

Introduction

This is a book about political despair and political hope. It is an inquiry into the cultural and psychological dynamics that have caused some Americans over the last century to feel that the most destructive forces at work in their society are irresistible and that their own desires for more humane ways of living are futile or childish. It is also an inquiry into the resources that have enabled others to imagine and work toward emancipatory alternatives. Neither political hope nor political despair is the result of rational calculation; neither is transparently provoked by social circumstance. They are, rather, cultural practices that embody different modes of psychological response to social injury and injustice. This book explores the wellsprings of each in modern America.

My inquiry will focus, in particular, on the ways in which early-twentieth-century Americans understood and responded to the capitalist transformation of their society. Many perceived that the burgeoning of advanced capitalism brought benefits: dazzling new technologies, exciting forms of urban life, access to undreamt of commodities, the expanding promise of social mobility and material prosperity. But millions could also feel that the emerging economic order was inflicting terrible wounds: intensifying economic exploitation, extreme social and material inequality, the betrayal of democracy and, beneath it all, a pervasive feeling of alienation.

The formally experimental literature that we have come to call modernism—perhaps the most famous literature yet produced in the United States—is a direct response to this social transformation. It is the fundamental contention of this book that American literary modernism is, at its heart, an effort to mourn the destructive effects of modern capitalism—and to mourn, most

of all, for the crisis of alienation. Modernist writers invented a set of cultural practices through which they could express and manage the loss, disappointment, and injury endured by those who lived within the emerging center of global capitalism. Their effort to grieve was deeply divided. Some writers were unable to name the social dynamics that had produced the widespread suffering they sought to record. They represented the crisis of modernity as an inexorable and mysterious trauma, and they grieved with a melancholic psychological paralysis that manifested itself as a beautiful and poignant despair. Others identified the destructive dynamics at work in their society with considerable clarity. As a result, they mourned with a fullness that enabled them to imagine how human capacities thwarted by the processes of modernization might yet be honored and cultivated in a more just society.

There are, then, two modernisms in the United States. They emerged alongside one another, in tension and in dialogue. Together, they constituted one of the most important arguments in twentieth-century American culture. This was, centrally, an argument about the suffering that had accompanied modern capitalism—a struggle between those who imagined that the alienation and injustice of modern life reflected grim and unalterable facts about human nature and those who insisted that these inhumane circumstances had been produced by a destructive social order that could be remade. This political and historical argument was conducted at the deepest emotional level and with the highest psychological stakes. For the two modernisms staged an encounter between those who felt that their deepest wishes—for love, for social solidarity, for a less alienated way of life—were inherently unrealizable illusions and those whose central aim was to explore those desires and to imagine how they might be realized. It was an encounter between two modes of response to social crisis and collective injury: an encounter between melancholia and mourning.

During the long era of the cold war, the American literary establishment canonized one half of this cultural argument and buried the other. Two generations of critics celebrated the melancholic strand of modernism, praising the literature of despair as the most sophisticated response to the crisis of modernity. They were drawn to texts that were mainly produced by writers who came from privileged segments of society and that expressed the anguish of modernity but evaded troubling political questions. These cold war critics ignored or denigrated the modernism of mourning, marginalizing

works that embodied psychological and cultural strategies that facilitated hope for political change. By the middle of the twentieth century, this distorted version of the literary movement had been fully consolidated. Melancholic modernism was isolated and institutionalized as the preeminent high-cultural response to the injuries inflicted by capitalist modernization.

Over the past twenty years, a new generation of scholars has vigorously challenged the narrowness of the established modernist canon. These scholars—often referred to today as the practitioners of a “new modernism studies”—have reclaimed a wide range of previously marginalized writers and have enabled us to see the racial, gender, class, sexual, and political diversity of this influential literary movement. By retrieving this diversity, the new modernism studies has made it possible to perceive the larger and more conflicted argument at the core of American modernism. *Mourning Modernity* seeks to name that central argument and to trace its political, psychological, and aesthetic contours. My aim is to show how the dynamic conflict between two modernisms shaped the early-twentieth-century American literary field as a whole as well as the individual works within it.

In the first half of *Mourning Modernity*, it is the broader literary field that I am concerned to map. I analyze a wide range of fictions and poems in order to show how one set of works contributed principally to the modernism of mourning and another set contributed mainly to the melancholic counter-tradition. Each of these texts is to some degree internally divided, containing both mournful and melancholic aspects—but in each case, one tendency or the other is strongly dominant. In the first half of my argument, I want to reveal the dominant tendencies of these texts and to delineate the two very different structures of feeling they embodied.

Chapter One lays the historical and theoretical foundations for this enterprise. It describes the relationship between modernism and the rise of monopoly capitalism in the early twentieth century. It outlines, in broad terms, the underlying political differences between the two modernisms and indicates the effects of the cold war canonization process. In order to explain the psychological conflict on which these political differences rest, it provides a detailed theoretical model for understanding different modes of social grieving. By offering a fundamental revision of the Freudian conceptualization of mourning and melancholia, it makes these psychoanalytic

terms flexible enough to account for the emotionally demanding and historically varied processes by which individuals and groups respond to vast and systematic forms of social injury.

Chapters Two and Three then offer compressed readings of a dozen major modernist works, revealing the distinct structures of feeling at odds within the tradition. In Chapter Two, I delineate the psychological, political, and aesthetic features of melancholic modernism—offering readings of four especially influential, canonical works (Eliot's *The Waste Land*, Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, and Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*), as well as two texts with a more tenuous relation to the cold war canon (Cather's *A Lost Lady* and Toomer's *Cane*). In Chapter Three, I explore the modernism of mourning—a tradition embodied principally in the works of writers from marginalized positions within the American social order (Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, H. D.'s *The Flowering of the Rod*, Tillie Olsen's *Yonnondio*, the poetry of Langston Hughes) but that also includes some works (such as poems by William Carlos Williams) produced by writers from more privileged backgrounds who were admitted earlier to the modernist canon.

Having offered a map of the two modernisms that reveals the political, psychological, and aesthetic argument obscured by the cold war canon, I proceed in the second half of *Mourning Modernity* to demonstrate how these two impulses contend with one another *within* an individual literary text. For the struggle between mourning and melancholia, between political hope and despair, is enacted within individual works of expressive culture—and, indeed, within individual psyches—as surely as it is within the larger society. Most literary works resolve this struggle mainly in one direction or the other, but evidence of affective and stylistic ambivalence is almost always present. At a theoretical level, I want to emphasize that the distinction between mourning and melancholia should not be understood as a binary opposition: rather, they are two psychological tendencies on a continuum of grieving. The distinction between them is substantive, since each tendency has dramatically different psychological ramifications—and, in a social setting, each has important political implications. But the two tendencies exist in tension with one another, and it is important to grasp the dynamic struggle between them in any grieving process and, therefore, within individual literary works. Toward this end, the second half of *Mourning Modernity* offers a detailed case study that explores one writer's divided effort of social mourning.

I have chosen to devote this case study to John Dos Passos's famous but neglected *U.S.A.* trilogy because it embodies the conflict between the two modernisms more fully and more visibly than any work in the American tradition. Every modernist text enacts that conflict to some degree, but in most works one impulse is sufficiently dominant that the other registers itself as an occasional, muted, often half-buried countertendency. In contrast, Dos Passos's particular representational experiment in *U.S.A.* enabled him to develop both impulses fully, systematically, and in formal separation. At a substantive level, *U.S.A.* makes exceptionally clear the political implications of these two formal and psychological strategies. Sharing the general modernist preoccupation with the alienating effects of advanced capitalism, the trilogy is explicitly concerned with the possibility of addressing those social ills through radical political action. Struggling to maintain his hope for a democratic and egalitarian political transformation in the face of mounting repression and disappointment, Dos Passos produced a work that is structured formally and psychologically by the continuous oscillation between melancholia and mourning.

Chapter Four provides a biographical account of Dos Passos's experience of the crisis of modernization—and it explores in detail the reasons for his attraction to anticapitalist political movements. It offers a revisionary, post-cold war account of the political challenges that Dos Passos faced alongside hundreds of thousands of American radicals. Placing Dos Passos's composition of *U.S.A.* within the context of that complex and evolving political history, I suggest that the trilogy was explicitly launched as an effort to mourn for the political repression of the Red Scare of the teens and 1920s. I show how that effort was overwhelmed by the author's struggle to cope with the subsequent crisis of Stalinism, which emerged within the Left itself during the period of the trilogy's composition. Chapter Five explores the biographical prose poems of *U.S.A.* as one of the most fully realized examples of the modernism of mourning. In these formally experimental biographies, Dos Passos memorialized the radicals who had been suppressed during the Red Scare. Through his own work of grieving, he extended their aspirations as a living tradition that could be embraced and developed by readers in the future. Chapter Six then analyzes the naturalist fictions of *U.S.A.*, revealing their melancholic countertendency. Like all works of melancholic modernism, these fictions employ the deterministic and misanthropic strategies of

literary naturalism. Dos Passos employs these strategies in order to assert the inevitability of the Left's failure and to negate the forms of political hope that he had simultaneously cultivated in the radical biographies. In the Conclusion, I offer a brief analysis of the Camera Eye segments of the trilogy as a way of returning to the larger psychological and political conflict that has had such fateful consequences in the history of the American Left—and that structures the cultural formation of American modernism.

One of the principal tasks of any culture is to develop—and adapt—strategies of grieving. Loss comes to each of us, but how we deal with loss is a collective as well as an individual matter. We learn ways of coping with the intimate grief that follows from the death of someone we love, from romantic rejection, from personal injury and disappointment. We also learn ways of managing the bewildering forms of loss and injury that are systematically inflicted by the social orders in which we live. Any community that suffers grave harm must find or invent practices of grieving in order to understand what its members have lost, in order to affirm those aspects of the self that have been denied, in order to find an outlet for rage, in order to survive. How we grieve has everything to do with how fully we can live. Mourning is not merely a way of remembering what is past. It is also a way of honoring what continues to live inside us and of projecting thwarted possibilities into the future. In the early twentieth century, Americans invented startling new practices for grieving the suffering produced by an economic and social transformation so vast that they could hardly grasp its contours. In the expressive arts, those forms of grieving have come to be called modernism. Some of those practices—eloquent but also mystifying—have been widely disseminated and have achieved remarkable influence over the last century. Others were long buried but contain resources for sustaining hope in the future flourishing of human capacities that have been frustrated and denied. *Mourning Modernity* explores these practices of social grieving. Their dynamic interaction produced the literature of modernism. How consciously we understand the struggle between them in our own generation will have much to do with the kind of society that we ourselves can imagine and create.