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Introduction

Still we call it Modernism, and this despite the anomaly of holding to such a name for an epoch fast receding into the cultural past. Not long after this volume is published, "Modernism" will be the name of a period in the beginning of a previous century, too distant even to serve as a figure for the grandparent. Uneasily but inevitably, we have reached a time when many feel the obsolescence of a movement still absurdly wearing such a brazen title. The temptation, much indulged in recent years, has been to dance beyond the reach of the aging, dying giant, to prove that one can live past the epoch marked by such names as Joyce and Woolf, Pound and Eliot, Eisenstein and Brecht, Freud and Marx. Certainly, many forces have joined to change the vectors of late twentieth-century culture. But our contemporary imperative to declare a new period and to declare ourselves citizens of a liberated postmodernism has badly distorted and sadly simplified the moment it means to surpass.

No one should be surprised by the distortions and simplifications of Modernism. Nor should anyone waste tears of sympathy on figures who themselves were more than willing to cut the shape of the past to suit present polemical purposes. And yet the task of rendering a fuller account is justified not only by the desire to provide richer, thicker narratives but also by a pressing need to clarify our own late-century, new-millennial position. A coarsely understood Modernism is at once an historical scandal and a contemporary disability.

Do we call for a return to Modernism? Certainly not, if this implies a nostalgic attempt to undo the last decades in order to share the dream of a movement that would never age and never end – but incontestably, if it means availing ourselves of the great timeliness of a revaluation. The influence of the first thirty years of the century over the next fifty was so great that the achievement of a distance from Modernism remains an event in contemporary culture. We are still learning how not to be Modernist, which is reason all the more to see what such an ambition could mean.

No clarification will be possible unless we who live at a moment of cultural skepticism are able to acknowledge the force of cultural conviction. When Gertrude Stein exploded stylistic propriety in order to release new rhythms in language, when Picasso painted primitive masks over the faces of his Demoiselles d'Avignon, when Antonin Artaud howled "No more masterpieces," when Woolf conjured a sister to Shakespeare, when Joyce trained himself to "scorch" the culture that nourished him, they all knew themselves to be engaged in forms of creative violence. For these figures the aim could never be simply to set the imagination free; it was rather first of all to challenge an unfreedom, the oppressions of journalism, of genteel audiences, of timid readers, of political and religious orthodoxy. So much of the story that these figures told themselves was a tale of tyranny and resistance. The name of the tyrant changed – the Editor, the Lady, the Public, the Banker, the Democrat – but whatever the scenario, the narrowness of the oppressor was seen amply to justify the violence of the art.

Much of this narrative was strategic, a means of rousing the will of the artist and of stimulating the useful anger of the public. We late-century historians can now see and show that the agon between revolutionary artist and benighted traditionalist was a caricature and that, as Lawrence Rainey argues below, high Modernist purpose was closely wound in the web of the commercial market. Rather than paint them as elite purists seeking a magic circle for the imagination, we can better see these artists as sharply conscious of their historical entanglements, their place within an epoch of accelerating social *modernization* that was always a challenge to a cultural Modernism.

Because its leading voices eagerly assumed not only the burden of making new artifacts, but also the responsibility for offering new justifications, the misunderstandings of Modernism began at the start, began with the ambition of writers and artists to set the terms by which they would be understood, where this often meant setting the terms by which others would not qualify for understanding. The circle of initiates was closed not only against the unwashed public, but also against rival artists who were excluded from the emerging narrative of Modernism triumphant. In the last twenty years this once dominant narrative has lost its power to control responses to the period, and we now have a dramatically enlarged perception of the range and reach of achievement. What once seemed the exclusive affair of "modern masters," the "men of 1914" (as Wyndham Lewis called them), now stands revealed as a complex of inventive gestures, daring performances, enacted also by many who were left out of account in the early histories of the epoch, histories offered first by the actors themselves and later produced within an academic discourse, willingly

guided by the precedents of the eminent artists. As Marianne DeKoven shows in her chapter, it is now deeply startling to realize how Stein's literary radicalism was omitted by the canonical narratives. And as Sara Blair securely demonstrates, the challenge of the Harlem Renaissance must belong to any account of Modernism with even modest aspirations to historical density.

No one should expect that our recession from these early century decades will allow the many varied performances to assume at last the crisp shape of unity. Nor should we regret the loss. Within the emerging historical revision there can still be found certain common devices and general preoccupations: the recurrent act of fragmenting unities (unities of character or plot or pictorial space or lyric form), the use of mythic paradigms, the refusal of norms of beauty, the willingness to make radical linguistic experiment, all often inspired by the resolve (in Eliot's phrase) to startle and disturb the public. Increasingly, though, attention has fallen upon a range of irreducibly local ambitions, highly particular projects not broadly shared but peculiar to a band of eager practitioners working in a sharply delimited field. The course of modern drama narrated here by Christopher Innes needs to be preserved in the specificity of its medium, as do the provocations of painting and cinema, described by Michael Wood and Glen MacLeod. As we acknowledge the full compass of the work, it will prove better to be minimalist in our definitions of that conveniently flaccid term *Modernist* and maximalist in our accounts of the diverse *modernizing* works and movements, which are sometimes deeply congruent with one another, and just as often opposed or even contradictory.

So much of the artistic passion of the period was stirred by questions of technique, where "technique" should not suggest attention to "form" as opposed to "content," but should imply rather the recognition that every element of the work is an instrument of its effect and therefore open to technical revision. Nothing was beyond the reach of technical concern: not the frame of a picture, not the shape of a stage, not the choice of a subject, not the status of a rhyme. If a new medium such as film was extravagantly bound up with problems of technique, so too was an ancient genre such as lyric poetry. And as David Trotter's chapter shows in great detail, novels of the period continually enacted strenuous negotiations between new formal strategies and the unprecedented social matter that they sought to absorb.

One of the notable effects of the regime of technique was precisely to bring attention to the close particularities of a specific genre. How long should a poem be? Could a still life rise off the surface of a painting? The general disposition – to radicalize the techniques of art – resolved into a rich multiplicity of different strategies, strongly localized experiments.

Despite a variety of efforts to bind the arts into a common cultural front, as in Pound's eagerness in 1914–15 to write poems somehow congruent with the experimental painting of Wyndham Lewis, the artistic results were most often short-lived and unpersuasive. The result is that the period 1890–1930 saw the sharply uneven development of the separate enterprises. Within prevailing narratives of English Modernism, the achievements in poetry and the novel between, say, 1914 and 1922 have been taken as the paradigm of modernist achievement. Useful as this view may be in comprehending the "men of 1914" – Pound, Eliot, Lewis, chief among them – it has become demonstrably inadequate to the enlarged domain. As Christopher Innes pointedly observes, such a paradigm has never been able to account for the development of twentieth-century drama. James Longenbach implicitly demonstrates that such a reading makes no better sense of the careers of Frost, Moore, or Stevens. Nor can it comprehend major episodes in painting and in film.

Crisis is inevitably the central term of art in discussions of this turbulent cultural moment. Overused as it has been, it still glows with justification. War! Strike! Women! The Irish! Or (within the popular press), Nihilism! Relativism! Fakery! This century had scarcely grown used to its own name, before it learned the twentieth would be the epoch of crisis, real and manufactured, physical and metaphysical, material and symbolic. The catastrophe of the First World War, and before that, the labor struggles, the emergence of feminism, the race for empire, these inescapable forces of turbulent social modernization were not simply looming on the outside as the destabilizing context of cultural Modernism; they penetrated the interior of artistic invention. They gave subjects to writers and painters, and they also gave forms, forms suggested by industrial machinery, or by the chuffing of cars, or even, most horribly, the bodies broken in the war.

If the social cataclysms left traces on modernist art, so did that art inform and to an extent *form* the conception of social life within historical crisis. Along with the massive intellectual challenge offered by Marx and Nietzsche, Freud and Frazer, Heidegger and Wittgenstein, chronicled in Michael Bell's chapter, the new art of film changed habits of perception, and the experiments enacted within the older arts of painting, poetry, drama, and novel incited the consciousness of breakdown.

Yet if the milieu of crisis incontestably affected the spirits of artists, who like others in their generation sometimes succumbed to great personal demoralization, it would be a mistake to paint these decades in unending shades of gray. Was modern civilization all a "Heart of Darkness?" Was it an arid "Waste Land?" True enough, figures of nihilism, of degeneration

and despair, circulate quickly both in the work and in the responses to the work. The loss of faith, the groundlessness of value, the violence of war, and a nameless, faceless anxiety – no one is likely be surprised by such a list of disturbances, at once individual and social. But here we come to a further complex effect of the passion for technique. Not only did it solicit attention to the close particulars of a genre at a given historical moment; it also opened a field of action, a theatre of conviction, within the wider social failure.

It is fair, and indeed important, to preserve memory of an alienation, an uncanny sense of moral bottomlessness, a political anxiety. There was so much to doubt: the foundations of religion and ethics, the integrity of governments and selves, the survival of a redemptive culture. But if the fate of the West seemed uncertain and shadowy, the struggles with the metrical scheme of lyric poetry or the pictorial space of a cubist painting could seem bracingly crisp. Shining luminously from so much of the work is the happiness of concentrated purpose and the pride of the cultural laborer, believing fully in the artistic task at hand.

Only a decade or two after Oscar Wilde's witty campaign against earnestness, these early century Modernists are distinguished precisely by the earnestness of their resolve. A deep, sometimes even dour, seriousness allowed many fragile personalities to carry on through private hardship. And if there is one temperamental difference sharply separating our late-century selves and our early century progenitors, it may be our own instinctive distance from the belief that the publication of a poem or the exhibition of a painting can so triumphantly confirm the creator and so decisively serve the culture. Among these Modernists were many connoisseurs of irony, but the irony was characteristically in the service of high-minded conviction that became still more explicit – more politically strenuous, more religiously ambitious – as the movement wore on.

What is so distinctive about such occasions of high conviction is how rarely they belonged either to solitary figures capable of pleasing themselves or to those who enjoyed comfortable relations with the wider public. The will to live out the risks of technical experiment – and the celebrity achieved later in the century should not obscure the extent of the risk – was characteristically nourished within small groups of mutually confirming artists, able to defend one another against neglect, incomprehension or often biting critique. The circles forming around Stein, Woolf, Pound, and DuBois, the collaborations of Picasso and Braque or Ford and Conrad, the trooping together of Dadaists and Surrealists were as much the condition of what we call Modernism as any set of formal gestures. In January 1923 Woolf filled pages of her diary with an account of a Bloomsbury party the

evening before, which in her heightened presentation comes to seem an emblem of her cultural position, even an allegory of her modernity.

> Suppose one's normal pulse to be 70: in five minutes it was 120: & the blood, not the sticky whitish fluid of daytime, but brilliant & prickling like champagne. This was my state, & most peoples. We collided, when we met: went pop, used Christian names, flattered, praised, & thought (or I did) of Shakespeare . . . We were all easy & gifted & friendly & like good children rewarded by having the capacity for enjoying ourselves thus. Could our fathers? . . . There is something indescribably congenial to me in this easy artists talk; the values the same as my own & therefore right; no impediments; life charming, good & interesting; no effort; art brooding calmly over it all.[1]

Woolf would write in other tones about many other evenings, but this passage speaks eloquently to the positive conditions of a Modernism of small social cells, nourished on the pleasures and powers of comradeship. In light of this description, and countless other such passages, we can speak of the micro-sociology of modernist innovation, within which small groups of artists were able to sustain their resolve – or more than sustain, able to create small flourishing communities based on the powers of reciprocal acknowledgment. Whether the opponent took on the aspect of the outraged traditionalist or the bored and inattentive distraction-seeker, the regular presence of the collaborator, or the group, was often enough to keep the will to cultural insurrection alive. Within this context the idea of a "party" takes on an important double signification: as a festivity and also as a cadre of insurrectionists. At such happy moments as this evening of 1923, the two senses combine, and it was possible to experience keen enjoyment while feeling that an advance was being made against the empire of those "fathers," who never could enjoy themselves and whose moralism blocked the flow of artists' talk.

Through the early decades of modernist experiment, the mix of skepticism and ardor – skepticism about the destiny of the species, ardor for the latest innovation in a brush stroke or a rhyme scheme – might well have led to the state of affairs familiar in recent caricatures of Modernism: the proud political abstention of those who sought perfection of the work at the expense of social engagement, who curled inside the "autonomy" of art, safe from the historical instability towards which they remained cool, indifferent, fastidious. We need not doubt the lure of abstention or the siren call of autonomy, but the more complete our historical recovery and the less constrained by polemical need, the clearer it is that the late, sometimes infamous, political turns were prepared during times of apparent social

indifference. Pound's *Jefferson and/or Mussolini* and Picasso's *Guernica* are radically different works, but both strong political statements grew out of earlier aggressions performed within the politics of culture. The efforts to slay the authority of George Eliot or poetic rhetoric or the conventions of pictorial realism were a preparation for the often bombastic social politics of late Modernism.

Pound's bellowing cry, "I want a new civilization," was more peremptory than others and more unfortunate in its effects, but it was hardly a lone demand for the extension of formal concentration into the broadest realms of politics. The challenge from the Left, from workers' parties within European democracies and from the example of the Russian revolution, and the challenge from the Right, from Action Française to the rise of fascism, squeezed liberal moderation and the moderate forms of art that nourished it.

The generation of artists who had created so much turbulence in their own and the century's youth reached late middle age when the whole world began to shudder. By the late twenties and the thirties, a host of new reputations had been secured. And whether or not it was due to the triumph of cultural vindication, those who had stood in artistic alliance had nearly all separated. From the position of proud isolation, they encountered the miserable years of the century.

How could the many Modernisms ever have aged gracefully? It is not simply that the young had to grow older and that revolutionary fervor was likely to fade, but also that special historical torsions placed so much strain on ambitious careers. Did Picasso play the art market with integrity-weakening cynicism? Was Pound right in saying that his cantos were "a botch," and was fascism the botching agent? Was Woolf's feminism ensnared within a deep class snobbery? Did Eliot's anti-Semitism reach down to the roots of his poetry? A movement committed to the rejuvenation of art exposed its own weaknesses as it grew older. Partly this was due to uglinesses of character that are not to be thought away, and partly it was due to the pressures of an ugly age.

As the grand artistic achievements have grown encrusted with cliché, the inescapable failings of an aging and increasingly divided Modernism – sometimes moral failings, sometimes aesthetic – have understandably encouraged the desire to consign those decades to a closed past. Certainly, whether we desire it or not, a new age is where we must live. But the long span of Modernism, longer now than ever, is a serious test of our own historical character. It is so tempting to make the many Modernisms into one thing, and then to place that one thing into a single chapter within a tidy narrative.

A *Companion* cannot be a friend to everyone. It cannot invite all achievement to the table; and ambitious though this volume is, it must perform resolute acts of exclusion in order to begin speaking at all. The strong central emphasis falls upon Anglo-American Modernism from the last decade of the nineteenth century up to the beginning of the Second World War. But this act of attention aims to be a focus not a prison. My own keen hope is that the following chapters will encourage an eye for new distinctions that will free the reader from the sight of any dull monolith in these originary decades and will make it possible for those of widely different tastes and temperaments to recognize the profusion within which there is ample room for reverence and resistance.

NOTES

1 *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, vol. II, 1920–4, ed. Anne Olivier Bell (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978), pp. 223–4.

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