

Imaginarities of American Modernism

In American literary and cultural history, “modernism” was considered a phenomenon of uncertain status – even after it was academically institutionalized by the New Criticism of the 1950s. It had long been perceived as a provincial extension of European developments, since even its leading protagonists – Eliot, Faulkner, Pound, Stein – could be easily integrated into the larger European context.¹ On the other hand, not least through America’s political, economic and cultural assertion as a global power after World War II, insistence on its national particularity, if not uniqueness, entered the discourse especially of American studies when it finally began to deal with the phenomenon of a home-grown modernism (after the new field had, at first, almost been exclusively focused on the ‘classic’ texts of the “American Renaissance”). For a long time it seemed plausible to conceive of American modernism and its history in linear terms, i.e., as part of a progressivist/pragmatist attempt to dissolve, and yet maintain, an obsolete cultural order by adjusting it to the flow of experience and the modernizing impulse of American society – first, by making the fluidity of life the object of representation (as in Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie*, for instance), later by translating experiential instantaneousness and fluidity into increasingly abstract forms of linguistic or artistic expression (as in Dos Passos’s *Manhattan Transfer*).²

A few years ago, Andreas Huyssen argued that

European modernism arrived at the threshold of a not yet fully modernized world in which old and new were violently knocked against each other, striking the sparks of that astonishing eruption of creativity that came to be known only much later as “modernism.” (“Geographies of Modernism” 190)³

American modernism, by attempting to create an art expressive of an already modernizing nation, seemed more in alignment with its technological

¹ Faulkner via Joyce and his *Ulysses*; Eliot, Pound or Stein since they apparently needed the aesthetic ambiance of Europe to find their modernist voice.

² See, e.g., the 1987 special issue “Modernist Culture in America” of *American Studies* (Singal); Sollors, “Ethnic Modernism”; as well as my own contributions to the discussion: “Deconstructing/Reconstructing Order”; “Die amerikanische Moderne”; and, earlier, “Modernisierung und die Tradition des Neuen.” I admit that the ambivalent status of American modernism has held a great fascination for me throughout my academic life so that I have returned to it time and again.

³ “Indeed,” Huyssen continues, “modernism as an adversary culture (Lionel Trilling) cannot be discussed without introducing the concept of alternative modernities to which the multiple modernisms and their different trajectories remain tied in complex mediated ways” (191). See also Kadir and Löbbermann.

environment – even though it did encounter resistance from a restrictive and still powerful genteel cultural tradition that modelled itself on European, especially on English ‘high’ culture. Centered mostly in New York, American modernism integrated elements of a thriving metropolitan, popular and commercial culture of modernity, at the same time that it reached back to what were considered the beginnings of a national cultural tradition originating with Emerson and Whitman. In doing so, it absorbed and modified the iconoclastic innovations of various European avant-gardes, leveling the differences between them in the process. It was thus possible to see American modernism as part of an international movement and yet also, as Kenner phrased it, as a distinct “homemade world” – as a box within a box which contained, as yet another box, the counter-modernism of the Harlem Renaissance and its attempt “to beat barbaric beauty out of a white frame” (McKay 94).⁴

This storyline became increasingly vulnerable to attacks from many sides. When its self-celebratory ideology of aesthetic innovation was analyzed within contexts of race, class and gender, modernism lost its quasi-mythological status as a cultural counterforce. In the wake of the cultural upheaval of the early 1970s and its long poststructuralist aftermath, it was generally regarded as a “politically retrograde phenomenon” (DeKoven, *Rich and Strange* 12), its transgressional tendencies only masking its undiminished commitment to ‘totality’ as well as to a logocentric and patriarchal order in which the aesthetically revolutionary and the politically reactionary merged. Its turn toward the creative forces of the ‘primitive’ and atavistic now seemed nothing but a white masquerade in blackface that thrived on the undiminished racism of American society; and its effort to give its discovery of the new a distinctly American face now appeared analogous to (or even complicit with) an all pervasive nativism that identified the Anglo-Saxon with the truly, the essentially American.

Michael North’s *The Dialect of Modernism* (1994) and Walter Benn Michaels’s *Our America* (1995) are surely the most brilliant examples of this deconstructive onslaught. Both critics have changed our view of American modernism once and for all by revealing its secret desires as well as, in some cases, its rather distasteful bedfellows. However, in thus uncovering the covered parts of modernism, they only replaced one image of it with another. In what follows, I shall try to look at modernism through their eyes and yet beyond their perception of it. Because, in its craving for essentials or for universals (however modernistically redefined), the American variant of modernism was neither primarily about race (although it could not escape racism), nor about nativism (although it did raise the question of what America was all about). Its achievements are inseparable from

⁴ Claude McKay’s phrase is taken from his novel *Home to Harlem*. See also Baker.

its ideological and psychological entanglements. In its dedication to the new (at a historic moment when the world seemed as much in decay as in revolutionary commotion) it explored cultural and linguistic possibilities *within* as well as *beyond* national boundaries – possibilities whose implications may have regained relevance only now, in a postmodern and transnational context.

In this attempt, the concept of a “cultural imaginary” that entered the discourse of cultural theory via Cornelius Castoriadis and Josué Harari (among others) has been helpful.⁵ However, I shall base my argument on the assumption that the imaginary of American modernism, its culturally wished-for other and not-yet ‘real’ (its cultural pre- or unconscious), consists in fact of several imaginaries: I visualize it as a mesh of conflicting but also overlapping dreams, fantasies, desires. I shall construct several frames – based on contrast and analogy – between which I imagine this network of modernist imaginaries as suspended. One could also conceive of such frames as consisting of lines connecting opposite positions along

⁵ “What, then, is the imaginary?” writes Harari. “In itself, it is nothing, and everything. The imaginary world is always with us, as a parallel to our world; there is no single moment of our existence which is not imbued with the imaginary. Yet, even if all its ‘markers’ refer back to reality, the imaginary does not belong to reality proper. The imaginary is neither a lie nor an illusion that distracts us from the real (as dreams do); it is neither reality’s ‘negative’ nor the ‘unreal’ of reality. The closest one can get to describing how the imaginary stands in relation to the real is to refer to the familiar Saussurian image of the sheet of paper whose front cannot be cut without its back being cut at the same time. In like manner, the real cannot be separated from the imaginary or the imaginary from the real: any such division could be accomplished only abstractly, and the result would be either pure representation or reality in its raw state – imageless and therefore meaningless. Thus if we were to define the imaginary according to clear-cut categories, we would reach a dead end, for the imaginary is always ambiguous; it functions as an ever-present ‘otherness,’ persistently soliciting the real” (57). In his preface to a collection of essays on *Other Cities, Other Worlds: Urban Imaginaries in a Globalizing Age*, Huyssen adopts the concept of the imaginary for his own purpose: “An urban imaginary marks first and foremost the way city dwellers imagine their own city as the place of everyday life, the site of inspiring traditions and continuities as well as the scene of histories of destruction, crime, and conflicts of all kinds. Urban space is always and inevitably social space involving subjectivities and identities differentiated by class and race, gender and age, education and religion. An urban imaginary is the cognitive and somatic image which we carry within us of the places where we live, work, and play. It is an embodied material fact. Urban imaginaries are thus part of any city’s reality, rather than being only figments of the imagination. What we think about a city and how we perceive it informs the ways we act in it” (3). In my case, “imaginary” is, to be sure, applied to the experience of metropolitan space, specifically of New York (the locus of American modern culture par excellence) but also to the experience, the felt impact, of cultural modernity itself that is responding to but also creatively shaping urban space.

which imaginaries fluctuate: between the cosmopolitan or global and the local or nativist; between the universal or holistic and the particular or fragmentary; between a utopian, race-transcending humanism and racial essentialism; between the religious or mystical and the secular or materialist; between nostalgia for an absent (yet somehow still present) ‘divine’ and insistence on its revelation in the flesh.

I start the outline of my imaginary web (as well as of my web of imaginaries) with a pre-modernist historical event: the imperial moment of Admiral Dewey’s victory at the battle of Manila in 1898 which made Ernest Fenollosa, the famous orientalist scholar (and an American of Catalan origin), write an exuberant essay for *Harper’s Monthly Magazine* which he called “The Coming Fusion of East and West.” It ends with an appeal to his countrymen to awake to a higher, world-embracing consciousness:

[L]ast night we were [...] content with our local issues, our private curse of slavery, intent to erect a little island of silver coinage. How could we unify our scattered aims with no centrality of focus on the needs of a common humanity? This morning we have waked to find ourselves citizens of a new world, full of Drakes, and Sidneys, and Philips, and Armadas; rich in immeasurable colonies, investments, adventures; of an unlimited mind-expansion; of a race sympathy new in human annals. Columbus and his discovery are but a four-century stepping stone to it; for we were obstacles in his western path that had to be first mastered. Today we enter literally into his dream, and carry the Aryan banner of his caravels where he aimed to plant it – on the heights of an awakened East. (122)

Fenollosa’s expansive imagination conceives of America’s imperial venture as a long-hoped for liberation from its narrow provincialisms, as a cultural wake-up call from its colonial sleep. His vision is at once cosmopolitan and nationalist, humanist and racist; it connects the new military and economic assertion of the United States with “the needs of a common humanity” and the mythologized past of European empire building; but then also forward, by acts of “unlimited mind-expansion,” to a universalism that will constitute the cultural empire of a global future. Material conquest finds its transcendent legitimation in spiritual conquest, and the progress of Western civilization unfolds – via America – as a process of territorial expansion and cultural integration. Columbus’s discovery of the new empire is continued in the conquest of the American continent which is continued in the conquest of the Philippines which is prefigured in Whitman’s metaphorical conquest of space in “Passage to India,” which in turn anticipates the linguistic empire of Ezra Pound’s *Cantos*. Pound would conceive of this empire as his, the American poet’s, aesthetic appropriation of the world’s cultural traditions whose fragments he would assemble and connect by an ideogrammatic method of collage – a method he developed from the same Fenollosa’s study of Chinese characters.

A few years later, but in reaction to the same war, the Nicaraguan poet Rubén Darío wrote his poem “To Roosevelt” in which he rejects American expansionism with an emphatic “No”: “You think that life is fire / that progress is eruption, / that wherever you shoot / you hit the future. / No.” In a counter-move he then evokes “our America, that has had poets / since the ancient times of Netzahualcoyotl [...] America [...] lives, you men of Saxon eyes and barbarous soul / And it dreams. And it loves [...].” No doubt, Darío uses the phrase “our America” (“nuestra America”) consciously – in commemoration of his friend José Martí whom he had met in New York more than a decade before and who had died in Cuba in 1895 fighting for its liberation.

Martí’s concept of “Our America” – as developed in an essay of 1891 that has become a major text in recent redefinitions of American studies – wavers between Cuban nationalism and pan-Latin American transnationalism since the national can be achieved only from a transnational consciousness.⁶ Martí’s project is in any case dedicated to the creation of a political structure that does not yet exist, but is distinctly different in its spirituality and cultural substance from the America that is *not* ours – from that materialist Northern “giant in seven-mile-boots,” that Anglo-Saxon “Caliban” (as Darío called the U.S.) against whose power “Our America” had still to be created in defensive self-assertion.⁷

“What ‘Our’ means,” writes Doris Sommer, “is a promising problem, because the discriminating possessive pronoun is so shifty, so available for competing positionalities and equivocal meanings” (83). What happens, for example, when it is used in reference to the United States, as is the case with Waldo Frank’s cultural critique of 1919 that he called *Our America*. Frank insisted that, when he wrote it, he had no knowledge of Martí’s essay;⁸ rather: that his book was written in response to the demands of his French friends to explain America to them: “My dear Jacques Copeau and Gaston Gallimard,” he writes in his introductory remarks, “In a real sense this is your book.” “America” was substance buried, a hidden ‘secret treasure’ yet to be discovered, and a national concept that transcended

⁶ For the subsequent discussion, see also Belnap and Fernández.

⁷ “The ideals of these Calibans are none but the stock market and the factory. They eat and eat and eat, and calculate, and drink whisky, and make millions. They sing ‘Home, Sweet Home’ and their home is a checking account, a banjo, a black man, and a pipe. Enemies of all idealism, in their progress they are apoplectic, perpetual mirrors of expansion, but Sir Emerson, rightly classified, is like the moon to Carlyle’s sun; their Whitman with his hatchet-hewn verses is a democratic prophet in the service of Uncle Sam; and their Poe, their great Poe, a poor swan drunk on alcohol and pain, was the martyr to his dream in a land where he will never be understood” (Darío, *Selected Writings* 507-08).

⁸ However, in 1931, he commented extensively on Martí’s concept of a Cuban nation in *América Hispana*, 265-72.

nationalism. It was, in any case, not congruent with Anglo-Saxon America but – not unlike the vision of Darío, Martí or, somewhat later, William Carlos Williams – pre-Columbian and continental, part of the avant-garde’s attempt to define America as “something other than a white nation” (Hutchinson, *The Harlem Renaissance* 446). The continental dimension of Frank’s vision became more evident during the 1920s when he, in several books about Latin America, not only saw himself as allied in prophetic spirit to Simon Bolívar and Jose Martí but also assumed the role of cultural mediator between different “our” Americas – analogous to and yet vehemently against the reactionary and essentializing visions of people like Lothrop Stoddard that Walter Benn Michaels reflects in the ironic mirror of his own *Our America*, his deconstructive study of American modernism.

Although it is certainly true that the modernist turn to “Our America” was part of a general shift toward cultural self-definition during the 1920s (a shift that was at least partially provoked by the United States entering the league of imperialist nations), it is yet worthwhile to remember that it was also the result of a continuous dialogue across national and cultural borders. This is certainly true in the case of European (especially French) demands and expectations. Frank’s *Our America* is one example, Williams’s *In the American Grain* another – a book that was written in response to Valery Larbaud and enthusiastically reviewed by D. H. Lawrence. In the first volume of the short-lived journal *The Seven Arts*, Frank’s friend and mentor, Romain Rolland – the celebrated author of the novel *Jean Cristophe* (published a few years before World War I) – had appealed to American artists not only to express their as yet unexplored cultural resources but also to become agents of a global integration of cultures. In fact, Rolland’s appeal seems very much in line with Fenollosa’s vision that I quoted earlier:

The hour has struck for mankind to begin its march toward the ideal simply of Humanity; to begin it with conscious fervor, to suffer no exclusion. [...] The Asiatic cultures, China, India, are being born anew. The old and the new worlds must bring forth the treasures of their souls, and place them in common with these equal treasures. For all great expressions of mankind [...] complement each other. And the thought of the future must be a synthesis of all the great thoughts of the world. To achieve this fertile union should be the work of Americans. [...] It is they who live at the centre [of the life of the world]! This is my dream. (n.p.)

It has also been a persistent Western dream of progressive Enlightenment: this vision of a new world, emergent yet still to be created, led by an “America” to which Europe has passed the torch in mankind’s evolutionary movement toward unity. In several books written during the 1920s, Frank very much follows the line of Rolland’s holistic vision. *Our America* (as

well as his later *The Re-Discovery of America*) primarily aimed at the creation of a national culture but also referred to a continental America whose Hispanic parts were least modernized, least “Americanized,” as he put it, and therefore a latent resource of spirituality.⁹ In the peoples of Latin America, Frank writes,

[m]ystic America has become [...] an organic undertaking. [...] Upon the side of our hope, there is first and last the peculiar energy of the American world – the forming life of our land which makes us all, Nordic and Negro, American; and which relates us more essentially with the Indian or the Peruvian, than with our blood-brothers of Europe. [...] It is so wondrously atune with our mystic tradition that one is almost ready to believe in an Atlantis, whence the Egyptian, Mediterranean, and Amerindian all emerged. (*The Re-Discovery of America* 229-30)

The four cultural histories Frank published between 1919 and 1931 – *Our America* (1919), *Virgin Spain* (1926), *The Re-Discovery of America* (1929) and *América Hispana* (1931) – explore this “mystic tradition” that potentially united these cultures despite their apparent cultural differences: “two half-worlds” destined to eventually become “not a homogeneity (God forbid!), not an identity (God forbid!) but a complex multiple organism” (*South American Journey* 380). Accordingly, he dedicated *Virgin Spain* “To those brother Americans / whose tongues are Spanish and Portuguese [...] but whose America like mine / stretches from the Arctic to the Horn.” Those friends and spiritual “brothers” belonged to Latin America’s intellectual elite – the Mexican artists Alfonso Reyes, Diego Rivera and José Clemente Orozco or the Peruvian philosopher José Carlos Mariátegui to whom Frank dedicated his *South American Journey* (1943).

In blending Marx with Spinoza, a critique of capitalism with a transnational concept of unity and mystic immanence, Frank assumed the role of a modern Jewish prophet. He thus found himself in competitive vicinity with other prophets of the day, most notably with Georges Gurdjieff and his disciple Piotr Ouspensky whose mysticism of self-transcendence and expansion of consciousness was brought to New York and taught there in the mid-1920s by Alfred Orage,¹⁰ the former editor of *The New Age* whose “social credit” theories exerted influence especially on Pound but also on

⁹ “Did I know what Our America was really? Not an objective portrait of a real land, but an appeal to it to be?” he retrospectively reflected in his memoirs; and: “I had come to tell the Mexicans my plans for a cultural union of the Americas through the minorities of each. [...] In the decades ahead, I would come down many times to Mexico and visit every part of it; multiverse and potential cosmos” (Frank, *Memoirs*, 99 and 157).

¹⁰ To the group around Orage belonged Waldo Frank and his wife Margaret Naumberg, Herbert Croly, the editor of *The New Republic*, Mabel Dodge Luhan, Jane Heap, co-editor of *The Little Review*, and Jean Toomer. See Munson.

Williams and the critic Gorham Munson – all this confirming Leon Surette’s thesis that modernism was born in alternative visions that included the esoteric and occult (see his *The Birth of Modernism*).

His prophetic claims and posturing make Frank difficult reading today. And yet, for a brief historical moment, he was a central figure on the margins of the intellectual life of both Americas, his vision of “wholeness” responding to the period’s intense utopian longing. In the United States, *Our America*, as Gorham Munson remembered, “dazzled my immediate generation.”¹¹ It affected a group of artists and intellectuals commonly labeled “cultural nationalists” – although, for them, the national and the transnational were two sides of the same humanist/modernist coin. Frank’s notion of “wholeness” embraced the particular in order to transcend it. To reach a higher level of cultural synthesis, the regionally, racially or nationally different had to first culturally find and assert itself in aesthetic self-expression. Frank’s conceptual image for such a concordance *in* and *through* difference was that of the symphony – a metaphor he took from Rolland, however, and *not* from Horace Kallen whose symphonic multiculturalism he emphatically dismissed (see *The Re-Discovery of America* 260-61n).

His dialectics nevertheless involved him in a number of seemingly contradictory positions: Frank vehemently rejected industrialism and the “Machine,” but also accepted both as necessary historical conditions for their eventual transformation into facts of consciousness. He was caught in a similar contradiction when it came to the matter of race. From a higher perspective of anticipated synthesis, race – although a painful reality in American life – did not exist. But it had to be creatively accepted, its hidden potential expressed, so that it could become agent of a spiritual collective life. He therefore encouraged his friend and disciple Jean Toomer to explore his racial heritage at the same time that he tried to respect Toomer’s anti-essentialist, trans-racial position. After having read drafts of *Cane*, he assured Toomer that “you do not write as a Negro” (qtd. in O’Daniel 87); but then, in his preface to the published book, he praised him as a remarkable Negro writer.

Toomer had originally accepted this double role as an inevitable part of his own racial in-betweenness and, at one point, pleaded for a literary journal devoted entirely to the artistic expression of African Americans.¹² After

¹¹ Van Wyck Brooks called it “the Bible of our generation”; both qtd. in Hutchinson, *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White* 106-107. See also Mark Whalan’s “Introduction” to his edition of *The Letters of Jean Toomer*, especially p. xxix.

¹² “[M]y art will aid in giving the Negro to himself. In this connection, I have thought of a magazine. A magazine, American, but concentrating on the significant contributions [...] of the Negro to the western world. A magazine that would consciously hoist, and perhaps at first a trifle overemphasize a negroid ideal. A

Cane had come out, however, he increasingly resented the pressure – exerted by his publisher Boni & Liveright, but also by Sherwood Anderson, Alain Locke and by Frank himself – to accept being a Negro writer as his true identity and to continue writing “his Negro stuff.”¹³ Instead, he chose to abandon the black folk material he had so effectively made use of in *Cane* and commit himself to the teaching of Gurdjieff’s ideas to the Harlem intelligentsia (among them Nella Larsen) in order to promote the “spiritual evolution of a new American race” (Woodson 8), i.e., of a race beyond race and color,¹⁴ whose arrival he anticipated in his poem “The Blue Meridian” – while, as Walter Benn Michaels has demonstrated, the culture itself, by confirming racial as cultural difference, moved into the opposite direction.¹⁵

“Wholeness” – “personal, mystic, compact, myriad-formed, imperious,” as Frank phrased it in *The Re-Discovery of America* (260) – operates on several interconnected levels of awareness: As expressive of the holiness of life and its creative energies, it is directed toward a more communal existence and against the fragmenting, the life-destroying impact of capitalism. As a psychologically integrative concept attempting to engage the creative energies of the unconscious, it is directed against the repressive coalition of rationalism and Puritanism. As a spiritual concept, “wholeness” ultimately aims at achieving a higher, more inclusive stage of human consciousness. Therefore it also implied a specific aesthetic – those distinct strategies of organicist expressiveness that mark Frank’s writings as well as the poetry, fiction and paintings of those associated with the circles of “cultural nationalists” around Frank and the photographer Alfred Stieglitz: primarily

magazine that would function organically for what I feel to be the building of the Negro’s consciousness. The need is great” (*Letters* 106).

¹³ On the complex relationship between Negro artists and the white American avant-garde see North’s *The Dialect of Modernism*, esp. chapters 6 and 7. With reference to Toomer’s reaction to the pressures of stereotyping Whalan argues: “Toomer’s annoyance at being racially labeled sprung not only from representations of his own racial position; it also arose from critics misreading or missing altogether the fluidity and liminality of racial identity that marks *Cane* as such a fascinating piece of writing in the first place” (xxii).

¹⁴ “I am at once no one of the races and I am all of them. I belong to no one of them and I belong to all. I am, in a strict racial sense, a member of a new race. This new race, of which I happen to be one of the first articulate members, is now forming perhaps everywhere on the Earth, but its formation is more rapid and marked in certain countries, one of which is America” (*A Jean Toomer Reader* 58).

¹⁵ “And it is precisely this pluralism that transforms the substitution of culture for race into the preservation of race. [...] although the move from racial identity to cultural identity appears to replace essentialist criteria of identity (who we are) with performative criteria (what we do), the commitment to pluralism requires in fact that the question of who we are continue to be understood as prior to questions about what we do” (Michaels 14-15).

the poets Jean Toomer and Hart Crane, the painters Arthur Dove and Marsden Hartley; but also, if at a farther remove, the Mexican muralists Diego Rivera and José Clemente Orozco whom Frank counted among a continental brotherhood of creative spirits. (Orozco's great mural painting "The Epic of American Civilization" at Dartmouth College is very much in the spirit of Frank's mythopoetic concept of history.)

Frank considered his cultural/anthropological histories of Latin America and Spain as aesthetic constructions: They sought to give organic expression to a people's spiritual essence and were thus focused macro-cosmically. But in form and substance they were no different from his microcosmically conceived stories focused "on a person or group of persons" (*América Hispana* ix). The corporeal world – the landscape a people lived in, the objects it produced, its customs and rituals, its history, literature and art – gave expression to that people's inner being. Inversely, a person's lack of spirituality, his/her psychological grotesqueness or distortion would symbolically express "the energy and turmoil of the prevailing social order," but also *in* and *through* them moments of spiritual transcendence "embedded in everyday life" (Whalan xxix).

The stories of Frank's short-story cycle *City Block* (1922), for instance, give evidence of the modern city's disruptive and dispersive force at the same time that they reveal the individual mind, in its very longing, to be an "agent of coherence" (qtd. in Pfeiffer 162) – the very symptoms of its absence suggesting the presence of "wholeness" in what Toomer called the text's "spiritual entity." Frank's figures, just as those of Toomer's *Cane* and, in some measure, also of Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*, are therefore not characters in any realistic sense, but types or ciphers, symbolic agents representing states of emotional intensity or consciousness, not advancing plot but revealing a hidden structure of experience. Toomer called Frank "the only modern writer who has immediately influenced me" (*Letters* 90-91) and saw in his strategies of essentializing or spiritualizing everyday experience, of wringing "a measure of eternal beauty from the world's suffering," a "religious function" of art "in our day" that also informed his own aesthetic practice (*Letters* 99, 102). Searching for "aesthetic wholeness" in *Cane*, Toomer – thus Werner Sollors – "espoused the fragmentary as the necessary part of larger totalities" ("Ethnic Modernism" 445). By mixing several literary genres and by combining strategies of European expressionism with elements of black oral culture, he went farther than Frank in creating fragmented, yet integrated texts, "lyrical crystallizations" as he called them, that would bring "a piece to a sudden, brilliant integration" (Hutchinson, "Identity in Motion" 49).

For Hart Crane, pressing spirituality from raw experience was not only a mode of life, he also made it a formal pattern of organic transformation in his poetry. Like Frank and Toomer, Crane struggled hard to make the

environment of city and machine part of a dialectics of visionary wholeness. In a letter to Lola Ridge, the editor of the avant-garde magazine *Broom*, Toomer had written: "The machine, its motion, mass, and precision is at last significant not because of the pain it inflicts upon sensitive mal-adjusted spirits, but for the reason that its elements are the starting point of creative form" (*Letters* 111). In a related manner Crane tried to absorb the wound-inflicting context of the new urban-industrial culture and distill from the intensities of his queer experience the symbolic structure of an objective and timeless cosmic unity. If in this process, the poem became the concrete evidence of an achieved state of higher consciousness – the "Word" revealed and become flesh in the word – the poet's 'incarnate word' could also find material confirmation in Brooklyn Bridge whose beauty, for Crane, embodied the spiritual possibilities and aspirations latent in his culture. In analogy to Stieglitz's photographs of clouds and trees at Lake George which made visible an invisible universe of energy and motion, Crane experienced the Bridge as movement caught, as "moment made eternal" (*Letters* 132): the vision of divinity revealed as visual and material presence at the same time that it was also caught and made present in the condensed dynamics of Crane's metaphors. If, with Stieglitz, the machine as camera had become an instrument of vision, with Crane, Brooklyn Bridge – that supreme product of the industrial age – was not only a tool or path to vision but its mythic incarnation.¹⁶

The Bridge – as symbolic expression of divinity – thus constitutes the most evident link between an "aesthetic of wholeness" and that group of artists around Frank and Stieglitz dedicated to creating a national yet spiritually transformed culture in the sign of the modern. However, it is interesting that William Carlos Williams – whose *In the American Grain* would seem to show him as clearly belonging to that group – vehemently rejected Crane's visionary poetry on aesthetic grounds: Crane's mystic vision, he argued, "blurred" his perception and made his poetic language imprecise. For Williams, the poem was not "a moment made eternal," not a timeless moment of revealed totality, but part of a world in constant transition: timelessness *was* process; not presence in the word made flesh but an ever-changing Now of perception that, for each moment, had to be caught and re-presented anew.

Waldo Frank acknowledged his spiritual affinity with Williams who, like Crane, had been "trying to forge a new aesthetic image of our past" (Frank, *The Re-Discovery of America* 324). By imagining a counter-history beyond the Anglo-Saxon whose origins included pre-Columbian, Spanish and French engagements with a primordial wilderness, Williams's project indeed appeared to run on a parallel track with Frank's. And yet his alternative concept of America's past was different in that it was not concerned

¹⁶ See also Crane's "Modern Poetry" in *The Complete Poems* (ed. Frank); Strand.

with a vision of organic unity but with what Williams called America's "inability before the new" (*Selected Essays* 152). Williams was in fact obsessed with re-imagining past moments of encounter with the continent's savage newness, now lost or buried under the rubble of an imported English culture. It was this fascination with the savage that made Frank call Williams "an anarch" and "a victim rather than a victor of our chaos."¹⁷ It seemed to prove Williams's affinity to Dada – a movement whose anti-holistic and irreverent tendencies Frank abhorred and Williams sympathized with since, as he wrote in his defense of Gertrude Stein, the whole house of language had to come down before it could be reconstructed (*Selected Essays* 163). Williams collaborated with Frank on a volume that paid tribute to Alfred Stieglitz (a central agent of American modernism who had also been Gertrude Stein's first publisher), yet he was more strongly drawn to a circle of New York avant-gardists that included Marcel Duchamp and Francis Picabia – artists who felt attracted to America and were instrumental also in the shaping of American modernism.¹⁸

For Williams, doing the "American thing" meant moving "away from the word as symbol toward the word as reality," toward language "as an essential and primary experience" (Hejinian 10).¹⁹ His aesthetic of the fragmentary and particular is linked to the experimentalism of the European avant-garde with whom Williams never ceased to be in dialogue. His emphasis on the particular also connected him with cosmopolitan expatriates such as Pound and, perhaps even more, Stein who, like Williams, saw herself as immersed in a continuous present, in a fluid "now" of perceiving, thinking, writing – of words set in motion that transformed the perceived object as well as the perceiving self. Despite these aesthetic affinities, however, Stein's as much as Pound's disdain for the provincial appear to run counter to Williams's passionate commitment to the local and American. Yet, although he fervently embraced the notion that, culturally, America was still a European colony and that finding his own voice meant

¹⁷ *The Re-Discovery of America* 324. How averse Frank was to any idea of fragmentation is apparent in a letter he wrote to Jean Toomer: "The one impossibility of the human mind is incoherence, since mind is above all an active agent of coherence. The word experience should be confined to the form of that fusion of the initial reality of a man's life with the unitary synthesis of what he knows his life, at every instant and every act, to be" (qtd. in Helbling 89).

¹⁸ See *America and Alfred Stieglitz*, ed. Frank et al. (1934), with contributions by Crane and Williams. On Williams and the modernist art scene in New York, see Dijkstra; Tashjian; Naumann; and Corn, esp. the introductory chapter, "Spiritual America."

¹⁹ Hejinian uses this phrase in an essay on Gertrude Stein but it applies to Williams as well and underlines the linguistic affinity between both writers. Although for both language is a reality in itself, reality is not (yet) subsumed in language, as Jennifer Ashton assumes in her subtle analysis of modernist poetry that sees Stein as anticipating a postmodernist linguistic turn.

finding a voice that was most of all American, Williams was not a stubborn nationalist; nor did Stein (or, for that matter, Pound) represent unrelenting cosmopolitan disdain for the local or the national.

In his review of *In the American Grain*, D. H. Lawrence insisted that “[n]ationality in letters is deplorable, whereas the local is essential. All creative art must rise out of a specific soil and flicker with a spirit of place. The local, of course, in Mr. Williams’ sense, is the very opposite of the parochial” (334). The ‘New,’ as Williams defined it, was “a relation to the immediate conditions of the matter at hand, and a determination to assert them in all opposition to all intermediate authority” (*Selected Essays* 143). It is thus closely connected with the local but also with the democratic whose rhetoric enters Williams’s (and Stein’s) aesthetic as a metaphor of non-hierarchic structure as well as an ideological underpinning. The local is potentially everywhere and thus universal. Therefore, if the new as local is also the “American,” that latter term cannot be confined to a strictly national(ist) meaning. Williams seems to waver between a concept of the modern that is specifically American and a concept of the American that is part or aspect of the modern, metonymically related to it. On the one hand, he thus argues that the drive toward the new is not a phenomenon “distinctively confined to America: it is the growing edge in every culture” (143); but on the other, he maintains that by having to settle new ground, the Americans labor under different conditions than the Europeans: “The effort to appraise the real through the maze of a cut-off and imposed culture from Europe has been a vivid task, if very often too great for their realizations. Thus the new and the real, hard to come at, are synonymous” (143). In other words, even if the new cannot be considered as being exclusively American, the American real and the really American always connote the new. It is essence and yet always in motion – to be realized in the act of expressing a continuously unfolding Now *and* New of experience.

Frank’s, Toomer’s or Crane’s “aesthetic of wholeness” was focused on a hidden mythic, a divine, presence, revealed in moments of heightened experience; yet it was also utopian, anticipating a world that was still actively to be created. In contrast, Williams’s ‘aesthetic of the particular’ was decidedly non-teleological and secular. “The only human value of anything, writing included, is intense vision of the facts. God – sure if it means sense,” Williams wrote. “‘God’ is poetic for the unattainable. Sense is hard to get but it can be got. Certainly that destroys ‘God,’ it destroys everything that interferes with simple clarity of apprehension” (*Selected Essays* 71). He thus replaces the ‘divine’ – so prominent in Crane – with the notion of the ‘real’ that, “hard to come at,” also is the new; or rather: for Williams the divine *is* the real *as* the new – to be continuously perceived and caught in a language of sensuous, especially of visual perception. However, if, according to Williams, the expression of the new is the very definition of

the modern, then modernism was – not unlike John Dewey’s pragmatist concept of democracy – a continuous task, an unending process, never a state of achievement; and therefore, one might add, it could never connote either a closed aesthetic form, nor a closed historical period.

While Williams gives this continuous process its foundation in the local particular – in the locally perceived or in the locally spoken – Stein often playfully refers to a national frame for her linguistic experiments, as when she acknowledges the abstractness of American space as well as the abstract modes of American industrial production as related to her own penchant for abstraction. “Henry Ford’s perfection of the assembly line, and with it of a distinctly American capitalism, successfully completed the abstraction of the finished product from the individual assembly work” Steven Meyer writes. “The worker, no less than the Model T, was interchangeable; and Stein would insist this form of abstraction was even more fundamentally American than it was capitalist” (137). Yet she dissolves this rather abstract national frame of her work in the ultimate, the supremely real, space of writing which, as Meyer suggests with reference to William James, is a space of “radical experience,” i.e., it is timeless and open-ended consciousness, an agent in “the world’s ‘creative advance’ into novelty” (215).

In the following passage from *The Geographical History of America, or the Relation of Human Nature to the Human Mind* (1936), Stein seems nevertheless to articulate, thus Marianne DeKoven, “a version of the theory of manifest destiny” (“Half in” 77); at the same time that she also appears to deny such a concrete historical and/or geographical frame to her writing:

Some people like a big country and some people like a little one but it all depends it depends whether you can wander around a big one or a little one. Wandering around a country has something to do with the geographical history of that country and the way one piece of it is not separated from any other one. Can one say too often just as loving or tears in one’s eyes that the straight lines on the map of the United States of America make wandering a mission and an everything and can it only be a big country that can be like that or even a little one. Anyway it has a great deal to do with the relation between human nature and the human mind and not remembering and not forgetting and not as much as much having tears in one’s eyes. No no tears in one’s eyes, whatever any one else can say. In wandering around a big country some people who live in a big country do not wander. What has wandering to do with the human mind or religion. But really wandering has something to do with the human mind. A big or a little country. Wandering in a big or a little country. (84-85)

The enormous dimension of American space seems to invite movement and abstraction, freedom from past and memory (plus the tears that go with the memory of the past) and thus openness toward the modern and the new. But national geography is primarily connected with the limits of human

nature, whereas the human mind becomes free in the space of writing. There it wanders where it pleases and takes its ultimate pleasure in moving in and through space – which is a conceptual more than a geographical category. Whatever human nature may or may not do, in a country that is either big or little, the human mind's pleasure lies in breaking through “the prison of framing”: be it the confinements of linguistic order, of literary tradition or of other manifestations of what DeKoven calls “patriarchal cultural hegemony” (76).

And yet on other occasions, Stein seems to place the freedom of the mind's movement as practiced in the various phases of her experimental writings quite firmly within the historical frame of America's “imperial” expansion. In a late essay on “American Language and Literature” (1944) she writes:

Then came the Spanish American war [...] and that was another big step in making Americans American. We then knew that we could do what we wanted to do and we did not need Europe to tell us to do what we wanted to do, we did not any longer feel that we were attached to Europe at all except of course pleasantly not at all as anything to dominate us. It was a decided liberation, that was when I began to write, and I found myself plunged into a water of words, having words choosing words liberating words feeling words and the words were all ours and it was enough that we held them in our hands to play with them whatever you can play with is yours and this was the beginning of knowing of all America knowing that it could play and play and play with words and the words were all ours all ours. (231)

Stein's empire of writing is appositional (yet quite evidently not oppositional) to America's metamorphosis from a ‘provincial’ to an imperial nation – a change that, in 1901, Secretary of State John Hay had metaphorically equated, in a memorable speech after President McKinley's assassination, with the butterfly's breaking of its chrysalis.²⁰ In that sense Frank's or Williams's call for a national culture and Stein's or Pound's cosmopolitanism are aspects of the same cultural effort. If on the axis connecting the cosmopolitan and the national Stein and Frank are placed at opposite poles (Frank representing the cosmopolitan within the national and Stein the national within the cosmopolitan), then Pound is somewhere in between. Although he rejected America's imperial expansion, it is difficult not to see *The Cantos* as a parallel venture of cultural imperialism (however antagonistically it may be related to it). The new American imperialism provided both Stein and Pound with a feeling of cultural empowerment which Stein

²⁰ “It finds itself floating on wings which had not existed before, whose strength it had never tested [...] The past gives no clue to the future. The fathers where are they? and the prophets, do they live forever? We are ourselves the fathers! We are ourselves the prophets!” (173).

enacted as linguistic liberation, as an immersion “in a water of words,” and Pound as establishing poetic mastery over a vast cultural territory.

With Stein, but especially with Williams, Pound shared a passion for exactness and a delight in particularity. Like them, he was trying to tightly connect words to things; and like Stein and Williams, he practiced an anti-symbolic literalism of the imagination – what Herbert Schneidau called a “pagan fundamentalism” (*Waking Giants* 236) where words have the sacredness of objects and objects are perceived with sensuous immediacy; “as if” – thus Pound in an essay of 1918 – “the gods were standing behind us” (“Religio” 48). “Knowledge,” Schneidau elaborates, “even mystical knowledge of the gods, is in the particulars of the world [...] ‘Art does not avoid universals, it strikes at them all the harder in that it strikes through particulars’” (221).²¹

Yet, despite his fascination with the factual and the particular, with polyphonic composition and the dynamics of the fragmentary in his method of collage, it is not implausible to see Pound as also connected to Waldo Frank by a belief in synergetic “wholeness.” “*The Cantos*,” Leon Surette writes, “are designed to announce the birth of a new age” (*The Birth of Modernism* 36); and in this they seem very much in accordance with Romain Rolland’s holistic vision of assembling the best of the world’s cultures by linking West and East, the old World and the new. They were meant to juxtapose, yet also to connect – like pearls distributed on a string of continuity – the sensuous presence of the gods (as represented in the myths of the Greeks), the struggle for a just society against the forces of greed and usura: throughout the Middle Ages, the Italian Renaissance, the long history of Imperial China and the experience of the modern age. His *Cantos* were to document a heretic, counter-cultural and anti-capitalist tradition, a “conspiracy” of intelligence (Hesse, “Introduction” 13) that Pound also believed to recognize in the values of the early American Republic (as represented once by Adams and Jefferson and now by Mussolini) as well as in the teachings of Confucius. While both Pound and Frank thus attempted to link spiritual vision and social practice, Frank’s yearning for wholeness drove him to the left during the 1930s (and later into total isolation and neglect); while Pound, during the same period, moved further to the paranoid Right. He stated in a letter to his father that he had modeled *The Cantos* on Dante’s *Divina Commedia*, that they would (not unlike Crane’s *The Bridge*) lead from Hades and Purgatory to a vision of Paradise: to an ideal city, Ecbatan (Pound’s version of what Frank and Crane had called “Atlantis”), whose latent presence could be glimpsed throughout the ages yet whose fulfillment was still to come. However he was only able to sustain his faith by embracing the unholy (w)holism of Italian fascism whose

²¹ The quotation is from Pound’s essay on “T. S. Eliot” (see *Literary Essays* 420).

collapse made him eventually fear that his *Cantos*, far from suggesting wholeness, might be nothing but an accumulation of scattered fragments – “a botch ... It does not cohere.”

Yet as late as 1954, Pound tried to convince himself that there *was* a system to his *Cantos* that, as Massimo Bacigalupo writes, “America and China would be its historical poles, and these would be as it were connected by Europe and Italy” (232). Throughout his last years, Pound seems to have wavered between acknowledging his failure to create a poetic order suggestive of a hidden unity and an acceptance of the ultimate randomness and fragmentariness of life. If anything, *The Cantos* thus represent another universalist dream in ruins. On the one hand, they are, as Bacigalupo puts it, “the sacred poem of the Nazi-Fascist millennium which mercifully never eventuated” (x); on the other, they anticipate, as a modernist collage of diverse cultural forms and traditions, a global postmodern culture in which things increasingly hang together, although nothing essentially coheres.