Reconnecting Aestheticism and Modernism

Charting the period that extends from the 1860s to the 1940s, this volume offers fresh perspectives on aestheticism and modernism. By acknowledging that both movements had a passion for the 'new', it goes beyond the alleged divide between modernism and its predecessors. Rather than reading the modernist credo, 'Make it New!', as a desire to break away from the past, the authors of this book suggest reading it as a continuation and a reappropriation of the spirit of the 'New' that characterizes aestheticism. Basing their arguments on recent reassessments of aestheticism and modernism and their articulation, contributors take up the challenge of interrogating the connections, continuities, and intersections between the two movements, thus revealing the working processes of cultural and aesthetic change so as to reassess the value of the new for each movement. Attending to well-known writers such as Waugh, Woolf, Richardson, Eliot, Pound, Ford, Symons, Wilde, and Hopkins, as well as to hitherto neglected figures such as Lucas Malet, L. G. Gibbon, Leonard Woolf or George Egerston, they revise assumptions about aestheticism and modernism and their very definitions. This collection brings together international scholars specializing in aestheticism or modernism who push their analyses beyond their strict period of expertise and consider both movements using exciting approaches that borrow from aesthetics, philosophy or economics. The volume proposes a corrective to the traditional narratives of the history of aestheticism and modernism, revitalizing the definitions of these movements and revealing new directions in aestheticist and modernist studies.

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Introduction

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Winifred Holtby, Virginia Woolf's own contemporary and first critic, stated in 1936 that for Woolf, a work of art "must be an end in itself, as perfect and self-contained as a Greek vase," indirectly positing a close similarity between this future icon of modernism and late-Victorian proponents of aestheticism, such as Walter Pater, Algernon Charles Swinburne, John Addington Symonds, Vernon Lee or Oscar Wilde who were also profoundly interested in Greek art. As Stefano Evangelista points out, key aesthetic texts such as Algernon Charles Swinburne's Atalanta in Calydon (1865), Walter Pater's essay on Winckelmann (1867) or John Addington Symonds's Studies of the Greek Poets (1873 and 1876) presented the ancient Greeks as the original source of the modern notions of aesthetic criticism and art for art's sake. Connections between aestheticism and modernism have tended to be ignored by literary history. Yet, this volume argues that the articulation between these two major British literary movements is worth probing and interrogating. Indeed, canon formation and literary history are always problematic constructions whose quarrels, rejections, inclusions and exclusions need to be periodically re-investigated, re-contextualized and re-adjusted if they are to retain any accuracy or any relevance for the present time. Focusing on the period from 1860 to 1940, this collection re-examines historiographical assumptions about aestheticism and modernism, especially what has been presented over the years as a 'great divide' between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

According to the standard narrative, modernism introduced a rupture with the past. The Modernists themselves were eager to proclaim their difference from their predecessors in unequivocal terms. Although Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot relied heavily on ancient myths in their poetry, with T. S. Eliot even glorifying tradition in his essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent," Ezra Pound's injunction to 'Make It New!' prevailed and was echoed by other Modernists, namely, Wyndham Lewis's resounding 'Blast', or Virginia Woolf's pronouncement that 'In or about December 1910, human character changed.' Hence, the Modernists' own desire for radical innovation promoted a dichotomous vision of modernism as innovative and pitted against tradition.

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10 Speculative Modernism

Stephen Ross

In this paper, I speculate about the nature of literary modernism; its relationship to aesthetics, ethics and economics; and the status of Scottish modernism. Speculation forms both the figure and ground of this essay, beginning with a fundamental shift in emphasis in the late nineteenth century and into the early twentieth century: away from empiricism and towards speculation in finance, science and philosophy. It is a shift I can trace in only the broadest strokes in the space I have here, but which I hope will still prove productive for thinking about how modernist aesthetic strategies enforce a speculative orientation on readers – and considering the risks attendant upon doing so, for speculation is always risky. My chief example of modernism's speculative facet is Lewis Grassic Gibbon's trilogy A Scots Quair. Throughout, I contend that modernism originates in a culture of speculation, producing works whose difficulty solicits neglect and challenges readers not to read them. Though this challenge has largely been met in canonical modernism, it has led to the relative obscurity of many of the minor modernisms currently being canvassed as part of the new modernist studies.

Speculation

Speculation derives from one of the more flexible of the roots bequeathed to us by the Romans: spec-. A partial tour of spec-'s rich semantic field may begin with its apparently contradictory meanings, to see and to infer from what is unseen: it means both to observe and to theorise upon. Spec- also links speculation to specie as in money. This link is, of course, preserved in the French espèces, and depends on a community's capacity to infer the unseen (value) from the seen (inscription upon materials). Marx's famous formula of $M-C-M'$ is, in its essence, a formula of speculation that generates value through repetition. Money (M) is used to produce a commodity (C), which is then sold for more money (M'). The speculative conversion of money into a commodity in hopes of selling the commodity for a greater sum of money is quasi-magical in its fetishistic logic, as Marx repeatedly noted. Spec- also suggests spectacles: both a show and an aid to sight, and conjures the spectral, perhaps the ultimate inference of the unseen from the seen: the partly seen, the unseen seen, darkness visible, absence felt and detected,
perhaps another order of presence, another mode of being, an alternative possibility: an *otherwise*. Speculation, thus, requires that we consider alternatives to the plainly visible, using our imaginations to chart lines of flight across qualitative differences, attending to disruption and randomness – to difficulty and intransigence – and, thus, remaining receptive to alternatives: that we forego neglect and instead take on the difficult task of reading that which presents itself as unreadable.

**The Speculative Turn**

In *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Slavoj Žižek argues that the commodity form creates the conditions of possibility for speculative abstraction in science and philosophy: ‘the commodity form articulates in advance the autonomy, the self-organization of the Kantian transcendental subject – that is, the network of transcendental categories which constitute the a priori framework of “objective” scientific knowledge.’ As such, it makes sense to begin our quick tour of the speculative turn in the nineteenth century with finance, touching on science and philosophy to show how all three divergent fields conform to a consistent logic.

In financial terms, the speculative shift in the nineteenth century occurs as a symptom of the transition from industrial to finance capitalism. Capitalism has always been fundamentally speculative: capitalists acquire resources that can be re-deployed in the hope of a profit. They speculate, trying to see into the future, inferring the unseen from the seen, and gambling on their hypotheses. The uncanny nature of this activity led Marx to write about the commodity as a form of fetishism correlated to pantheism. For him, the table capitalism began to transition to finance capitalism, this tendency intensified. Though the practice of issuing stock in a commercial venture dates at least to the establishment of the Dutch East India company in 1602, and though speculation on the futures of actual stock – animals, materials – had long been standard practice, speculation accelerates and intensifies in the last half of the nineteenth century as sites such as the Chicago Stockyards (where half of the actual stock was traded) were superseded by the more abstract speculation centres of the Paris Bourse and the New York Stock Exchange (NYSE). Both the Bourse and NYSE underwent sudden rapid expansions in the last half of the nineteenth century, as abstracted representations of stock replaced the commodity, as paper money had replaced minted coins. Not material commodities, just as paper money had replaced minted coins. Not material commodities, just as paper money had replaced minted coins. Not material commodities, just as paper money had replaced minted coins. Not material commodities, just as paper money had replaced minted coins. Not material commodities, just as paper money had replaced minted coins. Not material commodities, just as paper money had replaced minted coins. Not material commodities, just as paper money had replaced minted coins. Not material commodities, just as paper money had replaced minted coins.

Capitalism’s basic tendency towards ever-increasing abstraction and equivalence accelerated through the nineteenth century, making speculation a fact of fiduciary life, up to and including the normalization of credit purchasing in the early twentieth century.

A similar shift occurred in science, which, like capitalism, has always been speculative. A scientist speculates about the unknown and subsequently tests that speculation. Such testing usually involves empirical methods, using one’s senses to inquire into the true nature of the phenomenon being studied. In the mid- to late nineteenth century, two things happened to make speculation not only the motivation for such testing but increasingly the means by which investigation was carried out. First, scientists began to take seriously questions that had not hitherto been subject to empirical inquiry: the origins of the human being, the nature of time and space and consciousness. Second, many of empiricism’s instruments reached hard physical limits. The maximum optical magnification and clarity achievable with compound lenses and incandescent light was reached very early in the twentieth century. Microscopes and telescopes both hit physical limits on what they could show. Scientists responded by devising methods of interference-based imaging, such as x-rays, and better forms of illumination that could extend the capacity of glass lenses: they built better *spectacles* and sought technologies that would detect disturbances produced by particles – disturbances that allowed them to infer the passage or presence of particles – rather than actually seeing the particles directly. Simultaneously, psychoanalysis and relativistic quantum mechanics challenged the reliability and objectivity of direct observation, making speculation the *de facto* default mode of research.

In philosophy, the nineteenth century began with relative certainty and confidence in the work of Immanuel Kant and G. W. F. Hegel and gradually gave us the indeterminacy and doubt of Friedrich Nietzsche, Henri Bergson and E. M. Cioran. Near-constant wars and revolutions, evolutionary theory, declining common religiosity and increasing interchange with imperial peripheries played havoc with philosophy in ways that are perhaps best exemplified in the career of Henry Sidgwick. In his *1874 The Methods of Ethics*, Sidgwick sounds much like a typical Victorian positivist:

I have avoided the inquiry into the Origin of the Moral Faculty ... by the simple assumption (which seems to be made implicitly in all ethical reasoning) that there is something under any given circumstances which it is right or reasonable to do, and that this may be known.

Sidgwick writes of the ‘certainty and precision’ he seeks in his ethical reasoning by applying rational procedures to ‘certain ethical premises’. His commitment to reason allows speculation to motivate his enquiry without defining it: a logical process is not speculative inasmuch as it adheres to predictable laws and gambles – if at all – only on the capacity of reason to decipher the systematicity underlying any apparent randomness. But Sidgwick
Speculative Modernism

This shift finds expression in two responses that lay the groundwork for modernism’s emergence: aestheticism and spiritualism. Both concern modernist writers with the problem of aesthetic experience and a fundamental mechanism of speculation. Aestheticism de-instrumentalizes aesthetic experience as a means to an end and insists on the inherent value and beauty. Aesthetic spiritualism: the appreciation of beauty is itself ethical. Aesthetic ethical comportment: the appreciation of beauty is itself ethical. Aesthetic sensibility becomes an ethical quality; the two can be developed independently. Aestheticism makes speculation’s modality as ‘reflection’ into itself; speculatively, the aesthetic mindfulness as ethical court of appeal. Spiritualism mobilizes speculation in its spectacular mode to articulate fin-de-siècle concerns about ethics and religion certainly but arguable about money, matter, empire, sex, and property. Beginning in 1848 in Hydeville, New York, with the antics of the Fox sisters, spiritualism’s rise to cultural prominence is direct evidence of the growth of speculation as a mode of cultural activity. It depends entirely on inferring the unseen from the seen and gambling on the authenticity of both the seen and the unseen, in ways consistent with the speculative shift in the worlds of science, economics and philosophy. Contrary to aestheticism, spiritualism was often instrumentalized as a means to knowledge (and occasionally wisdom). Inexplicable phenomena were reported, witnessed and analyzed with the express goal of inferring unseen mechanisms from seen phenomena and sometimes wagering economic stakes on the conclusions. Spirits contacted through séances and vibrations often seek justice for an undetected crime, making demands for ethical restitution. In such cases, spirits are agents of ethical redistribution, frequently directing the living with regard to transfers of property, identity, social standing, and deviance. They unite financial, scientific and philosophical concerns under the very sign of speculation in all its hermeneutic diversity – and defy witnesses to neglect what they see at their own peril.

Neglect

Modernism responds to spiritualism and aestheticism precisely by taking up the incitement to speculate as the locus of value: by making a virtue out of the temptation to neglect that accompanies every opportunity to speculate. If speculation denotes attentiveness and reflection, neglect denotes inattention and ignorance (whether passive or active). Its etymology is instructive: neg- as in ‘not’ and lect as in legere or ‘to read’. Literally, neglect as ‘not to read’. Works that are neglected are unread: they remain unspeculatively-upon. What may be more unreadable: they may be neg-legible. Neglect of paranormal phenomena motivates Sidwick to join the SPR, and neglect of the beautiful in the everyday motivates the aesthetic to contemplation. Modernist formal experimentation often produces works that appear neg-legible, that invite neglect by pursuing strategies of defamiliarization that resist engagement: stream of consciousness, non-linear chronology, unreliable narrators, unnarrated events and unmarked transitions among consciousnesses – and between conscious and unconscious – present not simply as difficulty, but as pure defiance.

As such, modernism forces readers to speculate: in doing that, it generates value. Economically, it produces a commodity whose value lies in its resistance to consumption. As Lawrence Rainey and others have argued, modernist works enforce speculation rather than exchange as a strategy of valuation by claiming status as worthy of collection. The first edition of Ulysses, for example, was designed as a collector’s edition. The limited print-run on special paper, purchased by subscription in advance of publication, speaks not to consumers’ urgent need to read the book so much as to their speculation that this was a special book, one to be collected in the hope that its value would increase over time. Writers such as Joseph Conrad and D. H. Lawrence used manuscripts, typescripts, carbon copies, corrected typescripts, proofs, corrected proofs and first editions to collectors such as John Quinn
and Peggy Guggenheim because those collectors were willing to gamble that those materials would increase in value as the writers' reputations increased. Participating in the burgeoning art futures market, literary modernists effectively sold stock in their careers, capitalizing on collectors' willingness to speculate on the value of authentic materials, with a view to financial gain.

Similarly, modernism produces philosophical value through a strategy of resistance, its difficulty challenging readers to speculate about the problem of difficulty itself. In this sense, it performs the resistance to knowing that Emmanuel Levinas insists is the key to wisdom: not overcoming alterity but living with its challenge. Such resistance to knowing is the fundamental dimension of alterity that establishes ethics as first philosophy. It overturns the drive to know as a mode of grasping, domesticating and effacing the alterity of the other. Instead, as Levinas argues, such difficulty must be accepted as irreducible and inaccessible. It should provoke a sense of unease that accompanies the lack of full knowledge. The resultant mauvais conscience defines ethical comportment in the world, requiring us to give up on knowing in favour simply of being hospitable to the other. Modernisms experimentalism may, thus, be read in ethical terms in the ways it eludes our grasp. We may know difficulty as difficulty, and we may know how difficulty affects us, but difficulty by definition remains diffusely, inassimilably, challenging. It requires that we infer from its intransigence to something else, something that is neither the core meaning of that intransigence nor that intransigence itself as an entity with determinate meaning. As the narrator of ‘Heart of Darkness’ tells us of Marlow’s tales,

the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of these misty halos that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine. (my emphasis)  

Conrad’s narrator returns us to the etymology of ‘speculate’ with which I began: modernist difficulty – like spiritualism – calls on us to infer the unseen from the seen precisely by working through the recalcitrance of the spectacle before us: to struggle towards the other-wise, to become wise to the other through determined strategies of neg-legibility. Through neglect.

The chief risk of this strategy is that it may succeed too well. While scholars have managed to turn the neg-legibility of much modernist experiment into the celebrated difficulty that gave it credibility, they have not been wholly successful. James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, Marianne Moore, Joseph Conrad and many others made the cut. Their work’s difficulty provoked sustained engagement by articulating an alterity that could be engaged on the home turf, one that could be approached from many different angles and yet never give up the secret of its challenge. However, many other writers whose difficulty poses equal or even greater challenges fell by the wayside. Lacking champions to advocate for the value of working through their difficulty, writers such as May Sinclair, Mary Butts, Lewis Grassic Gibbon, Radvyle Hall, Edwin Muir, Catherine Carswell, Henry Green and others were tagged as – and remain – minor authors in key ways. Without someone to speculate on the long-term value-added of their effort to be neg-lected, they have been, simply, neglected.

A Scots Quair

On that point, I turn now to Lewis Grassic Gibbon’s relatively under-studied Scottish modernist trilogy, A Scots Quair.9 Published between 1932 and 1934, the novels making up the trilogy – Sunset Song, Cloud House and Grey Granite – chart the life of Chris Guthrie in northeast Scotland. The novels chart the encroachment of modernity on the pastoral life of Chris’s childhood, and her gradual move from the countryside in Sunset Song to the small village of Segget in Cloud House and finally to the city in Grey Granite.

A Scots Quair does not romanticize the Scottish past or life in the countryside, though. Instead, it presents the movement from farm to slum in terms of irresolvable tension between nature/culture, intuition/learning and tradition/modernity. Chris’s childhood is idyllic in some senses, and there is a genuine love for the landscape in all the novels. But we are not in the sentimental Scotland of the Kailyard School either. Instead, any nostalgia for the pre-modern life of crofters and folk of the land is undercut by the meanness, anger and pathos Chris encounters. The lecherous priests, petty neighbours and cruel farmers provide more than sufficient counterpart to any affection for the land, however genuine, we may find in the novels. Chris’s father, in particular, furnishes a poignant instance of this realist antithesis to the threat of sentimentalism. A rough man, John Guthrie represents a kind of elemental folk archetype. With a cavalier ease, he proposes to and takes as wife Jean Murdoch, as described below:

as he rode from the park on one horse he patted the back of the other and cried to Jean Murdoch with a glint from his dour, sharp eye Jump up if you like. And she cried back I like fine! and caught the horse by its mane and swung herself there till Guthrie’s hand caught her and set her steady on the back of the beast.  

As a tale of cocky self-confidence and a natural affinity, this event would seem to be a prologue to a long and harmonious match. Soon enough, though, this ready confidence and imperial mien give way to casual cruelty, as John administers harsh corporal punishment to his children when he sees fit and stands by his brutality even when it is exposed as unjust.11 He utterly disregards his wife’s pleas not to get her pregnant again after the twins (her third and fourth children) are born. When he does impregnate her again, she
poisons herself and her youngest children, the twins out of a fear 'dreadful and calm and clear-eyed'. With Chris's older brother Will gone away to Canada, and her mother and siblings now dead, Chris is left alone at the croft with her father - now crippled after a fall from a horse - who sees to it that any sentimentality is finally quashed, as expressed below:

But a worse thing came as that slow September dragged to its end, a thing she would never tell to a soul... when her father lay with the red in his face and his eye on her, whispering and whispering at her, the harvest in his blood, whispering to her to come to him, they'd done it in the Old Testament times, whispering, 'You're my flesh and blood, I can do with you what I will, come to me, Chris, do you hear?'

Paradigm stands high in any list of modernist prose techniques, exemplified perhaps nowhere more clearly than in the work of Gertrude Stein. Echino biblical language in its tendency to place all clauses and phrases on the same level, it can sound at once archaic and disorienting. It is disorienting in its rejection of the conventional use of hierarchical structures to organize material: subordinate/dependent clauses versus main/independent clauses. In this respect, paradigm mimics the flow of consciousness before awareness organizes stimuli into categories and grants them levels of importance. It forces the readers to speculate constantly and readjust their speculations constantly, continually to incorporate more information into a pattern that is always emerging and yet never fully present. In Gibbon's prose, this has the strange effect of making the narrative constantly appear to be coming to a point, without ever arriving at one. In the space of approximately 1,000 words in the middle of Sunset Song, selected at random, there are eight consecutive paragraphs beginning, respectively, with 'But...', 'But...', 'The second day...', 'So...', 'But...', 'But...', 'And...', 'So...'.14 This pattern is observed throughout the trilogy's driving it forward from event to event, hardly ever pausing to grant priority of one event over another or to establish meaning. If the larger arc that is part of the Bildungsroman, the fibre of the novels is undifferentiated, giving the sense that most of the events could simply be re-arranged without any violence to the plot or larger structure. It is episodic but paradoxical: the episodes are related in terms that suggest impending culmination but they never actually progress. Birth and death are the only markers of significance the novels seem to recognize. They anchor the narrative, but they do not give the material in between any compelling order; they force the reader either to speculate about how it all fits together or to neglect the narrative, concluding that it simply does not 'cohere all right' after all.15

Carrying on with the same passage in Sunset Song, we find the unfocused stream of consciousness that typifies the novels' primary narrative mode clearly in evidence:

So that was the harvest madness that came on Chris, mild enough it had been, she fell fast asleep in the middle of it. But it scored her mind
as a long drill scores the crumbling sods of a brown, still May, it left neither pleasure nor pain, but she’d know that track all the days of her life, and its dark, long sweep across the long waiting field. 18

The comma-spicling within the sentences combines with the indeterminate references (what was ‘mild enough’? the madness, or the harvest? – we must speculate), and the leaping transformation of significance from vehicle to vehicle until the tenor is hopelessly obscured: the harvest madness ‘screed’ Chris’s mind, leaving ‘neither pleasure nor pain’ but only a track; then the ‘track’ takes over the work of meaning, becoming the thing that Chris will remember ‘all the days of her life’. The track is initially the vehicle for: the experience of the harvest madness but gets concretized in the ensuing clauses to become the thing she will remember. It ceases to be a signifier of harvest madness and takes precedence as the object of memory in its stead. By this sort of relay in the unfocused stream of consciousness throughout A Scots Quair, Gibbon’s prose leaps along, blurring registers, confusing concrete and abstract, and keeping the reader’s attention from settling in any one place long enough to order and arrange events. As with the use of parataxis, a peculiarly modernist technique of defamiliarization forces the reader to speculate (if in bewilderment) and solicits neglect; one can easily imagine uncommitted readers simply throwing their hands up in despair, surrendering to the labyrinthine movements of metaphor and consciousness and reaching for comfort in Arnold Bennett or John Galsworthy.

Gibbon’s use of non-standard English has been commented on more than any other feature of A Scots Quair. 17 Gibbon himself wrote that it was not a matter of writing in Scots, and out of the question to write in the King’s English. 18 Instead, he opted for a strategy of hybrid language, or what has been called ‘synthetic Scots’.

The technique of Lewis Grassic Gibbon in his trilogy A Scots Quair... is to mould the English language into the rhythms and cadences of Scots spoken speech, and to inject into the English vocabulary such minimum number of words from Braid Scots as that remoulding requires. 19

It is a hard needle to thread, as Gibbon presents neither a specific Scots dialect nor English. The result is a language that is unfamiliar to all readers, whether they are native Scots or BBC announcers: ‘One inevitable result of such modernism – in language and in form – is it will be made writing in Scots more difficult than it was in the past and, inevitably, less accessible to the traditional reading public’.

Gibbon’s writing, thus, assumes a level of modernist difficulty that cannot be written down simply to chauvinism (for either Scotland or England) but must be understood as a formal experiment that carries with it political importance. At the same time, the Scottish characters in A Scots Quair mock those speaking English, at once dismissing them as outsiders and voicing their sense of inferiority by referring to English speakers as putting on airs. The effect is disorienting in the challenge it poses: it forces the readers to speculate about meaning almost constantly. 20 Even Scots readers have to code-switch between Braid Scots and English and develop the capacity to read English according to Scots cadences. 21 The disruption of English and Scots performed by Gibbon’s novels again forces the readers to speculate, challenges them to stop reading and articulates a complicated political perspective. Language is simultaneously derracinated and asserted as essential to political identity. As with the unfocalized stream of consciousness and use of parataxis, this linguistic strategy calls on readers to infer the unseen from the seen, to plumb the psycho-political drama that drives the prose along – and challenges its readers’ comprehension – so relentlessly.

These elements, and the difficulty they entail, find their most condensed expression in the proems that frame each volume of A Scots Quair:

If you climb the foothills to the ruined Kaimies, that was builded when Segget was no more than a place where the folk of old time had raised a camp with earthen walls and with freestone dykes, and had died and had left their camp to wither under the spread of the grass and the winds – if you climbed up the Kaimies of a winter morn and looked to the east and you held your breath, you would maybe hear the sough of the sea, sighing and listening up through the dawn, or see a shower of sparks as a train came skirling through the woods from Stonehaven, stopping seldom enough at Segget, the drivers would clear their throats and would spit, and the guards would grin: as though ‘twere a joke.

These ‘proems’ establish historical depth for the narratives that follow, but always in terms of a raw, harsh reality unglazed with romance or wishfulness. They depend on a ‘you’ who may be Chris Guthrie (‘you’ clearly refers to her in other places in the narrative) or simply the generalized ‘you’ with no precise referent. We must speculate. The narrative remains unfocalized, though not precisely stream of consciousness in this instance. It is, however, paratactic, never settling on a privileged perspective that will tell us the point of the passage. Instead, the prose rushes on, leaping from phrase to phrase, turning objects into subjects and denying readers any stable place to pause and consolidate. It outlines an imaginary landscape, moreover, that is partly based on the real topography of northeast Scotland and partly the product of Gibbon’s imagination. Yet, it is treated familiarly and described as though we could easily orient ourselves in it on the basis of these words alone. As William Calvin puts it, this particular modernist strategy is part of a radical break with the immediate past and revival of the more distant past that chimes precisely with T. S. Eliot’s recourse to Elizabethan England, Ezra Pound’s to medieval Provence, and W. B. Yeats’s to Celtic myth:

It was necessary to wrest free from what was perceived as the ideological fetters of the romantic heritage become a culture of cliche.
For this reason the moderns in Scotland and Occitania proclaimed their modernity by thrusting away Burns and Mistral — fathers whose weight threatened to be mortal — and by rehabilitating an older, more authentic cultural past, closer to the totality of life and to the language in its vital totality.24

Culin is right, but only partly. Though Gibbon clearly does ‘wrest free’ from ‘the romantic heritage become a culture of cliche,’ he does not perform the sort of recovery work Culin suggests: elevating the authentic folk tradition over the encroachments of modernity. As I have argued above, he is too much the modernist for that, and he insists on revealing the sordid side of the old ways just as much as he reveals the sordid side of the new urban reality. The result is a narrative that opposes the life of the land and intuition to the life of the city and reason, without privileging either one. Where Scottish writers of the immediately preceding Kailyard School — J. M. Barrie, Ian MacLaren, J. J. Bell, George MacDonald, Gabriel Setoun and S. R. Crockett — had adopted the romantic view of history that still drives much of the tourist industry in Scotland, Gibbon struck a modernist stance in his refusal to resolve the tension he saw as fundamental to Scottish modernity. Instead, the framing of each novel in the trilogy wrenches us out of time. We feel confronted with something at once much older and more elemental, and yet experimental and new. We are challenged to speculate and neglect, to consider whether we can detect the unseen history of Scottish modernism from the visible traces before us — the artefacts half-buried in the soil — and not to read on, to neglect the work in front of us, to reject it as simply negligible.

Through these characteristic modernist techniques, Gibbon’s prose holds us at a distance, keeping us from readily grasping what is happening. The same is true of Christ herself, and of the novel’s Scottish modernist. The aesthetic dimensions — of Christ’s life, of the novel’s form, of its language — coax us to confront it in a speculative frame of mind. The novel’s wilful neg-legibility is, in fact, the hallmark of its modernism and of its significance. Where science, finance and even philosophy in the nineteenth century sought to overcome uncertainty through rationalized speculation and where aestheticism and spiritualism challenged us to read neglected phenomena as unjustly and perhaps even dangerously ignored, modernism presents neg-lectibility — as itself that which must be read. Unreadability urges speculation — in material, financial and scientific senses fully as much as hermeneutic ones. It incites speculation, presenting the end of the ‘certainty and precision’ Sidgwick sought in 1874. In its place, we get the basis for a new ethics of the other-wise, a speculative epistemology that depends on imaginative engagements with the thoroughly alien. This wrenching disorientation — really a reorientation, a transvaluing of values whereby certainty is discounted in favour of irresolution — presents the possibility at last of a truly modernist ethics. It is an ethics we find everywhere in modernist works, but also one we must continually renew by sacrificing our certainty and precision, our sense that we know what modernism is or was. Instead, we have to attend to those works we have neglected, to those that are negligible, as an ethical obligation in its own right. If we can learn to read A Scots Quair’s neglect as a sign of value, we can begin to confront Scottish modernism as a challenge to the subject of modernism in all of its various valuations.

The reward of doing so, I venture, is that we can recover such minor modernisms, whether they be Scottish, Welsh, Finnish, Sri Lankan or Malaysian. Deleuze and Guattari use the term ‘minor’ to signify an overlooked but perfectly symptomatic literature, one that illuminates its context and the ‘major’ works, figures and traditions around it, as the canon cannot. In this respect, I contend that Scottish modernism is a key to understanding modernism more generally. Scotland itself is in a very strange spot. On the one hand, Scotland furnishes some of the most zealous and effective enforcers of the British empire. On the other hand, Scotland is itself colonized. The resurgence of modernist studies specifically devoted to recovering non-canonical or ‘low’ modernisms would seem to have promised a resurgence and recuperation of work like that of Gibbon. Instead, because the Scots are part of empire, Scottish modernism is marginalized. It is too close to the centre to be part of the periphery and too peripheral to be part of the centre. It is a doubly minor literature in some senses. Undoubtedly, there are many complex reasons that go into the mix as well as these; however, the upshot remains the same: Gibbon’s masterpiece remains neglected and our understanding of modernism, thus, is rather impoverished. To put it in terms of this section’s focus, we miss out on a key aesthetic value for economic reasons that have a perfectly good philosophical response.

Notes
1. Gibbon is the pen-name of James Leslie Mitchell.
2. M = money; C = commodity. In this formula, Money is used to purchase a Commodity, which is then resold for more Money. The buyer/seller who participates in both steps of this transaction speculates, purchasing a commodity for less than he or she thinks it can be sold for in the future.
7. For more on modernist difficulty, see Dipveen and Larham.
9. Though A Scots Quair is relatively well known in the constrained field of Scottish literature, it remains peripheral to the study of international modernism. The MLA International Bibliography returns only 29 articles on A Scots
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Notably, contemporary reprints of A Scots Quair feature glossaries of terms to aid readers.

In contrast, it returns 602 for James Joyce's Dublino. Search performed 10 July 2015.

Gibbon, Sunset Song, p. 32.
Gibbon, Sunset Song, p. 64.
Gibbon, Sunset Song, p. 108.
Gibson, Sunset Song, pp. 70–2.

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Quair. In contrast, it returns 602 for James Joyce's Dublino. Search performed 10 July 2015.

11. Gibbon, Sunset Song, p. 32.
12. Gibbon, Sunset Song, p. 64.
18. 'Scots, or, as it is sometimes called, Lallans, is an independent Anglic or Anglo-Saxon language ... spoken in the Scottish lowlands. Scots, like English, evolved from the Anglo-Saxon speech introduced into Britain at the time of the Germanic invasions. ... In the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance, the King's Scott in Edinburgh was comparable to the King's English in London. ... Over the centuries, Scots, like Occitan, never died out, though it too evolved (declined) from a literary koine and high court speech to the level of local patois. Here too, over the centuries the literature fell into decline, yet the periods of decline' in W. Calin, Minority Literatures and Modernism, p. 4.
22. Notably, contemporary reprints of A Scots Quair feature glossaries of terms to aid readers.
24. W. Calin, Minority Literatures and Modernism, p. 7

Works Cited

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