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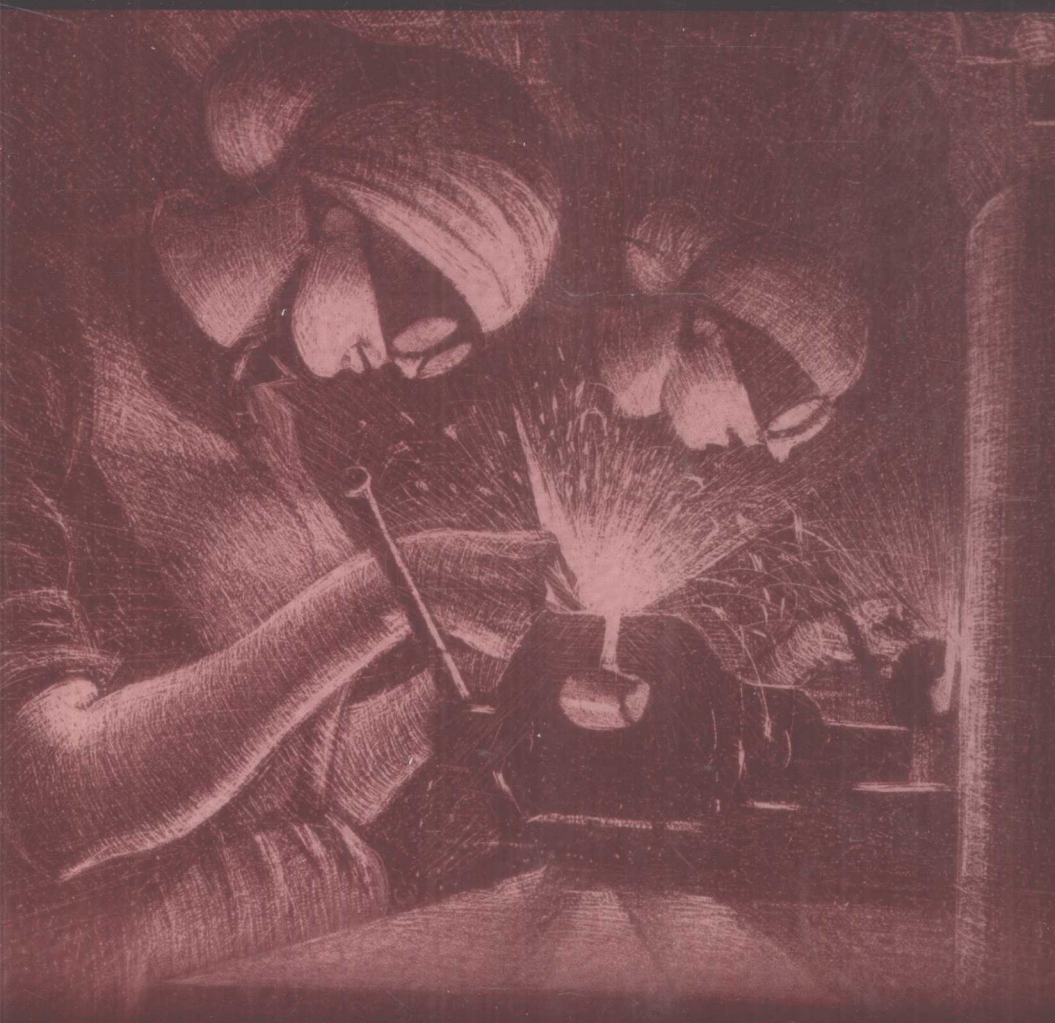

Modernism

Edited by Michael H. Whitworth

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Blackwell Guides to Criticism

Editor Michael O'Neill

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Note on the Texts

While I have tried as far as possible to present continuous arguments, most of the texts included here have had sections removed. Moreover, discursive footnotes have been reduced or removed. Readers are advised to consult the original texts for full information.

Contents

Part I

Introduction

According to some critics, this book should not exist: it concerns a wholly illusory topic. The argument has been put most forcefully by Perry Anderson:

> Modernism as a notion is the emptiest of all cultural categories. Unlike the terms Gothic, Renaissance, Baroque, Mannerist, Romantic, or Neo-Classical, it designates no describable object in its own right: it is completely lacking in positive content. In fact, [...] what is concealed beneath the label is a wide variety of very diverse – indeed incompatible – aesthetic practices: symbolism, constructivism, expressionism, surrealism. These, which do spell out specific programmes, were unified post hoc in a portmanteau concept whose only referent is the blank passage of time itself. There is no other aesthetic marker so vacant or vitiated. For what once was modern is soon obsolete. The futility of the term, and its attendant ideology, can be seen all too clearly from current attempts to cling to its wreckage and yet swim with the tide still further beyond it, in the coinage 'post-modernism': one void chasing another in a serial regression of self-congratulatory chronology.[1]

There are several respects in which this criticism is true, but there are also good reasons, as Anderson himself recognises, for continuing to use the term 'modernism' as one of a set of mutually dependent concepts. Though the movements that are commonly grouped under the term were diverse in their practices, and though the underlying justifications for those practices often draw on incompatible ideas about art, psychology, and society, a fragile unity may be found in the idea that all of them respond to a shared set of social and ideological conditions. 'Modernism' is not so much a thing as a set of responses to problems posed by the conditions of modernity. The recognition that modernism and modernity are related but not identical is crucial to most recent work in the area. At one time it was possible to write of there being 'two modernities', one being the modernity of technology and social life, and the other being aesthetic modernity;[2] more recently, critics have used 'modernism' for the second

of these, reserving 'modernity' for the social and ideological context. 'Social and ideological context' requires more careful definition: for some critics, the city and the comfort of modern life are at the forefront; for others, the dominance of 'instrumental reason', an inflexible form of rationality which threatens to enslave us; for others, historical events such as the First World War or the holocaust are more significant. Exactly which factors are included within modernity, and the relative importance of each, is something over which there is little critical agreement, and is one reason for the diversity in the accounts of modernism found in the present collection.

Part I of this guide aims to introduce modernism by surveying how 'modernist' writers understood their own newness and their relation to their social context. (The extent to which the labels 'modernist' and 'modernism' are anachronistic is something to which we shall return.) Many of the critical questions that have come to dominate later criticism have their roots in the modernists' self-conception. However, modernist writers articulated these questions in a vocabulary that now seems unfamiliar. In some cases, the questions were half-buried, implicit in other aspects of their work. Part I begins by outlining eight major problems posed by modernity, in the light of which the stylistic experiments and formal difficulties of modernist texts become more significant. The following section defines modernism in terms of twelve visible features of modernist texts. Such definitions can be restrictive, and in the past have had the effect of excluding some 'modern' works from the 'modernist' canon, but they have the advantage of connecting directly to textual evidence. When the visible features are set in the perspective offered by the underlying problems, the qualities of modernist texts acquire an interest that is historical as well as aesthetic.

As Perry Anderson's remarks make clear, 'modernism' is a fragile category. The section on the Victorians asks to what extent they differed from the modernists, while the next section, 'Modernist Self-Construction', examines the ways in which modernists sought to emphasise their difference. One of their methods was to set out a clear aesthetic programme through manifestos, reviews, and essays. These texts form the beginning of the critical tradition on modernism, though their emphasis on technique also sets them apart from more recent literary criticism. As the critical tradition developed, the terms 'modernist' and 'modernism' began to dominate, and their emergence is traced in the following section. The penultimate section in Part I examines the construction of modernism by the most significant critical school of the mid-twentieth century, The New Criticism; the final section briefly surveys later developments.

Although this guide frequently questions the definition of 'modernism', the selection of texts proceeds from a working definition: this guide concentrates on English-language writers active from 1910 to 1939. The chronological limits of modernism are questioned, however. In Part I the section on the Victorian questions the starting date of modernism, while in Part II the chapter on

'Late Modernism' reconsiders its terminal date. The concentration on English-language writers means that this guide does not address the full geographical range of European modernism. In consequence, Expressionism and Surrealism play a smaller part than they would in a work oriented towards continental Europe. However, the critical works gathered in Part II draw on a wide range of European, and particularly German-language, theorisations of modernism, and are thus relevant to readers with a linguistically wider range of interests.

Part II of the guide aims to introduce eight main debates surrounding literary modernism. It examines the relation of modernism to earlier movements and modes of writing, such as Romanticism, symbolism, and realism, and its relation to contemporaneous cultural formations, particularly the avant-garde and popular culture; it examines modernism's relation to the city, not simply as subject matter, but as an influence on the form of modern consciousness and modernist writing; it examines modernism's relation to questions of gender, both in the chapter on 'Regendering Modernism', and in the chapters on the Culture Industry and the City; it examines factors that affected the publication of modernist texts; and it asks how critics have approached variants of modernism that have flourished beyond its conventional chronological limits. Though Part II begins with one of the earliest pieces (dating from 1957) and concludes with one of the most recent (from 2005), the sequence is not a narrative of progress: many of the earliest debates continue to inform current work, albeit in transformed guises. The earliest piece in Part II, 'The Metropolis and Mental Life' (1903), predates many of the classic works of modernism, but has much in common with Marxist-influenced criticism from the late twentieth century.

Defining modernism need not mean laying finite limits to it, either in terms of a canon or a period. A more subtle definition defines not the material, but the processes that produced it: processes involving reactions to modernity that were sometimes aggressive, sometimes defensive, sometimes ambivalent. Such a definition is productive rather than restrictive, flexible rather than rigid, and capable of developing as it encounters new material.

Not Definitions, but Questions

In a valuable overview essay, Richard Sheppard has suggested that critics trying to understand modernism have adopted three main strategies. The first consists of trying to define key features of modernism, and it may be subdivided into attempts to define a modernist worldview, such as nihilism or authoritarianism, and attempts to define formal features of modernist works, such as the use of myth or of metaphor. The second approach tries to place modernism in 'a one-dimensional historical, literary-historical, or sociological context'. For example, it might try, in the historical dimension, to understand modernism as

a product of the First World War, in the literary-historical dimension to understand the continuities or discontinuities between modernism and Romanticism, or in the sociological dimension, to understand it as a result of the 'megalopolitan experience'. The third approach is also contextual, and could validly employ the language of cause and effect (e.g. of the 'products' and 'results' of historical moments), but in doing so attributes a more active role to modernist writing. Modernism's response to its historical context is to try to understand it. Sheppard, summarising Fredric Jameson, says that modernist works 'are not just reflexes, transcriptions or symptoms of a profound cultural upheaval, but, *simultaneously*, responses through which the authors of those works try to pictorialise their understanding and so make sense of that upheaval'.[3]

The three approaches are not mutually exclusive – Sheppard notes that the second is often a development of the first – and more than one will often co-exist in a single piece of criticism. Sheppard offers the third as the most refined and subtle, but the other two approaches need not be rejected; rather, they should be subsumed into the third. A theory of modernism that could not make reference to the formal features of the work would be an impoverished one. However, a theory which comprehends the relation between those formal features and the deeper cultural upheaval is richer than a theory which acknowledges both aspects without relating them.

As an approach to the question of how English-language modernist writers understood and constructed their identities, I would like to suggest eight fundamental problems that motivated them to become modernist. For the sake of clarity, these problems are best posed as questions, but this should not be taken to imply that the writers were fully conscious of them. Moreover, some questions are most easily and clearly posed in terminology that was not available to the writers in question. In saying that these problems 'motivated' them to become modernist, I wish to imply that the problems gave them an incentive for developments in that direction, without implying a strictly deterministic logic; there were other factors impelling them. These fundamental problems become particularly valuable once we understand their relation to the immediately visible aspects of modernist texts.

(1) How can we justify art in a world dominated by commerce, quantification, and instrumental rationality? No modernist would have put the question in exactly this way, because 'instrumental reason' is a phrase indebted to Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944, tr. 1972). However, at least as early as 1922, writers were characterising their age as 'the machine age', and by the 1930s they were talking of the relation of the poet to the age of 'big business'. The centrality of this question explains why the philosophy of Henri Bergson was so attractive to some modernists, because it seemed to vindicate qualitative knowledge in a world of quantification. Another way of posing

this question (to which my formula is indebted) is that of Andrew Brighton, who proposes that the 'inaugurating problem' of modernism is 'the issue of the status and possibility of imaginative and ethical consciousness in a culture dominated by modern rationality'.[4] Brighton's distinction of imaginative, ethical, and 'modern' rationality echoes Max Weber's argument that reason had become divided into the spheres of art, morality, and science, and in this light 'imaginative and ethical consciousness' should be understood as two distinct forms of knowledge. However, Brighton's coupling of the two terms raises the additional problem of whether imaginative consciousness is possible without its ethical complement, and vice versa. This too, it must be said, was a pressing question for modernist writers and critics, and one that appeared most explicitly in the debate between T. S. Eliot and I. A. Richards over whether it was possible to achieve 'a complete severance' between poetry and '*all* beliefs',[5] and again in the 1930s in debates over the relation of politics and literature.

(2) What model of the self is adequate to modern life? There are two aspects to this question. One asks what model of the self can accommodate scientific discoveries about human beings, primarily Darwin's recognition that humans are descended from apes, and the claims of psychologists and psychoanalysts about the more primitive aspects of the brain and the psyche. The other aspect is concerned with the experience of modernity, but – explicitly in Georg Simmel's essay in Part II – it overlaps with psychological questions about perception and cognition. The modern self is overwhelmed with sensations: the city is full of signs drawn from various codes, and full of fast and unpredictable movement. The question about the self is also a question about competing forms of knowledge. A self fully in touch with sense data does not have the capacity to reflect on what it perceives; a self that attempts to think about that sense data filters it, and so becomes detached from the empirical world. T. S. Eliot's phrase 'We had the experience but missed the meaning' ('The Dry Salvages', part II) gestures towards this idea, though in that poem Eliot is more optimistic than some about the possibility of uniting meaning and experience. Importantly, the question motivates the production of new modernist styles that attempt to place the reader in a characteristically modern subject position. Joseph Conrad's impressionistic style is one of the earliest forms: Conrad subjects the reader to a process of 'delayed decoding',[6] in which sense-impressions are reported before the described object is given its conventional name. The reader is made to feel the different competencies (and inadequacies) of each form of knowledge.

(3) What is the relation of an art-work to its creator? Should a poem express its author's feelings? If we allow a text to be non-expressive, and *impersonal*, does that mean that it is no longer *individual*? While many modernist writers were willing to accept that a text should be impersonal, the possibility of authorship becoming deindividualised was rather more threatening, as it implied a wholly mechanical process disturbingly consonant with the values of commerce and