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**Article**

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***The Modernist Party*, ed. by Kate McLoughlin, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press (ISBN 980 0 7486 4731 6), 2013, £70.**

In Woody Allen's 2011 film, *Midnight in Paris*, the protagonist, Gil Pender, time travels from present-day Paris back in time to the 1920s and beyond, where he goes to several parties that would make any modernist swoon with envy. How about the one with F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald, Cole Porter, Alice B. Toklas, Josephine Baker, Ernest Hemingway and Gertrude Stein, who introduces him to Pablo Picasso? Now that's what I call a modernist party. I remember being mesmerised by the film and the possibility of time travelling back to a modernist party of my own, perhaps to Garsington in 1917, on a weekend when the guest list might have included Virginia and Leonard Woolf, Katherine Mansfield and John Middleton Murry, Aldous Huxley, Lytton Strachey, Mark Gertler, etc., etc. And so these are the sorts of scenes I conjure up when I think of a modernist party—iconic locations and even more iconic guests.

The editor of *The Modernist Party*, Kate McLoughlin, sets up the reader from the outset to expect a proper party. The contributors are named in 'The Guest List', McLoughlin styles herself as the 'host', and the acknowledgments become 'A Note of Thanks'. In the latter she outlines a pedagogical origin for the book: 'I experimented with introducing the class to modernism through a discussion of parties (I have yet to meet a student who hasn't been to one)' (v). She continues in her Introduction with some fascinating glimpses into party hosts from Plato to Kant and Woolf, a veritable smörgåsbord of convivial get-togethers. Regarding the modernist era, she notes how the 'networks of communication are more efficient, ensuring that gossip can travel faster; in the era of high capitalism competition is fiercer than ever' (5), and get-togethers and parties were sometimes criticised and occasionally ridiculed (see for example Aldous Huxley's wonderful satirising of the Garsington set in his first novel *Crome Yellow* (1921)), but as McLoughlin perceptively notes:

There is only one thing worse than being invited to a party like this: *not* being invited to it. For Clarissa Dalloway, being excluded from a party is a personal catastrophe:

The shock of Lady Bruton asking Richard to lunch without her made the moment in which she had stood shiver, as a plant on the river-bed feels the shock of a passing oar and shivers: so she rocked: so she shivered. (6)

The 'guests' have written chapters on Conrad, Eliot (by the 'host'), Joyce, Mansfield, Woolf, Proust, Lesbian modernists and Gertrude Stein, Black modernists, Lawrence, Ford and Huxley.

McLoughlin's own chapter on Eliot and 'Prufrock', as one would expect from the 'host', is a real treat. Who has not wanted to know where Prufrock is going to consume his dreaded 'tea and cake and ices' (l. 79)? She states, 'An apparently benign—even pleasant, even highly enjoyable—event is presented as occasioning anxiety so inhibiting that it arrests decision and action. As the question might be put in non-scholarly parlance: what's not to like?' (46). Critics have blamed the protagonist's dread on the women in the poem and their "'perceived sordidity'" (46) and sexuality. McLoughlin structures her response mostly around Habermasian theories of human speech exchanges, which although not exactly 'fun', both illuminate and offer explanations for tongue-tied, anxious party goers, of which Eliot himself was a prime example, 'steeling himself to set off to social occasions, treating such events in the spirit of an anthropologist forced, for professional reasons, to witness an unpleasant rite. [...] Poor Prufrock's tongue-tiedness therefore expresses a moment at which all threatens to fall apart' (55, 59). This is a nuanced and beautifully crafted essay that does much to further our understanding of Prufrock, the most reluctant of literary partygoers.

It was a stroke of good fortune that the 'host' persuaded Professor Emerita Angela Smith to come to the party and write the chapter on Katherine Mansfield. For Smith, in Mansfield's party stories 'the party-givers and the party-goers want to project an image of themselves which is always undermined by a moment of disruption when the picture is skewed, when Mansfield's searching scrutiny reveals an aspect of the secret self, and a protagonist comes close to an epiphany which is often ultimately elusive' (79). She discusses five stories from different moments in Mansfield's career, ending of course with 'The Garden Party', written in 1922, in the last year of Mansfield's life. Still thinking of 'Prufrock', Smith reminds the reader of how Mansfield once read the poem out loud to the assembled guests at one of the Garsington house-parties, and 'may have felt a frisson of recognition when she read of Prufrock, en route to a party, cautiously preparing "a face to meet the faces that you meet"' (79). Most of us will recognise our 'party' selves in that comment.

The chapter on Woolf by Bryony Randall, titled 'Virginia Woolf's Idea of a Party', is a particularly well-researched essay. She quotes Leonard Woolf, stating that his wife 'not only enjoyed society, the kaleidoscope of human beings, conversation, and the excitement of parties, she was through and through a professional novelist, and all this was the raw material of her trade'. The premise here is that of 'seeing the relationship of her texts [...] as that between guests at a party' (96), whilst also demonstrating a certain incompatibility between parties and Woolf's creative endeavours. Randall cites a diary entry for 22 October 1935, whilst writing *The Years*, where Woolf states: 'I think I shall refuse all invitations to chatter parties till I'm done. [...] For instance, if I go to Edith Sitwell's cocktail this evening I shall only pick up some

exacerbating picture: I shall froth myself into sparklets; and there'll be the whole smoothing and freshening to begin again' (97). And so parties not only fed into Woolf's creativity, they sometimes over-taxed her, so that even to simply imagine a party could excite her sufficiently to spark a creative moment. Several Woolf texts are discussed but particular importance is given to *The Years* and of course *Mrs Dalloway* with its most iconic and celebrated of all modernist parties; Clarissa Dalloway states that 'she too, was going that very night to kindle and illuminate; to give her party' (108). For Randall, Woolf is ultimately perceived as the host of a *textual* party, moving towards "'a gaiety—an inconsequence—a light spirited stepping at my sweet will", which resolves into the image of "dancing" texts' (106). Here, in a flash of inspiration, Randall imagines Woolf 'here as mistress of a house, hosting a party where these texts will dance, in light-spirited steps' (106). And considering all Woolf's texts as party guests, the reader can note 'conversation between guests, and texts, no doubt; there are connections and comings-together. But there is always the inconsecutive, the shifting, the "dance" to consider, which Woolf, our hostess, is always so concerned to keep alive in her "idea of a party"' (108).

Other chapters I particularly enjoyed include Nathan Waddell's discussion of Ford Madox Ford's 1923 novel *The Marsden Case* and the Cabaret Theatre Club. Here there is not so much the description of a party, so much as 'an early modernist scene of revelry and hedonism' and the 'revisitation of a pre-war cultural scene whose cosmopolitan and intellectual underpinnings might point the way for a directionless post-war modernity' (206). Morag Shiach's chapter on Aldous Huxley examines the role of the party in Huxley's fiction, from *Crome Yellow* to *Brave New World*, via *Point Counter Point*. As Shiach notes, 'in each case, the party becomes a kind of fictional laboratory, where relationships, identities and desires are tested against Huxley's narrators' probing sense of imminent social crisis and personal collapse' (211).

The *OED* describes a party as a 'social gathering, esp. of invited guests at a person's house, typically involving eating, drinking, and entertainment', and this would certainly describe my wish-list parties above. A small point, but where does the reader figure in McLoughlin's metaphorical party, and what is our role to be? A fellow guest? A fly on the wall? Or an outsider? When the book is read, what sort of experience are we supposed to have had? For example, an invitation stuck into the front fly-leaf would have been an inspirational move to persuade the reader to join in the game. Professor David Trotter's review comment on the back cover states: 'Intriguing. There should be more fun in Modernist Studies'. I agree, but this would work so much more overtly here if I as the reader was persuaded to be part of the 'fun' from the outset, to be like Woolf perhaps, 'to kindle and illuminate' and 'froth myself into sparklets'.