteem than their white American counterparts. The renaissance, thus, reveals itself in retrospect, according to Lewis, as the product of middle-class black “architects [who] believed in

ultimate victory through the maximizing of the exceptional. They [members of the 'talented tenth'] deceived themselves into thinking that race relations in the United States were amenable to the assimilationist patterns of a Latin country" (305-06).

The gap between the Afro-American masses and the talented tenth could not have been manifested more profoundly than in the latter's quixotic assimilationist assumptions. For, ironically, the most acute symbol of Harlem's surge at the wall of segregation is not poems nor interracial dinner parties, according to Lewis, but rather the Harlem riot of 1935, in which thousands took to the streets and unleashed their profound frustrations by destroying millions of dollars' worth of white property. The riot, for Lewis, offers the conclusive signal that the strivings of the twenties were delusional and that the renaissance was fated to end with a bang of enraged failure.

Johnson, Huggins, and Lewis are all scholars who merit respect for their willingness to assess an enormously complex array of interactions spanning more than a decade of Afro-American artistic, social, and intellectual history. Thanks to their efforts, we have far more than a bare scholarly beginning when we attempt to define one of the seminal moments of Afro-American "modernism." Yet, the scholarly reflections that we possess are, unfortunately, governed by a problematic—a set of questions and issues—that makes certain conclusions and evaluations inevitable. For if one begins with the query that motivates Johnson and others, then one is destined to provide a derogatory account of the twenties. "Why did the Harlem Renaissance fail?" is the question, and the query is tantamount to the unexpected question sprung by a stranger as one walks a crowded street: "When, Sir, did you stop beating your wife?" Both questions are, of course, conditioned by presuppositions that restrict the field of possible responses. To ask "why" the renaissance failed is to agree, at the very outset, that the twenties did not have profoundly beneficial effects for areas of Afro-American discourse that we have only recently begun to explore in depth. Willing compliance in a problematic of "failure" is equivalent, I believe, to efforts of historians—black and otherwise—who seek causal explanations for the "failure" of the Civil Rights Movement.

It seems paradoxical that a probing scholar of Lewis' caliber—an investigator who implies strongly that he clearly understands the low esteem in which Afro-Americans will *always* be held—devotes three hundred pages to proving the "failure" of a movement that in the eyes of white America could never have been a success—precisely because it was "Afro-American." The scholarly double bind that forces Afro-Americanists to begin with *given* assessments of black intellectual history and thus laboriously work their way to dire conclusions is, quite simply, an unfortunate result of disciplinary control and power politics. The purely hypothetical injunction to an Afro-Americanist from the mainstream might be stated as follows:

Show me, by the best scholarly procedures of the discipline, why the Harlem Renaissance was a failure, and I will reward you. By explaining this *failure*, you will have rendered an "honest" intellectual service to the discipline, to yourself, and to your race.

The primary evaluation where such an injunction is concerned remains, of course, that of the dominating society whose axiological validity and aptitude are guaranteed by its dictation of the governing problematic.

If, for the moment, we return to Anglo-American and British modernism, it is difficult to conceive of scholars devoting enormous energy to explicating the “failure” of modernism. Surely it is the case that the various “isms” of the first decades of British and American modernism did not forestall wars, feed the poor, cure the sick, empower coal miners in Wales (or West Virginia), or arrest the spread of bureaucratic technology. Furthermore—though apologists will not thank me for saying so—the artistic rebels and rebellions of British and American modernism were often decidedly puerile and undeniably transient. The type of mind-set that has governed a Harlem Renaissance problematic would be in force vis-à-vis British and American modernism, I think, if a scholar took Ranier Marie Rilke’s evaluation in a letter to a friend as the indisputable truth of modernism’s total effect on the world. Writing at the outbreak of World War I, Rilke laments:

that such confusion, not-knowing-which-way-to-turn, the whole sad man-made complication of this provoked fate, that exactly this incurably bad condition of things was necessary to force out evidence of whole-hearted courage, devotion and bigness? While we, the arts, the theater, called nothing forth in these very same people, brought nothing to rise and flower, were unable to change anyone.¹⁵

A too optimistic faith in the potential of art may, in fact, be as signal a mark of British and American modernism’s “failure” as of the Harlem Renaissance. I suspect, however, that no group of British or white American scholars would take *failure* as their watchword and governing sign for an entire generation and its products. The predictable corollary of my suspicion is my belief that a new problematic is in order for the Harlem Renaissance. What is needed, I believe, is a reconceptualization of the questions we will ask in order to locate the efforts of the 1920s.

* * *

The new problematic that I am attempting to formulate begins with turn-of-the-century Afro-American discursive strategies and their motivation. My claim is that Afro-American spokespersons in late nineteenth-century America were primarily interested in a form of discourse—of public address and delivery—that would effectively articulate the needs, virtues, and strengths of a mass of Afro-Americans stranded by Jim Crow discrimination and violent lynch law in the “country districts” of the South. Both Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. DuBois set forth statements that define strategies of discourse—a black “discursive field,” as it were—that are southern in focus and revolutionary in implication. For in *Up From Slavery* (1901) and *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) alike, we find that the “subject” is

the black masses of southern country districts; the goal of both works is the effective liberation of this mass group from feudal subsistence economies and legally reinforced conditions of ignorance and illiteracy. In order to be recognized and heard as Afro-American spokespersons, however, both Washington and DuBois had to assume a discursive stance in relationship to the signal white American *form* for representing blacks—the minstrel mask.

Briefly, minstrelsy is a perduring legacy and strategy of representation when blacks appear in white discourse. It offers a form of appropriation, a domestic space for taking, hearing, and containing the black OTHER. Only by assuming a posture relative to this space could turn-of-the-century, Afro-American spokespersons become effectively articulate.

While the options of such spokespersons were not as clear-cut as a simple duality would suggest, I claim that Washington and DuBois, in their deployment of a “mastery of form” and a “deformation of mastery,” respectively, set the contours of a field of Afro-American phonics that marks the birth of Afro-American modernism.

“Mastery” is such a common term in colleges and universities with the MA and MPhil degrees that the first strategy—“mastery of form”—is easily understood. But “deformation” is a more difficult concept.

What I intend by the term is akin to what the deconstructionist Jacques Derrida calls the “trace.” The deformative sounds of Afro-America are the group phonics and common language of the masses, sounds that are traditionally labelled “sub-standard,” “nonsensical,” or “unlearned” by white speakers. But such commonly understood sounds, under a linguist’s scrutiny, reveal themselves as normal, standard, literate components of one dialect. The provisional and dialectical character of Black English infects, as it were, assumptions by all speakers in the United States that their language variety is anything other than a quite provisional dialect. It is impossible to sustain a master, standard, or absolute position in the face of the radically demonstrated provisionality of one’s position. When Caliban knows himself as a usurped king, it is time for Prospero to depart the island.

Deformation, then, is the putative bondsperson’s assured song of his or her own exalted, expressive status in an always coequal world of sounds and soundings. Anecdotally, one can image Paul Whiteman trying to sustain the title “King of Jazz” in the presence of Louis Armstrong. In the context of the present discussion, it is very difficult to imagine ninety-nine percent of the Anglo-American population of the years between 1899 and 1920 attempting to convince itself that it sounded in any way as brilliant as W. E. B. DuBois, who takes apart—or de-forms—illusions of such equality through the lyrical brilliance of his prose and his deliberately ironical and satirical mockeries of such illusion.

Washington intersperses *Up From Slavery* with outrageous darky jokes, caricatures of elderly black southern men and women, aspersions against overly ambitious northern blacks, and insulting stereotypes of the race, including a portrait of his own mother as a CHICKEN THIEF. But he also devotes a quarter of his

autobiography to the art of public speaking, and his outlandish portrayals of the folk of the “country districts” reveal themselves, finally, as means of holding the attention of an audience that knows but one sound—minstrelsy—of the Negro. In effect, Washington employs sounds of the minstrel mask, or form, to create a space and audience for black public speaking. That public speaking, in turn, is employed to secure philanthropic funds for a black vocational educational institution that constitutes a moral skills center for the black folks of the country districts. Tuskegee Institute is the ultimate result of Washington’s sounding on, and mastery of, the minstrel form. His mastery of form is, in fact, signified by the transcendence of minstrel *non-sense* represented by Tuskegee.

In contrast to Washington’s mastery of form is DuBois’ deformation of mastery. Refusing the sounds of minstrelsy, DuBois instituted black song, specifically the Afro-American spiritual, as the carrier of a black folk energy from southern country districts. Fisk University, built, in part, by monies obtained from concerts of spirituals presented by the Fisk Jubilee Singers, becomes a symbol of the type of educational centers that are needed to move Afro-Americans into the first ranks of twentieth-century life. For DuBois, the black university is the site where black folk energies and Western high culture merge, producing a sound that surpasses all traditional American music, or minstrelsy. In its emphasis on the symbolic weight of black folk spirituality and spiritual singing, *The Souls of Black Folk* stands as a singing book.

The defining discursive models of mastery and deformation provided by Washington and DuBois produce not a binary opposition, but, rather, a type of Cartesian plane—a system of coordinates in which any point on, say, a horizontal axis of mastery implies a coexistent point on a vertical axis of deformation. Hence, the notion of a discursive field.

Alain Locke, a key Afro-American spokesperson of the 1920s, seems to have possessed a brilliant comprehension of this field. For his anthology *The New Negro* (1925) represents Afro-American discourse in its myriad stops and resonances. Locke’s collection is a blend of business-like mastery and lyrical and intrepid deformation. It is a public document geared toward specifically in-group and distinctively racial ends. Its purpose is to sound a comprehensive Afro-American voice, one capable of singing in the manner of spirituals (Locke himself wrote the very centerpiece essay on the Afro-American spirituals), yet adept in the ways of southern education and vocation. There are essays devoted both to Hampton-Tuskegee vocationalism and to black business enterprise in the South. Moreover, *The New Negro* employs a rich array of African and Afro-American graphics in order to frame its claims for the emergence of a “New Negro” with venerable visuals drawn from centuries-old traditions. The result is a landmark in Afro-American discourse: a collection that sounds a resonantly new note as both a public speaking manual and a deeply racial (and vernacular) singing book.

High cultural and vernacular expressivity merge in the office of moving Afro-America from subservience, low esteem, and dependency to the status of respected

and boldly outspoken nation. What is signal in Locke's venture is the unabashed coalescence of mass and class, "standard" dialect and black vernacular, aesthetic and political concerns. A long and probing essay addressed to the cause of African decolonization and written by DuBois is the concluding section of Locke's work.

If *The New Negro* is representative of efforts of Harlem Renaissance spokespersons (and I believe it is), then the discursive results of Harlem in black intellectual history can scarcely be deemed failures. For Locke's work both enjoins and represents a successful expressive moment in the field constituted by a mastery of form and a deformation of mastery. *The New Negro* is a kind of manual of maroonage, a voice of a northern, urban black population that has radically absented itself from the erstwhile plantations and devastated country districts of the South. Combining a panoply of folk sounds with traditional artistic forms and entrepreneurial and practical concerns of black liberation, *The New Negro* projects an articulate, nationalistic, and independent black voice. That voice—if at times too sanguine, overly self-conscious and self-confident—constitutes a high point for energies set in motion at the turn of the century.

Further, the voice of the New Negro comprised a model for subsequent generations. When Sterling Brown, who is preeminently a poet and critic of the 1930s, assumed the mantle of "folk poet" as a natural wrap, he demonstrated the efficacy and effects of a successful Afro-American modernism. For what the Harlem Renaissance, as a masterfully achieved space within a black discursive field, enabled was a speaking or sounding place where a middle-class, Phi Beta Kappa, college-bred poet like Brown could responsibly play a distinctive note. DuBois' black, country folk as university pupils find their voice and representation in the Jubilee Singers of Nashville. The urbane Sterling Brown met the blues singer Gertrude "Ma" Rainey in Nashville (home of Fisk University). He was in the company of the famous black musicologist and Fisk faculty member John Work when they encountered Rainey at a Nashville club. What the two men drew from the tradition of folk sound represented by Rainey is now a matter of black discursive history.

Brown's *Southern Road* (1932) is one of the most outstanding collections of modern, black verse in existence. Work's collections and analyses of black song (*Folk Song of the American Negro, Jubilee, Ten Spirituals*) are unsurpassed. The productions of the two men not only guaranteed their own recognition, reward, and employment, but also brought new perspective to the group portrait of the Afro-American that had been in formation since the turn of the century. This perspective was a usable construction for writers like Richard Wright and Zora Neale Hurston who had their maturation in the thirties.

* * *

The success of the Harlem Renaissance as Afro-American modernism's defining moment is signalled by *The New Negro*'s confidently voiced plays within a field

marked by the mastery of form and the deformation of mastery. Only by reconstructing or re-mem-bering a discursive history of Afro-America and its socioeconomic and sociopolitical motivations and objectives can one see Harlem and its successors as articulations that carry a population not away from querulous literary ancestors, but rather *up from slavery*. Modernism for Afro-America finds impetus, empowerment, and inspiration in the black city (Harlem). No cracks and bursts in the violet air here, only soundings designed to secure the highest available social, economic, and artistic rewards for a generation that moved decisively beyond the horrors of old country districts.

A blues sound rolled forth, producing the sense of a moment's speaking, an augury of possibilities for finance and even fusion (jazz) that surely became orchestrated during the 1960s and 1970s, the period of a Black Arts Movement that referred to itself in energetically self-conscious ways as "Renaissance II."

Perhaps the eternally modern in Afro-American discursive and intellectual history is not so much signalled by the single "Harlem Renaissance" as by a more inclusive "renaissancism" defined as an ever-present, folk or vernacular drive that moves always up, beyond, and away from whatever forms of oppression a surrounding culture next devises. "Renaissancism" is, finally, the sign of the modern that joins Harlem and the *Indigene* movement of Haiti and African Negritude. One might say that the success of Afro-American renaissancism consists in its heralding of a countermodernism, as it were, a drive unlike the exquisite disillusionment and despair of Britain and Jazz Age U.S.A. I use "counter" just as advisedly as I earlier employed "modernism" alone, for now I believe the complexities—a very peculiar set of expressive manifestations and critical and theoretical issues—of Afro-American twentieth-century expression should be comprehensible. Recognition of such complexities leads to the recognitions of a trace, a something not accounted for in traditional, Anglo-American definitions of modernism. One definition of what can be recognized is a "countermodernism."

This countertradition found its socioeconomic and sociopolitical groundings in what the sagacious Franz Fanon called "dying colonialism." *The New Negro*, as stated earlier, concludes with an essay by DuBois that sings, figuratively, this death of colonialism and sounds a note of liberation to which hundreds of millions of formerly colonized, darker peoples of the world can march. This note from Harlem, as any scan of the global scene today will reveal, is, perhaps, the most thoroughly modern sound the United States has yet produced.

NOTES

¹Harry Levin, "What Was Modernism?", *Massachusetts Review* 1 (1960): 609-30. All citations are marked by page numbers in parentheses.

²Robert Martin Adams, "What Was Modernism?", *Hudson Review* 31 (1978): 19-33. Hereafter in my notes, I will list the full reference. Subsequent cites will be marked by page numbers in parentheses.

³Ihab Hassan, "POSTmodernISM A Paracritical Bibliography," *New Literary History* 3 (1971): 5-30.

⁴T. S. Eliot, "The Waste Land," in *Modern Poetry*, ed. Maynard Mack et al., 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: 1961), 157-58.

⁵F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (New York, 1953), 13.

⁶Lionel Trilling, "On the Teaching of Modern Literature," in *Beyond Culture* (New York, 1965), 327.

⁷I refer, of course, to Conrad's "Heart of Darkness."

⁸D. H. Lawrence, *Women in Love* (New York, 1974).

⁹The reference is to Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones*.

¹⁰Wystan Hugh Auden's ordinary citizen as "Modern Man" is coldly described by the speaker of "The Citizen (To JS/07/M/378 This marble Monument Is Erected by the State)," a 1940 poem, as "in the modern sense of an old-fashioned word, he was a saint." Quoted from Mack, *Modern Poetry*, 206. The speaker is not undone when his/her report is broken by someone's question about such exemplary conduct: "Was he free? Was he happy?" The speaker answers: "... The Question is absurd:/Had anything been wrong, we should certainly have heard."

¹¹In *Madness and Civilization*, Michel Foucault argues that it is *de rigueur* for a rational, bourgeois, capitalist state to "confine" the poor, the criminal, and the insane in order to know the boundaries of affluence, sanity, and innocence. It is, however, *confinement* in itself that enforces the categories; if you are an inmate of a "total institution" (like a prison, or, American Slavery as the "Prisonhouse of Bondage"), then you are automatically classified according to the defining standards of that institution. The Kantian reference is, of course, to the *Critique of Judgement* (1790). Once "ART" and "AESTHETICS" are distinguished from "popular culture" and "low taste," then one has effected a confinement that can be enforced merely by mentioning a word. Such distinctions—resting on Western metaphysics—can be used to defend and preserve canons of literature and to protect "artistic" masterpieces from all criticism. Only "men of Taste" are held to possess the developed "aesthetic sense" and sensibility requisite to identification and judgment of genuine works of "art." If such men declare that a product is *not* ART but a product of some other category, there is no escape from their authority of confinement—except subversion.

¹²"Foreword," *Challenge* 1 (1934):1.

¹³Nathan Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance* (New York, 1971). Subsequent citations appear in text.

¹⁴David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (New York, 1981). Subsequent citations appear in text. The phrase "when Harlem was in vogue" is drawn from the section of Langston Hughes' autobiography *The Big Sea* (1940) devoted to the Harlem Renaissance. Hughes writes of the renaissance as a mere "vogue" set in motion and largely financed by white downtowners while Negroes played minstrel and trickster roles in it all. A time of low-seriousness and charming highjinks is what Hughes (one hopes ironically) portrays. In fact, I think Hughes' characterization is as much a product of the dreadful disappointment he suffered when his patron (Mrs. R. Osgood Mason) dumped him because he decided to write an "engaged" poem, a "socialist" response to the opening of a luxury hotel in New York when so many were starving. He reads treacherous patronage over the entire Harlem Renaissance. Further, to say, as Hughes does, that you were "only funning" is to dampen the pain that results if *you* were really serious and your patron was "funning" all along. In any case, I believe Hughes' account (partially because he lived and produced wonderful work through subsequent generations) has had an enormous effect on subsequent accounts of the renaissance. In many ways, this effect has been unfortunate.

¹⁵Quotes from Miklos Szabolcsi, "Avant-garde, Neo-avant-garde, Modernism: Questions and Suggestions," *New Literary History* 3 (1971): 75.