

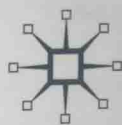
before modernism was
modern history and the
constituency of writing



GEOFF GILBERT

LANGUAGE, DISCOURSE, SOCIETY

Editors: Stephen Heath, Colin MacCabe and Denise Riley

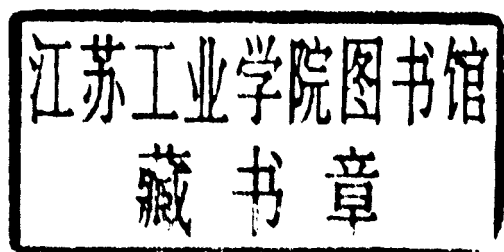


Before Modernism Was

Modern History and the Constituency of Writing

Geoff Gilbert

The American University of Paris



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Preface: Things That Matter

All that is 'advanced' moves backwards, now, towards that impossible goal, of the pre-war dawn.

Wyndham Lewis.¹

Modernism is most fully itself *before modernism was*: my book will be an elaboration on the terms of this sentence. The notion of the 'before' is a strange one in English, divided between indicating a spatial extension – what lies before us, a prospect; and a position in a temporal sequence – what came before, an antecedence. The meanings are distinct, but in practice they interfere with one another. When we stand before what lies before us, our spatial position is fringed with a temporal affect, an anticipation, anxiety, impatience, desire, dread. We find ourselves within an imagined sequence, temporally and affectively *before*. The sequence is only imagined: we can baulk at our prospects, turn away from them with regret or relief. But something will come: in that sense the presence of the spatial 'before' in our experience of time is an abstract one, which will fade in the face of the insistent concretion of temporal sequence. But the rising and fading of imagined prospects is part of the constituting texture of historical reality, and, more particularly, of the constituency – the urgent social thickness of desire and anticipation and frustration that lies beside historical narrative – of modernism.

This will not be an essay on temporality: when Sigmund Freud and Henri Bergson, two of the great modern theorists of memory and time, appear in the argument, they appear surprised by their excitement at war, and smoking cigars. The 'beforeness' of modernism will be explored in its affective immediacy, as it is given to us in a writing that is charged with project, and as it appears to us now, desirous and incomplete readers.² That is, the question of 'before' is a question of constituency: it depends upon the matter which makes up writing, and the arrangement of persons who are imagined to surround it. Mine is an historical book: the prospects that open up spatially before modernism, and the contexts which exist temporally before modernism, are historical prospects and historical contexts; they are surveyed and populated, in my account, by dogs and diseases and Poles and cigarettes and houses

and ghosts and juvenile delinquents. These figures are located in space and in time: the spaces are organised, for the most part, around Britain; the time is the early decades of the twentieth century. Each of the figures has its fate, and those fates play out in historical sequences which are finished now; about which we can do nothing. What lay before them is now past. But the history which is appropriate to modernism, I will be arguing, cannot settle in this form: the urgencies we look for urgently in modernism demand a different shaping of history.

As Wyndham Lewis, the complex and troubling modernist writer and painter who will provide one recurring point of reference for my narrative,³ put it, looking back in the 1930s at the practical failure of modernism:

We are not only 'the last men of an epoch' (as Mr. Edmund Wilson and others have said): we are more than that, or we are that in a different way to what is most often asserted. *We are the first men of a future that has not materialized.* We belong to a 'great age' that has not 'come off'. [. . .] The rear guard presses forward, it is true. The doughty Hervert (he of 'Unit One') advances towards 1914, for all that is 'advanced' moves backwards, now, towards that impossible goal, of the pre-war dawn.⁴

Prospect is in the past, but it persists in the present as an affective if ineffectual project, driving history out of sequential shape. This history begins 'before' modernism, in the contexts to which experimental writing reacted and accommodated itself.

Modernism, my book will argue, is already there in the affective moment of its context. An example: in 1912, Leo George Chiozza Money, the liberal political economist, published a book called *Things That Matter*.⁵ The subjects he discusses are recognisably important, both for historians in their attempts to understand the early twentieth century, and in their persistence as features of our contemporary world. Across analyses of education, franchise reform, unemployment, wages, and trade, he notes again and again how difficult it is to conceive of individual or collective agencies that could transform the world. The world he describes is heavy with mediation, composed of such a mass of confusing and contingent stuff that understanding and knowledge are both especially difficult to arrive at and, more importantly, irrelevant in directing us towards transformative actions.

For Chiozza Money, history has become heavy, and difficult to grasp or to transform; at the same time, the objects in which our

relations to the world are concentrated have become flimsy and thin. In one chapter of the book, 'Our Chief Industry', he describes the dominance of 'rubbish' in a culture of over-production, in a world in which 'industry' has ceased to be a human attribute, and become a mediating institution.⁶ Led by representations of what an ideal domestic life should look like, furnished fully with a growing number of necessary luxuries, much of our world has been cheaply and insubstantially made. The objects we produce, the intimate things that make up the fabric of our lives, extending us into the world and giving back to us a sense of being at home there, are increasingly – insultingly – unsatisfying:

The poor man buys not a few good articles, but many pieces of rubbish. Instead of putting solid stuff into one comfortable room, he must pay respect to the 'drawing room' with which a thoughtful rubbish builder has provided him. The conventional rubbish house calls for conventional rubbish 'suites', for rubbish pictures in rubbish frames, and for rubbish ornaments. And what is a rubbish home without a rubbish piano?⁷

The hatred of badly made things is a recognisable period concern, and it echoes the terms of writers as disparate as Ezra Pound, Roger Fry, G. K. Chesterton, and H. G. Wells, whose various modernisms, medievalisms, and fabianisms focus on the need to materialise human belonging in the world in satisfying and well-made domestic objects. Chiozza Money's statement could also be read alongside the desire, expressed by Willa Cather and by Wyndham Lewis, to get rid of the clutter that is blocking potential formal creativities in fiction and in modern lives.⁸ For Chiozza Money, this proliferating rubbish is shoddy physical evidence of a disastrous mediation of social relations by ungovernable economic and historical processes; the very signs of the lives we have, together, built for ourselves, warp and split, such that we cannot read or restore the conditions in which we exist.

Rather than focusing on modernism's attempts to build against this flow of rubbish, to rebuild the sign; and rather than reading modernism as part of an historical fabric which rips and tears towards a new aesthetic,⁹ what I want to take from Chiozza Money's book is encoded in the animus of the writing. His is a book which does not lead easily towards the existing institutions of knowledge, for it accepts that knowing does not lead towards agency; that grasping and understand-

ing the problem still leaves us helpless, unable to intervene formatively in the world. The rising stylistic energy of Chiozza Money's work registers the state of being blocked and irritated, of having nowhere plausible to turn. This is the energy and tone that my book will be tracing, in its attempt to register the presence of a modernism, before modernism was. This modernism is manifest not in the reparative drive towards an 'art' which will rebuild our world such that we can live there, nor as the exhilarating discovery of new formal possibilities within alienated fragments, but as another mode in which writing can do its work within modern history.

The figures of flimsiness are animated in *Things That Matter* by an appeal for constituency. It is this appeal, an urgent call out to a constituency of similarly blocked and damaged persons, that marks its historicity, or what I will be referring to simply, for modernism, as an engagement with modern history. As I have suggested, the book is recognisable to a reader today, for nothing but details have changed since it was written. The 'things that matter' to Chiozza Money are 'things that matter' equally to us now. In that sense, the book is negligible, for it made nothing happen: the weighty mediation it railed against proved properly impervious. But a reader of *Things That Matter* today will, I think, find herself experiencing an affect of longing, as well as a consolidated and potentially depressing recognition. For Chiozza Money's tone is filled with a frustrated hope that is foreign now for us: while he describes a world which resists critical knowledge and excludes transformative intervention, he fails to disguise his belief in alternative social relations. The book is subtitled 'Papers upon Subjects which are, or Ought to be, Under Discussion'. The heavy institutional passive voice of 'Subjects which are Under Discussion' reassures the reader, or alternatively dismisses him, with the claim that there is a committee of qualified individuals, a government or a royal society, which is dealing with these problems in his name. But that voice is doubled by a groundless parenthetical prescription – 'ought to be' – which is still searching for its constituency. To read this today is to be forced in retrospect to recognise that the constituency was not found, did not materialise; but at the same time it is to hear an appeal towards an open future. The energy in Chiozza Money's writing could not turn prescription into action, but it does persist in the affect of our reading, and that persistence gives history a different shape.

Robert Musil, in *The Man Without Qualities*, names this implausible persistence, a way of living and writing in relation to a prospect that does not obey the laws of the world, as 'the sense of possibility':

To pass freely through open doors, it is necessary to respect the fact that they have solid frames. This principle [. . .] is simply a requisite of the sense of reality. But if there is a sense of reality, and no one will doubt that it has its justification for existing, then there must also be something we can call a sense of possibility.¹⁰

This sense of possibility is tied to the counterfactual, to things which are fated not to happen.¹¹ But the relation between things which happen and those which do not, far from being a stable opposition, is complex enough to drive Musil's enormous novel. His elaboration of this relation, and his development of a narrative mode in which to express it, marked him, for Georg Lukács, as a modernist of the worst kind, as refusing to participate in the social project of constructing reality.¹² For Lukács, that shirking of engagement with the world, a privileging of 'abstract' over 'concrete' possibilities, is part of the 'ideology' of modernism, in which an absolute withdrawal from historical process and social relation is encoded. Musil, as if in response, stresses how fully embedded the sense of possibility can be in the social fabric of living:

the possible includes not only the fantasies of people with weak nerves but also the as yet unawakened intentions of God. A possible experience of truth is not the same as an actual experience of truth minus its 'reality value' but has – according to its partisans, at least – something quite divine about it, a fire, a soaring, a readiness to build and a conscious utopianism that does not shrink from reality but sees it as a project, something yet to be invented. After all, the earth is not that old, and was apparently never so ready as now to give birth to its full potential.¹³

There is heavy irony in this conjuring of a divine 'now', bursting unsatisfactory doorframes with its utopian futures. Musil's text will shuttle between an ironic instancing of the pathology of possibility, which leads to isolation and empty dreaming, and a writing which has faith in the capacity to invest the matter of our world with project. There are tunes to play on our rubbish pianos.

A modernism read within a history that we do not invest with this sense of possibility is worthless; to consolidate modernism as part of 'reality' is to betray it. This poses problems for a book such as my own, which

aims, as many others have done, to place modernism within modern history. Chapters 1 and 2 will provide figures for modern history, in the forms, respectively, of the ghost in the empty house, and the juvenile delinquent. Here, as a first step in constructing a history which does not subordinate the sense of possibility to the sequences of reality, I want to reconsider the historicity of the term 'modernism'. The idea that modernism 'was', that in retrospect it can be placed stably in a narrative of the past, needs to be inflected by some of the resonance of prospect, of what lies before modernism as its condition in possibility. What lies before modernism spatially, the prospect of a possible world, is also part of modernism's temporal and social condition. Our assured employment, within the literary academy, of the word 'modernism', obscures this condition.

The problem with 'modernism' is that it does not mean very strongly. The term does not have the focus or the force definitively to include or to exclude any particular evidence, on either formal or historical grounds. This has led to critics multiplying and dividing modernism into modernisms, in an attempt to find something stable there.¹⁴ But that search for a solid and material starting point is doomed to failure: the only history that 'modernism' has is an institutional history. This would not matter if the institutional history of 'modernism' in the Anglo-American academy had arrived at an internal coherence. But of course it has not: no single discourse explains why Gertrude Stein and Wyndham Lewis and André Gide, for example, should ever have been comprehended within one single mental breath, certainly not one with enough force to blow away the substantial presence of, say, G. K. Chesterton. And this in turn might not matter if the loose and contingent arrangement of texts and historical moments with which the discourse on modernism operates were widely shared. But no bookstore outside a university would shelve the texts of modernism together; no reader innocent of university study of modernism would read Virginia Woolf and Ezra Pound for the same reasons.

Most of the other terms of literary study and literary periodisation are also heuristic and contingent, of course: 'the enlightenment', or 'romanticism', or 'realism', are all internally divided across a struggle to organise and to arrange materials which are to some extent recalcitrant. But the debates in each of these cases have at least some clear sense of purpose: we know that when we debate the terms of 'enlightenment', we engage arguments that have shaped, and continue to inform, the justification for uses of force in international politics, for example. When we consider the romantics, we might balance responsibilities to

the wide usage of the term with an investigation of the ways in which modern subjectivity has been configured. Or when we talk about the values and limits of 'realism', we are defining and critiquing a shared and social project of representing the 'reality' of a world in which we work and belong. Each of these terms has three-fold solidity: they each signal an established and coherent discourse, an object that is shared beyond the academy, and a sense of purpose that is widely recognised.¹⁵ 'Modernism' has none of this weight: it is flimsy, 'rubbish', because there has not been and can not be a plausible investment in its social fabric. When we use the term, we are in danger of appearing as dodgy salespersons, reassuring a sceptical customer.

It is easy to undermine the assurance of the Anglo-American institutions of modernism. There is a telling moment when Michel Foucault was asked where he places himself, in relation to 'modernism' and 'post-modernism'. He replied as follows:

I must say, I find that difficult to answer. First, because I never really understood how modernism is defined in France. It's clear by Baudelaire, but after that it seems to lose meaning for me. I don't know in what sense Germans speak of modernism. I know that Americans are planning a kind of seminar with Habermas and me and Habermas proposed modernism as a topic. I'm at a loss; I don't know what that means or what the problematic is.¹⁶

Foucault's candour, however disingenuous it may be, produces, in me at least, a shudder or a frisson of embarrassed recognition. He feels in relation to 'modernism' an unsettlement, leaving him at a loss in the face of an unholy aggregation of Baudelaire, German philosophers, and the odd American celebrity event that he can only refer to as 'a kind of seminar'. It is hard to deny that this is more or less what has held 'modernism' together; and the contingencies within this arrangement can only be finessed away by a hardening of institutional assurance.

The isolation and incoherence and lack of project signalled by 'modernism' ought to be much more embarrassing than it currently is. Because 'modernism' does not have a formal unity or an historical drive, it has to be constituted afresh in the present, in the enunciation 'I am a modernist', uttered either by academics pledging a kind of allegiance to the institution (when responding to advertisements for university jobs, for example), or in secret dedication to dead writers' long-lost causes. That enunciation, while it shares something of the form of other rallying enunciations, such as 'I am a socialist', or 'I am a feminist', or

perhaps even 'I am queer', is unlikely to provoke either coherent solidarity or coherent opposition. Outside its institutional function, it is a project that is empty enough, ethically and conceptually, to become a puzzling poetics or to signal pathology.

It is hardly surprising that the embarrassing constitution of modernism – a mixture of longing and melancholy and narcissism – should go hand in hand with an institutional retreat. The technicalities of practical criticism, new criticism, or textual post-structuralism, all of which are imbricated with moments of the enunciation 'I am a modernist', offer an intense if isolated structured labour, which helps to distract from the gap where modernism ought to be. The constitutional and the institutional energies that are gathered around modernism are radically opposed to one another; the invested subjunctive desire that modernism be is undermined by the assurance that it really is (in academic discourse) or that it really was (in historical sequence). Assurance works to contain embarrassment, hardening against it and denying its productivity, or at least its potential communication (there is nothing so contagious as embarrassment). That denial removes discourses of modernism from their relation to modern history, constituted as a history of possibility.

I have situated this embarrassment within contemporary academic discourses about modernism. But it is not entirely possible to separate the institutional from the constitutional moments of modernism, for the turn from embarrassed sense of project towards institutional consolidation exists as much within the object of modernist discourses, within the trajectories of most of the writers and groups that habitually are named 'modernist', as it does within academic discourses themselves. To take one central example, to which I will return in Chapter 3: when T. S. Eliot, who was, incidentally, very susceptible to blushing, formalises the project of his journal *The Criterion*, the two moments, of constitution and institution, are almost simultaneous. His 1923 obituary of Marie Lloyd describes a melancholy space where the music hall had been.¹⁷ A vivid relation, a creative public interaction, between working people and the arts has been lost with her passing; culture is dying, for Eliot, as cultures die under colonisation. The image of a large working-class public, creative in their relation to their entertainments, noisy and vital, appears to signal an urgent project for the writers he will gather together in his journal. But what Eliot proposes is not the reconstruction or the reinforcement of threatened social relations: in his critical writings he does not imagine a world which is brought alive across a shared reading of *The Waste Land* or *Ulysses*. Rather, his

response, later in the same year, in 'The Function of Criticism', is an institutional displacement of the whole problem. He promises, and places himself at the centre of, a policeable institution of criticism: 'a simple and orderly field of beneficent activity, from which impostors can be readily ejected'.¹⁸ Eliot begins with a sense of loss, which he shares with a disenchanted public; he imagines for a second modernism as reparative social relation, and this brings great crowds of happier people briefly flashing into Eliot's thought. This is an embarrassing dream, and it is quickly replaced by the plausible prehistory of a discourse on modernism, impostors ejected, order established.

There is nothing necessarily progressive in returning to the productive embarrassment of the modernist constitution. The social arrangements which appear for a moment there, thickening the fabric of our desire for modernism, are not predestined to channel only the energies which would please this reader. In Eliot's discarded image of a popular cultural fusion, we can perhaps also sense hints of a nascent Fascism, and the Anglican Church, and even of *Cats*. When, in Chapter 4, I turn to the figure of the modernist dog, the social prospect which appears is a wild mixture of anarchic violence and national isolation. Or, in Chapter 5, while what is constituted around the practice of smoking may resist the deep determination of the human subject by historical sequence, at the same time it condemns the smoker to personal pathology, and leaves him vulnerable to control by Philip Morris, and the newer configurations of global economic power. The project of modernism is not an ethical project. There are good reasons to turn away from the embarrassments of constitution and towards the institution and its ordered discourses.¹⁹

The stable object which we can call 'modernism' is formed, in moments like Eliot's, as the object of a quasi-institutional discourse that has turned away from a vision of constituency. Modernism enters a history governed by distinctions and structures, by doorframes – however much we may sense that they are rubbish doorframes – and the sense of reality that accompanies them. But the point of modernism, modernism itself as a pattern of subjunctive desire, has been masked: there is only a trace within this discourse of the urgent groping towards a constituency of possibility that spreads out affectively before Eliot. That constituency of possibility is what we are in search of, I wager, when we read the works which we call, incoherently, modernism, and gather ourselves towards the risky enunciation: 'I am a modernist.' This book engages the search for that constituency, as it persists within modernism, before modernism was.

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Introduction: Modern History and the Disavowal of Possibility

In the accidental ways of being a foreigner *away from home* [...] Wittgenstein sees the metaphor of *foreign* analytical procedures *inside* the very language that circumscribes them. 'When we do philosophy [that is, when we are working in the place which is the only "philosophical" one, the prose of the world] we are like savages, primitive peoples, who hear the expressions of primitive men, put a false interpretation on them, and then draw the queerest conclusions from it.' This is no longer the position of professionals, supposed to be civilized men among savages; it is rather the position which consists in being a foreigner *at home*, a 'savage' in the midst of ordinary culture, lost in the complexity of the common agreement and what goes without saying. And since one does not 'leave' this language, since one cannot find another place from which to interpret it, since there are therefore no separate groups of false interpretations and true interpretations, since in short there is no *way out*, the fact remains that we are *foreigners* on the inside – *but there is no outside*.

Michel de Certeau.¹

It will then be the task of historico-philosophical interpretation to decide whether [...] the new has no herald but our hopes: those hopes which are signs of a world to come, still so weak that it can easily be crushed by the sterile power of the merely existent.

Georg Lukács.²

In my construction of 'queer conclusions', and of hopes which sign a weak new world, I will begin *inside* what is before modernism; will begin with a work by a writer who is not a 'modernist', however much we stretch and toy with definition. *The Adolescent* (1874) was the third in the sequence of major novels Dostoevsky wrote when he returned from exile, beginning with *Crime and Punishment* in 1866, and ending with *The Brothers Karamazov* in 1876. While it is almost impossible to summarise the plot, some of its materials can be assembled: the novel recounts the relations between Arkady, the nineteen-year-old adolescent of the title,³ and those around him: his friends, his objects of desire, and his family. This family is complex. He does not bear the name of his father, Versilov, as his mother is married to Dolgoruky (both his mother and Dolgoruky had been serfs of Versilov). When Arkady comes to St Petersburg, he arrives with a burden of resentment against his father and against the world, which is compounded by the fact that his surname, Dolgoruky, is also that of a noble family, and so he has regularly to experience the difficulty of finding the right tone in which to deny that he is a Prince. The negotiation of these relations, the finding of an appropriate stance to take within what the novel calls a typically modern 'accidental family', is coordinated with the negotiation of entry into 'adult' life, an accommodation with a world which seems to be every bit as accidental as his family is.

The dynamic of the plot appears to be charged with an ethical dilemma. Arkady comes to St Petersburg from Moscow bearing a letter which may prove important – disastrously so – to the legal and emotional relations between many of the other characters, and he has to decide what to do with the power this evidence confers on him. But the relations are multiple and ambivalent and opaque, and the letter undergoes a series of accidents that mean its power is extremely uncertain. The relation between the uncertain ethical dilemma and the developments of the plot is at best tangential, and while the letter is often invoked, it is seldom clearly relevant; worse, it is not often in Arkady's control – it is at one point cut out of the lining of his coat while he sleeps, drunk – and the plot is moving so rapidly and randomly from one area of interest to another that it is difficult to grasp exactly what the moral problem is, that might be under scrutiny.⁴

The novel will not come into focus under these terms: in that sense, it is not like *Crime and Punishment*, or perhaps, it is even more extreme than that novel in decentering its central questions of moral choice. Indeed it does not really come into focus at all: the title that Dostoevsky initially considered for the novel was 'Disorder'. It ends with a gesture