Modernism and Mildred Walker

Carmen Pearson

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p. iii: Mildred Walker. Photo
courtesy of Christopher M.
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Preface

I first came across Mildred Walker's work in the fall of 1995. At the time, I was snowbound in Great Falls, Montana, having traveled down from Canada to pick up a load of ponies. An early winter storm had blown in that day, and I found myself wandering around a bookstore trying to find a distraction from thoughts of the trip I had just made, of slipping and sliding in the ruts of semis with a rented horse trailer blowing back and forth. Since I'd been traveling through winter wheat country all afternoon—as best as I could tell in the drifting snow—the title of Mildred Walker's recently republished book, *Winter Wheat*, caught my eye.

The next morning, with the snow replaced by ferocious winds, I found my way to Curtis Lee's little farm on the banks of the Missouri River to pick up his band of Shetlands. The vivid landscape of Walker's book shadowed my thoughts as I helped load the little animals. Curtis was selling his farm and taking the proceeds to move into a nursing home. It was all a little sad—him showing me photos and trophies from Great Falls' fairs in the 1940s and '50s. On that day I had no idea that almost fifteen years later I'd find myself less than a mile from his place, again standing on the banks of the Missouri, again in Great Falls, again picking up something and hauling it home, and I had no idea that the book I'd bought the night before just to lull myself to sleep would have something to do with it all.

Like Mary Clearman Blew, the little girl who realized for the first time that lives like hers were worth writing about when she found a copy of *The Curlew's Cry* in a local Montana library, I too was happy to realize that the seemingly mundane and backwater existence I lived was somehow validated in words—beautiful words. Subsequently, I arranged to have each new reissue of Walker's novels by the University of Nebraska Press sent to our farm in Alberta. Certainly, my initial enthusiasm for Walker's fiction was by no means scholarly. It was entirely personal, and probably still is. Her settings were realistic, as were her characters. Her books didn't have happy endings. They just stopped because there wasn't anything else to say. Her characters and writing had an integrity that I valued. So with just that, I sent copies of her books to my family and friends and carried on in my little backwater, secretly wishing I could meet the author. But, like many things, I waited too long—or so I thought.

As with many mothers and wives, my life changed when my husband came home one day, and although I did not know it at the time, the news that Andrew announced would bring me a whole lot closer to meeting Mildred Walker than I could have ever imagined. He explained that he had been offered a job in Houston and thought it would be nice to have a break from Alberta's winter and snow, just for a season or two, and he asked what we thought. Initially, we were horrified. We had horses, sheep, chickens—not exactly a mobile group—and I sure wasn't a "trailing spouse." But we struck a compromise. My husband was itching for a little change, we'd find someone to stay at the farm, and hadn't I always vowed that when I was old, I'd finish my PhD? Maybe this was the opportunity, I reasoned.

I discovered that not many universities are interested in a middle-aged mamma who wants to pursue a PhD in English, having no formal education in the subject. However, luck was on my side. With characteristic Southern hospitality, the University of Houston didn't slam their door but instead said they'd

give me a chance to see what I could do. Well, I knew how to read and how to work. With little else than that, I started. They let me stay. When it came time to pick a subject for a dissertation, I was still feeling pretty insecure, an outsider to the inner sanctums of English academia. Maybe because of this—or despite it—I carried my collection of Walker's books into the university and announced that I would like to write about Mildred Walker. Other students were doing Shakespeare and Virginia Woolf. Although I was green behind the ears and already figured most people had never heard of her, I wasn't all that green—but of course, I only realize that now.

Even though it did not include much formal literary training, my upbringing had given me a postmodern sensibility, whether I knew it or not. I would like to believe this had something to do with living in the West. Instinctively, I sensed that what happened out West was just as relevant to a fuller understanding of American culture as what occurred other places. I also knew that certain stories and voices had been sidelined for too many years and that something needed to be done about it. Of course, I wasn't alone in my opinion. Others—esteemed scholars of American literature—felt the same way. Members of the Western Literature Association had been dropping hints for years that someone ought to give more critical attention to Mildred Walker. The proof was also in the publication record; the University of Nebraska Press had dedicated considerable resources to bringing Walker's books back into print. If they were worth reading, surely they were also worth studying. I felt I was the one for the job.

As I embarked on my dissertation, it didn't hurt that Ladette Randolph at the University of Nebraska Press had already offered her encouragement and that Ripley Hugo, Mildred Walker's daughter and biographer, was already helping me in every way she could. If the heavens line up in a certain way on a specific day and they let you pass through, you take that as a good sign. Nervously, I went to one of the faculty members at

the University of Houston, Dr. Dorothy Baker, to ask her if she would supervise my dissertation. To my surprise, she had attended Walker's alma mater, Wells College, and had colleagues who had known Walker. Dr. Baker agreed to the project. This coincidence fueled my sense of fate and I continued on.

The road to completing my PhD—like that snowy road from Lethbridge to Shelby—had a few blind spots, bends, and surprises. But, in the end, I'm back at the farm and it all worked out just fine. Along the way, I discovered that Walker had left one manuscript for a novel unpublished. Working with Ripley via phone and mail, I edited *The Orange Tree* for posthumous publication before completing this critical study. Editing the manuscript set me back in terms of time but not in learning. Walker left several versions of the manuscript, and for the better part of one winter, I sat in my office in the barn and studied her notes and words, talked to her ghost, and tried to understand how she created a novel. This experience, along with long phone conversations and letters from Ripley, helped me through the project. Of all the fine English teachers I have had, Walker proved to be the best. If you admire a writer, sitting and rewriting and editing his or her every single word is a journey you should take. But my journey didn't end there. I was fortunate enough to visit Walker's former home in Grafton, Vermont. Christopher and Deniza Schemm, Walker's youngest son and daughter-in-law, were exemplary hosts, inviting me to their home and kind enough even to house me in what had been Mildred's room. On that visit, we walked to the local cemetery, sat on the edge of the Saxtons River, and hiked through the woods, searching for the erratic boulder featured in *A Piece of the World* and the overgrown quarries depicted in *The Quarry*. I also peeked around a traditional New England house, complete with a separate wing, as memorialized in *The Southwest Corner*. Again, in Oregon, George and Janet Schemm allowed me to sleep in a wing of their beautiful home when I came to visit. I didn't sleep as much as I should have though, because the

room contained what was left of Walker's private collection of books. In short, everything to do with the work of Walker was an adventure and a huge treat—and I've come to the conclusion that that is what real education should be.

Ironically, of all the people who helped me write this book, I have not yet personally met perhaps the most important one. Maybe I have not yet made the shortest trip—to Missoula—because, like her mother, Ripley Hugo's spirit and intelligence sparkle in her words so much that I felt as though I had met her from our first telephone conversation. From the start, she has been the kind and intelligent voice across the line. She is the one who gave me directions to her family home, Beaverbank, on the banks of the Missouri, that beautiful September day when I walked just downstream from the spot where Curtis Lee had given me his ponies many years earlier. She is the careful editor—the one who sent me notes and letters. She gave the most, and I hope that what follows is worthy of your efforts, Ripley. We have both said we would meet someday, and that our meeting has to be at Tupa—and I hope we will.

Of all Walker's residences, Tupa, the family cabin in the Sawtooth Mountains, was one of her favorites. In *Unless the Wind Turns*, her character's description of a cabin certainly expresses her own feelings: "This cabin's mine. [. . .] A place that you keep going back to in your life is always more than a place. It's a kind of measuring ground and a philosophy and a hide-out" (182).

My work with Mildred Walker has also been a measuring ground. Through her novels, with their vivid examples of the integrity and artistry of ordinary people, and the hospitality of her kind and generous offspring, I have gone on an incredible journey that will always be my benchmark. It was a journey fueled by words, like Walker's own life. For this reason I chose to discuss her work within the context of modernism. Although, as the following pages will demonstrate, many critical approaches are apt for studying Walker's work, modernism's

distinguishing characteristic is that meaning and art are found not only in the stories, the struggles, the characters, and the landscapes, but in the creation of the words themselves. When taken alone, the subjects of Walker's novels—economics, war, motherhood, aesthetics—give little indication of how her books fit in the modernist tradition. Novels have always been about love, money, wars, family relationships, and historical events. What distinguishes modernist fiction such as Walker's is that a novel is written not simply to entertain or inform but to sanctify the very act of writing.

There are areas of this study that could have been expanded, and I hope that someday soon other scholars will study Walker's fiction and do so. For instance, the relationship between modernism and westering and Walker's focus on relationships, the nuclear family, and complex female characters are topics that deserve more detailed study. Likewise, with the growing interest in eco-criticism, Walker's attention to the relationship between landscape and cultural production lends itself to detailed eco-critical study. It is my hope that this initial study might encourage such work.

Acknowledgments

I wish to offer a special thanks to the University of Nebraska Press and its staff for republishing Mildred Walker's novels for the public—without its efforts, I would never have discovered her works—and to the many individuals behind the scenes who are responsible for this study, particularly Louis Welch for passing my initial questions on to Ripley Hugo. Again, I must thank UNP for publishing Ripley Hugo's biography of her mother, *Writing for Her Life: The Novelist Mildred Walker*. Without this carefully researched and well-presented text coupled with Ripley's personal and always generous guidance, information, and advice, this project never could have even been initiated. Furthermore, Ripley's introducing me to her brothers and their families has enriched both this project and my life. Deniza and Christopher Schemm, I wish to thank you for those special days in Grafton, looking for the erratic boulder and the long-lost quarries and meeting your friends and family. George and Janet, thank you for our evening in Oregon and for my night with all of Mildred's books.

The encouragement and support of many individuals have been integral to this project, most notably that of Ripley Hugo and her family and Ladette Randolph and other members of the UNP staff. Thank you to Christopher Steinke and Joeth Zucco for your careful editorial work. The librarians, archivists, and staff at the American Heritage Center at the University of Wyo-

ming supported this project with both the use of their archives and a travel grant. Early publications of material on this project by the *South Dakota Review*, *Western American Literature*, and *Legacy*, coupled with invitations to present papers on Mildred Walker at conferences held by the Western Literature Association, the Society for the Study of American Women Writers, the American Literature Association, and the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment provided further encouragement in this work, as did the supportive and helpful critiques of both Ann Ronald and Mary Clearman Blew.

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Introduction

The purpose of this study is to offer the first comprehensive critical reading of the major fictional works of Mildred Walker. Its goals are to suggest a variety of interpretations that will encourage readers already familiar with Walker's novels to reevaluate her works and their implications and also to encourage new readers and students of literature to undertake further critical studies of the author's fiction. The study's methodology will be to evaluate the author's novels in light of critical concerns that have previously been, and are currently, discussed in the context of modernism. In doing so, a further goal of this study is to reiterate and reinforce the value of what Hugh Witemeyer, in *The Future of Modernism*, refers to as a postmodern version of modernist criticism and to contribute to the ongoing reevaluation of modernism as a critical idiom.

Walker's life spanned the twentieth century, from 1905 to 1998, and her literary production lasted almost three-quarters of a century. Eleven of her novels were first published with Harcourt Brace between 1934 and 1970. Her last published novel was *A Piece of the World*, a work of young adult fiction published by Atheneum Press in 1971. All these novels were out of print in 1992, when the University of Nebraska Press reissued *Winter Wheat*. Subsequent to that publication, all her previously published novels have been reissued to the public under the press's Bison imprint. Moreover, in 2006 the University of Nebraska

Press posthumously released her last novel, *The Orange Tree*.

With a new reading public and an extensive body of readily available literature to draw upon, Walker's place in and contribution to American letters deserve greater critical understanding and appreciation. The biggest challenge to presenting the initial critical study of Walker's collected works is in choosing a critical idiom that not only does justice to the author's diverse works and interests but also encourages future studies that may lead students and readers to a variety of interpretations, something that her works are certainly conducive to. With the diversity of fresh approaches evident in the new critical introductions included in the reissues, certainly what can be agreed upon is that Walker's engagement and concern with the issues of her time are still relevant today.

Modernism is an appropriate critical idiom for an examination of Walker's work because it encourages readings that take into account the times in which she lived, her many areas of interest, and the stylistic adaptations that she exhibited over her long career as a writer. Furthermore, in light of critics' and scholars' reevaluations and discussions of modernism in recent years and the ongoing interest in modernism, this study addresses these developments in order to reevaluate modernism in a postmodern light.

Modernism is no longer defined solely by avant-garde aesthetic reactions to modernity in the first half of the twentieth century, when Walker produced much of her work, but is increasingly thought of as a multicultural, philosophical, and social reaction that emerged in many forms in response to the vast changes sweeping through the modern world that altered the public's perception of what was once considered stable and predictable. Although this study will consider the various definitions of modernism and the different forms it took in Europe, the United States, and the rest of the world, the text's focus will be on the author's reactions to the era in which she lived and her contributions to modernist American literature.

In particular, this study will address the cultural issues raised in the novels: human relationships, family dynamics, the changing roles for women and children in our society and in fiction, the movement of the population from the East to the West, the effect of an evolving U.S. economy on its communities, the many cultural faces of the U.S. population, the integrity and importance of the natural world, and literature's place in that world. I also focus on the importance of "readerly" interpretations of modernist texts through the use of unreliable narrators, changing points of view, and poetic techniques such as the extended metaphor and literary compression.

Not only was modernism a movement in which literature opened to readers in a new way, allowing and encouraging readerly participation in the creative process, it was also a period of time when technology, capitalism, and the American artist seemed to come together for a brief and gilded hour. During the 1920s, '30s, and '40s, before the well-paid and recognized in America consisted mainly of football players and rock stars, writers and other artists were among America's first celebrities. Writers such as John Steinbeck, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Ernest Hemingway were well-compensated for their work and were recognized by wide audiences, as were many other authors who are not as well-known to today's readers. With a public that read and a publishing industry that had finally come into its own, before the advent of TV and computers and the many competing public media we have today, the *Book of the Month Club* selections and magazines such as the *Atlantic Monthly*, *Scribner's*, *Redbook*, and the *Saturday Evening Post* were integral to the entertainment and educational process in many homes.

In the Mildred Walker Archives at the University of Wyoming, the carefully folded *Book of the Month Club* selections and issues of *New York Times Book Review* featuring her novels are evidence of those special days as are comments in her journals describing her excitement over a release of a new novel and how "royally" her publishers treated her. This period of celebrity for

modernist writers is also one of the factors that distinguishes modernism from postmodernism.

American modernist publications were not limited to the U.S. audience in their readership or their subject matter. American fiction had truly become international; particularly with the rise of expatriate writers, U.S. fiction moved, both physically and spiritually, beyond the borders of North America. After two world wars, with rapidly changing technology contributing to less expensive modes of transportation, the earth became smaller and globalization shifted into overdrive. The world's nations became more interested in one another. Even an author from Great Falls, Montana, had her novels translated into nine other languages and toured Europe to visit foreign publishers. Evidence of this internationalization of American literature can also be found in samples of letters from her foreign readers, from soldiers stationed abroad, and even from a young teacher in Japan. Accordingly, this work addresses international issues that indicate the increasingly globalized perspective in American literature.

With the exception of Ripley Hugo's biography of her mother, *Writing for Her Life: The Novelist Mildred Walker*, no text has been fully dedicated to a study of Walker or her novels. Hugo's biography presents invaluable critical information concerning her mother's fiction and brings attention both to the events in Walker's life that influenced the settings, characters, and themes in her novels and to the concerns and beliefs that contributed to her development as a novelist. Hugo's integration of setting, personal details of her mother's life, and an analysis of the texts' creation influences the approach of this study. This work aims not to study literature in isolation from its source of creation and reception but rather to present an integrated discussion focusing on the cultural and social histories and background of the texts, their authors' personal experiences and inspirations for their creation, and readers' reactions to the texts. In this light, *Modernism and Mildred Walker* responds to Ripley Hugo's biography and should be viewed as a continuation of *Writing for Her Life*.

Of all her literary works, *Winter Wheat* has received the most critical attention. However, to date, much of this attention has focused on the novel's setting in Montana, its realistic depictions of western life, and its contribution to the region's literary heritage. With the exception of Elaine Jahner, in her *Spaces of the Mind: Narrative and Community in the American West*, critics have not focused on the novel's complexity and success as a literary work. Jahner dedicates several chapters to a detailed discussion of *Winter Wheat* through discourse theory. Her study encourages critical approaches to the fiction of Walker that blend a use of regionalism with a fresh approach to formalism. In other recent works that discuss her novels, writers most often highlight the need for more critical work on her fiction. These include William Bevis's *Ten Tough Trips: Montana Writers and the West*; Mary Clearman Blew's *Bone Deep in Landscape: Writing, Reading, and Place*; Krista Comer's *Landscapes of the New West: Gender and Geography in Contemporary Women's Writing*; Ken Egan Jr.'s *Hope and Dread in Montana Literature*, William Kittredge and Annick Smith's *The Last Best Place: A Montana Anthology*, and Ann Ronald's *Reader of the Purple Sage*.

Because the term "modernism" and the approaches to this critical idiom are so contentious, a separate chapter is dedicated to modernism's historical context, its various uses as a term, and a suggested definition in light of recent critical discussions. The definition formulated in this chapter attempts to bridge the aesthetic interests of formalists and New Critics, characterized by their interest in high modernism's poetry, with postmodernists' inclination for approaching literary criticism with intertextual, multidisciplinary, and multicultural studies. The conclusion of the discussion is that both approaches can and ought to be wed.

Modernist texts, as Matthew Bruccoli describes them in *Ernest Hemingway and the Expatriate Modernist Movement*, are both "diachronic" and "synchronic." Because of this it is important to approach a modernist discussion from both perspectives.

When viewing them diachronically, modernist texts should be studied in relation to the current events in the authors' lives and in the world at large. In "Passing the Time: Modernism versus New Criticism," Jeffrey Perl points out that even Eliot, often considered the founder of New Criticism and the great proponent of critics staying within the text and attending to "poetry as poetry," also wanted it known that "any critic seriously concerned with a man's work should be expected to know something about the man's life" (33). With this in mind, this study does not isolate the author's life from a discussion of her fiction but instead integrates her life with her fiction, beginning with her first publication, *Fireweed*, written during the Great Depression, and continuing through *The Orange Tree*, written almost a half century later. Approaching her works in this manner, I evaluate her fiction as it is related to both the public and private events that inspired and affected it. Because modernist fiction is also synchronic, I also address the author's experimentation and development of her fictional style as a result of her private concerns, public interests, and creative inclinations.

In light of the fact that modernism was characterized by words such as "change" and "crisis" and that its authors still sought a common ground and stabilizing force in their work, this study also explores Walker's belief that stability was to be found in language and literature. As such, I offer specific examples of her characters' discussions on writing, literature, and the inconstancy of language. Walker used the metaphor and also seemed to write in the realist tradition. The reconciliation of realism and modernism is discussed further in the chapter "The Aesthetics of Modernism" in light of her use of both metaphoric and metonymic prose.

Chapter one, "The Life and Works of Mildred Walker," offers an overview of this project. Chapter two, "A Working Definition of Modernism," offers readers an overview of modernism both as a term and as a movement. Chapter three, "The Aesthetics of

Modernism," concentrates on the specific aspects of Walker's literary style and experimentation. This chapter also explores her occasionally complex linguistic choices. It is noteworthy that her last works of adult fiction are the most heavily laden with references to literature and mythology, notably *If a Lion Could Talk* and *The Orange Tree*, both of which were produced after her nearly twenty years of teaching English.

In the chapters that follow, I approach modernism from a variety of perspectives: economical, historical, social, and technical. In chapter four, "The Economics of Modernism," the Marxist contention that capitalism flourishes in crisis and constant change is a point of departure for discussion because the characters' tension in many of Walker's novels is created by crises that result from economic change or the competition in a free market economy. Her characters' reactions to these economic forces shed light on her own interpretation of this volatile aspect of modern life. In this discussion I also consider the balance between aesthetic aspiration and economic need that faced modernist writers. Walker's pragmatism is discussed in light of critical essays on Henry James, T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and Ernest Hemingway. Ann Ardis's *New Women, New Novels: Feminism and Early Modernism* and Suzanne Clark's *Sentimental Modernism: Women Writers and the Revolution of the Word* inform the discussion in this chapter. Excerpts from some of the author's final journal entries are also read for her personal feelings before her death.

Chapter five, "Mildred Walker's Wars," follows a chronology of U.S. warfare in the latter part of the nineteenth century and through the twentieth century, as seen through her novels. Particular attention is given to feminist critics' discussions of noncombatants' roles in the discourse of war. Following this analysis I consider the New Woman and the evolution of the American family, surely two of Walker's favorite topics, in chapter 6, "The Mothers of Modernism." Even after the author vowed, "I won't write about the relations between men and women—husbands and wives—again," she could not resist