

Daniel Albright. *Putting Modernism Together*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2015. Print.

Reviewed by  
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In his many years as a scholar in the field of culture and literature, Daniel Albright (1945-2015) wrote extensively about Modernism. Interested in studying the movement as a whole, his analyses convene the diverse genres that constitute it, from poetry and painting to narrative, music, essay, and film. In his last book, entitled *Putting Modernism Together* (Johns Hopkins UP, 2015), Albright offers an encompassing, fresh, and ingenious approach to this movement, seeing connections between artistic expressions and individual works that go well beyond 1920—the year that is considered to mark its end. His exploration is traversed by a line of inquiry that revisits the notion of *value*. For Albright, the importance of Modernism resides in its ability to reset and redefine what the West used to identify as the core of artistic beauty, that is, an exercise of compliance with aesthetic codes that consecrated proportion, balance, adherence to truth and to natural landscapes, and rhyme. Albright's new book is successful at maintaining a tension between a diachronic exposition of the different movements that comprise Modernism and a theoretical thread that never veers off the particular reshaping of the value of beauty.

In his first chapter, Albright recounts the contributions of two names associated with the devising of Modernism—Charles Baudelaire and Friedrich Nietzsche—in terms of aesthetic pursuits and philosophical ramifications. Focusing on Baudelaire's artistic ambitions, Albright recounts the decisive break in what was defined as beauty up to that point. He calls this shift on aesthetic parameters a “Modernist Transvaluation.” Albright tells readers how Baudelaire brought his attention to a growing, polluted, inhuman, and chaotic city. With Baudelaire, dissonance and disordered arrangements of artistic elements conquered proportion and decorum. Albright also details how Nietzsche's Dionysian impulses counterbalanced an Apollonian organization of life and art. The desert and a mankind in dissonance threatened to conquer the civilized.

Albright's most remarkable contribution to the studies of Modernism in his new book is his ability to find—but also to create and invent—connections between works of art that reveal the “Transvaluation” that for him defines the movement. His introduction opens with a rewriting of a poem by Alexander Pope in one of Ezra Pound's *Cantos*: “plumes [...] is she a bird or an angel?” More than amiably inviting his predecessor to share the space of the page, what Pound performs is blunt interrogation.

The core of the second section of Albright's book is devoted to these rewritings, not only in poetry and narrative, but also in painting, music, and cinema. Some chapters, those in which a real shift is developed, are accompanied by an aphorism in which Albright summarizes the essence of each one of these ramifications of Modernism. Many of them mirror vital elements of the movement in question, like this one, written about Expressionism: "Value: Cut to the interior—human truth lies in the electroencephalogram." Albright calls this second section the "Isms" and includes sixteen of its variants, beginning with those loosely defined (Impressionism and Expressionism), and concluding with the more programmatic ones (Futurism and Surrealism). Albright's book finishes with a discussion about the end of Modernism and leaves readers with the idea that in our age the premodern, the modern, and postmodern linger and juxtapose. But after all, did Modernism really end? Aren't those avatars that we build in social media still a ramification of Oscar Wilde's call which compels us to "make ourselves into a work of art"?

The decision to include reproductions of the paintings Albright comments on allows the reader to witness firsthand the luminosity with which he sees "Transvaluation." As Albright repeats throughout his book, "Modernism is about cities." The reader can therefore appreciate Pissarro's attempt to represent the Boulevard Montmartre in Paris and contrast it with the blade-looking shapes of the women who stand at Postdamer Platz in Ludwig Kirscher's painting. In his section on Futurism, Albright supplements Marinetti's attempts to portray a world in rapid and constant movement with the depiction of Marcel Duchamp's staircase and Umberto Boccioni's *The Street Enters the House*. Albright also includes cinema, making connections with the machine as a typical Modernist leitmotiv, so central in Charles Chaplin's *Modern Times* and the films of the Marx Brothers.

Music serves Albright as a concrete reference to "[test] the limits of aesthetic construction." Albright examines Nietzsche's defense of dissonance as a central element of art by offering Richard Wagner's arias as a point of comparison. The same occurs with Monet and Debussy, connections that Albright admits are more difficult to be seen. Albright is interested in defining Modernism in terms of values that are counterintuitive, like in Debussy's Nocturnes—that Albright qualifies as "a ghostly procession"—or in Charles Ives's *Fourth of July*, in which the audience realizes that they are in the "midst of cacophony."

Albright's prose in *Putting Modernism Together* is enjoyable and entertaining. His words chase Modernism in a quest to define it in new ways. It would be worth reading the volume and counting how many times he succeeds at redefining a movement so often named and characterized. He refers to Modernism as "a strong assertion of the author's authority" or as "a set of what we might call transvalues." One definition that called my attention is that of Modernism as "an age in which poetry performs all sorts of violence on the poems of the past." Writing and quoting as an exercise of violence is a definition that allows one to understand Pound's questioning of Pope's poems as well

as other Modernisms, such as those in Latin America. In 1896, the Nicaraguan poet Ruben Darío published in Buenos Aires a volume that contained his famous “Sonatina.” Ten years later José Asunción Silva rewrote Darío’s poem and interrupted the musical smoothness of the stanzas with intense repetitions of strident consonants. But in 1909, only a few years after Silva’s “Sinfonía,” Leopoldo Lugones performed a similar task in his *Lunario sentimental* and returned to José Asunción Silva’s “Nocturno” while dissecting its tropes and alliterations in a series of humorous cacophonies.

*Putting Modernism Together* was born of one of Albright’s famous courses taught at Harvard. One can still find the traces of that oral style that incorporates facts, original analyses, surprising images and metaphors, excursus, and anecdotes. Albright’s new book is a volume worth reading by anyone interested in Modernism and by all those who want to comprehend the precipitous ways in which art developed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.