Late Modernism

Politics, Fiction, and the Arts Between the World Wars

TYRUS MILLER

Late Modernism

Politics, Fiction, and the Arts
Between the World Wars

Tyrus Miller

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS

Berkeley / Los Angeles / London

Acknowledgments

I have enjoyed the advice and support of several people who contributed in tangible and intangible ways to the completion of this book: Elaine Chang, George Dekker, Johanna Drucker, Ann Gaylin, Ursula Heise, Ursula König, Hans and Irmi Löschner, Kathy Ogren, Linda Peterson, Brian Rourke, George Stade, Richard Terdiman, Lilliane Weissberg, and Daniela Weitensfelder. Karla Oeler deserves thanks for her translations from obscure Russian sources, which have helped me uncover the mysteries of Beckett's "Bim and Bom"; Katerina Clark also pointed out additional sources on this question. Edward Lintz provided crucial help in the obtaining of permissions and in the preparation of the manuscript.

Peter Brooks, David Halliburton, Robert Harrison, Michael Holquist, Wayne Koestenbaum, David Quint, Gilbert Sorrentino, Elide Valarini, Alexander Welsh, and Hayden White read and offered advice on chapters or on the manuscript as a whole; their help has been invaluable. Lawrence Rainey deserves special thanks for a very careful and critical reading of the manuscript in its entirety, shortly before its submission; he helped me to iron out several rough spots and to heighten a number of key arguments. I would also like to thank my readers for the University of California Press, Peter Nicholls and Thomas Harrison, and my editors, William Murphy, Linda Norton, and Julie Brand.

I have saved for last those for whom the formalities of an acknowledgment fall so far short of my debt to them that the normal phrases seem to betray rather than express my feelings. To my parents, who have watched my peregrinations with a minimum of skepticism and a maximum of love and support, I can finally say, Here it is. To Marjorie Perloff, my mentor, inspiration, and most stringent critic, go my profoundest thanks: Your generosity, enthusiasm, support, and friendship have been priceless to me for close to a decade now; I couldn't have done it without you. Finally, and above all, to my wife, Deanna Shemek—my thanks leave me speechless. I hope that our life together may hint to you the depth of my gratitude for all you have done and will do for me in years to come: "his thoughts, the stream / and we, we two, isolated in the stream / we also: three alike—."

Contents

Illustrations

Theorizing Late Modernism

*We lived under the shadow of two movements that affected all
Europe: modernism and collectivism.*

Noel Annan, *Our Age*

Introduction

The Problem of Late Modernism

---

*We are not only the "last men of an epoch." . . . We are the first
men of a Future that has not materialized. We belong to a
"great age" that has not "come off."*

Wyndham Lewis, 1937

There is no avant-garde, only those who are left behind.

Motto from art-text by Richard Tipping, 1993

I

Since the late 1920s, it has become an increasingly central part of the
avant-garde's vocation to profess its lack of vocation. The statements of
Wyndham Lewis and Richard Tipping, separated by more than fifty
years, are a case in point. A similar thought animates both artists, that
the avant-garde has failed—that it has never ceased to fail—to deliver on
its historical promise to "materialize" an unprecedented future in
prophetic works of art. For Lewis, the modernist painter, novelist, and
polemical "blaster," this realization was sobering. It became the occa-
sion for stock-taking works like his memoirs of World War I, *Blasting
and Bombardiering,* and his post–World War II autobiography, *Rude
Assignment;* it was a spur to rethink past experiences and hunker down
to the much bleaker future that had come to pass despite all avant-garde
"renewals." For the young Australian postmodernist Tipping, in con-
trast, the late-twentieth-century dissipation of vanguardist pretenses
offers a happy freedom to make art playfully, with little concern for who

might be following him and whither. If no one really knows which way things are going, he suggests, why not just go your own way? (Perhaps not accidentally, some of Tipping's best works are humorously modified road signs.) Lewis stoically bestows an epitaph on the grave of the fallen modernist legend; his postmodernist successor discovers a place—as good as any—to begin to dance.

Conceptions of modernism and the avant-garde, as even a limited survey will suggest, are shaped by factors that go well beyond narrowly aesthetic concerns. These may include, among a welter of other elements, particularities of nationality, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality; questions of political engagement; concrete experiences of wars and other important historical events; developments in technology; and religious beliefs. Moreover, insofar as terms like "modernism" and "avant-garde" are used historically to situate a selection of artists and works within a certain geography and time span, they are subject to the conceptual, narrative, and figural parameters that shape all historical writing.[1] Simply put, as we write the cultural history of the twentieth century, we spin out stories of artists, writers, thinkers, movements, and the works they conjured into life; and we weave these stories into the larger fabric of social and political history. Our historical plots have beginnings, middles, and ends; births and deaths occur; there are fixed settings and spaces of errancy; times of decision and dreamtimes in which the logic of the day seems suspended or deranged. Within these bounds we delineate our heroes and villains, setting them on their fatal paths to perdition or bringing them through narrow escapes from the grips of enchanters with resonant foreign names. Yet all the while our choices as to place and period, our selections of "characters" and of their deeds, are being swayed by a powerful, invisible force field of stories twice- and thrice-told, stories learned far too well and recounted on demand.

Modernism has generated a number of different stories, many of which have become familiar to the point of becoming a kind of academic folk wisdom: modernism is the liberation of formal innovation; the destruction of tradition; the renewal of decadent conventions or habit-encrusted perceptions; the depersonalization of art; the radical subjectivization of art. And so on. Despite the diversity and contradictory nature of opinions about what modernism is (or was), however, the study of modernism has tended to be dominated by one very broad and richly embellished story: its "Book of Genesis," which narrates its creation out of the spirit of revolt against the nineteenth century, whether that age be conceived as bourgeois or socialistic, Victorian or Biedermeier, positivis-

tic or decadent and symbolistic. The grand narrative in the study of modernism has been that of its beginnings: "origins," "rise," "emergence," "genealogy," are key terms in this ever more nuanced account. Granted this point, one may go on to observe how much this center of gravity in traditional modernist studies accords with the ideology of modernist aesthetics as such. From writer-critics like Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot to their latter-day heirs in the academy, critics have defined the movement in large part with figurative and evaluative underpinnings of modernism itself, with the Poundian imperative to "Make It New." In authoritative cultural histories of modernism such as Allan Janik and Stephen Toulmin's *Wittgenstein's Vienna*, Carl Schorske's *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna*, and Stephen Kern's *The Culture of Time and Space* and in major studies of literary modernism such as Hugh Kenner's *The Pound Era*, Marjorie Perloff's *The Futurist Moment*, and Michael Levinson's *The Genealogy of Modernism*, the accent has fallen on relatively unitary and "vital" moments of its development. In the continental context, this critical emphasis has meant giving pride of place to the cubist and futurist movements before World War I and to the avant-garde ferment of the twenties. Only recently have scholars begun to address the less coherent fate of modernist culture in 1930s France, while the fascinating cultural history of Vienna after the founding of the republic all but disappears behind the crowd of studies dedicated to the pre–World War I ferment.[2] In the Anglo-American context, the imagist and vorticist movements and the postwar Paris expatriate scene likewise receive a disproportionate amount of critical attention, because they identify clear communities of rebel experimenters working in emerging modes and forms.[3]

In the present study of modernism during the late 1920s and 1930s, I have turned this historiographic telescope the other way round, to focus on modernism from the perspective of its end.[4] I develop my argument in two major parts. The first of these, "Theorizing Late Modernism," sets the literature of these years in its broad cultural and political context while elaborating a revisionary model for understanding modernist writing in this transitional period. The second, "Reading Late Modernism," considers in detail the writings and related works—visual, critical, political, and cultural-polemical—of Wyndham Lewis, Djuna Barnes, and Samuel Beckett, who serve in this book as exemplary late modernist figures. I conclude with a coda chapter on a posthumously published novel by the Anglo-expatriate poet and artist, Mina Loy. Loy's *Insel* gives a fictionalized account of her experiences working in the early 1930s as a procurer of modern paintings for her son-in-law's

New York gallery. Her narrator's ill-fated adventures with an ineffectual German painter suggest the baneful short-circuiting of the once-energizing connection of modernist literature and modern visual arts. Indeed, in its wider implications, Loy's book registers a trembling of the whole artistic field, from writing to painting to photography and cinema, and the threat these new plate tectonics of culture posed to the social "islands" where modernist poet and painter had together found temporary refuge. The ending of *Insel* stands as an emblem of the end of an artistic epoch: the seedy painter who never paints and the aging writer who futilely seeks to squeeze some inspiration out of an artist-hero meet for the last time, tacitly agree that their alliance has not panned out, and part ways with a sense of relief.

My concentration on these authors is motivated by two impulses, the first evaluative, the latter strategic. Let me lay down my cards in advance: I seek to make a case for the importance of these authors and works and to elevate their status in the canons of twentieth-century literature as now taught in the American university. Bluntly stated, the majority of the works I discuss in this study are just not read—and not only by the half-mythical "common reader," stunted by the profitable conformism of mass-market publishing and the eviscerated budgets for public libraries, but even by scholars and teachers of modernist literature. I attempt to account historically for the feeble presence of these works in the protocols of our collective reading. But I must add that the conditions that brought these works lame-footed and stuttering into the world are, precisely, historical, and thus part of a past that may be surveyed, criticized, and superseded. It is high time to get on with the task of reading these works and discovering what we have missed by accepting critical bedtime tales as truth and letting our uneasy questions go to sleep.

Beyond this plea for revaluation, however, I also seize on these writings for strategic purposes. They form something of a vanishing point for the perspective lines projected by works in several different artistic fields, as well as by the political and critical discourses current in the late 1920s and 1930s and by diverse popular tendencies of the day. Careful reading of these works, together with the reconstruction of their context, shows the tacit dialogue they conducted with the other arts. It reveals how they sought to bind the restless, disturbing collective energies of recorded music, fashion, advertising, radio, and film; and it exposes to critical view the stigmata where mass politics and urban life left their forceful signatures.

When the history of modernist literature is considered in this way, from the perspective of its latter years, an alternative depiction of modernism becomes possible. At first glance, late modernist writing appears a distinctly self-conscious manifestation of the aging and decline of modernism, in both its institutional and ideological dimensions.[5] More surprising, however, such writing also strongly anticipates future developments, so that without forcing, it might easily fit into a narrative of emergent postmodernism.[6] This problem points to a central paradox of late modernist literature in English: its apparent admixture of decadent and forward-looking elements and its consequent lack of a clearly defined place in the dominant frameworks of twentieth-century criticism. It is as if the phosphorescence of decay had illumined the passageway to a reemergence of innovative writing after modernism. Ultimately, I wish to suggest, the writing of this period has much to teach us about the broader shape of twentieth-century culture, both preceding and following the years between the wars. Yet the double life of this significant body of writing—its linkage forward into postmodernism and backward into modernism—has not, by and large, been accounted for by critics and historians of the period.

II

The earliest and still one of the best diagnoses of the new literary dispensation that emerged in the 1930s may be found in George Orwell's 1935 review of Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* and, at greater length, in his extensive essay on Miller and the significance of his work, "Inside the Whale." The review is largely subsumed into the later essay, so I will not discuss its contents in detail. Orwell, however, opens his remarks on Miller with a lurid and extreme image evoking an uncanny automatic mechanism that functions even after death. He is speaking of literature and its ability to face up to or avert its eyes from the perilous condition of the present: "Modern man is rather like a bisected wasp which goes on sucking jam and pretends that the loss of its abdomen does not matter. It is some perception of this fact which brings books like *Tropic of Cancer* (for there will probably be more and more of them as time goes on) into being."[7]

In 1935 this characterization of "modern man" might have seemed hyperbolic and shrill; by the time "Inside the Whale" appeared in 1940,

with Nazi victories blanketing the map of Europe and British capitulation to the mad Charlie Chaplin emperor in Berlin a very real possibility, it was hard not to concur with Orwell's pessimism, if not his precise diagnosis. In forty pages of brilliant, undeceived examination of the main lines of twentieth-century British writing, Orwell diagnoses the condition of literature in England on the brink of a total war for survival. He reveals the collective psychology underlying the epochal shifts in authorial stance and popular taste from the Georgian decades of A. E. Housman and H. G. Wells, to the modernist revolt of T. S. Eliot and James Joyce, to the "Boy Scout atmosphere of bare knees and community singing" he sensed in the leftish boosterism of W. H. Auden, Stephen Spender, Cecil Day-Lewis, and company—all set against a background of political, military, and human horrors: the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact to divide up Poland between Germany and Russia, the mechanized drone of Stuka dive bombers and Panzer brigades, and the stifled cries of the concentration camps.

The historical panorama that Orwell sets out with such unforgiving concision serves to foreground the peculiar homelessness of Miller's work in this history. Miller, quite simply, doesn't fit in the big picture of his times. Out of frank disbelief, Miller avoids the progressive commitments of the Edwardians and the communist enthusiasms of the Auden generation; neither, however, does he exhibit, modernist-style, any faith in the power of carefully crafted, difficult art to redeem the squalid realities of his subproletarian existence. If these large-scale tendencies of attitude and taste had once been, for better or worse, conditions of possibility for an enduring English literature, Miller, in contrast, heralds an altogether different future in which literature as such is endangered by a world much too much with it. Miller's work, Orwell writes, "is a demonstration of the *impossibility* of any major literature until the world has shaken itself into its new shape."[8] For Orwell, Miller is more than just a writer; he is the unlaureled proseist of middle-class unemployment, the pulverization of professional society in train from the late 1920s on—the collective *désoeuvrement* of the middle strata, not just in the sense that the heirs of the Edwardian bourgeoisie were without jobs, but also, more fundamentally, that they were bereft of vocation, of any calling in which they might sincerely believe. Miller writes neither to praise collective idleness nor to ally himself rhetorically with the gravediggers of a dying culture, signing on to a future utopia of labor and endeavoring to bury it. It is in this "neither-nor" that Orwell detects a new tone, and identifies in it the endgame of modern individualistic cul-

ture, with the late modernist torso gyrating mechanically while the head no longer serves to guide it and no limb propels it on.

Unfortunately, few critics have developed in a systematic manner Orwell's essayistically formulated insight. Among contemporary scholars of modernist culture, the architectural historian Charles Jencks has made a compelling case for employing the notion of late modernism in critical discussions of twentieth-century architecture and, by extension, the other arts as well.[9] Jencks designates as "late modernist" the persistence in architectural practice of an avant-garde moralism, utopianism, and purist style after the classic period of International-style architectural modernism (1920–1960). "Late modern" architecture, Jencks argues, *coexists* with the postmodernism that emerges in the 1960s. By comparison to either modernism or late modernism, postmodernist architecture is pluralist and populist in its ethos, intentionally addressing different "taste cultures" from the general public to elite, knowledgeable constituencies, capable of appreciating inside jokes and learned references. Postmodernist architects are unashamedly historicist in their use of ornament and ironic allusion to earlier buildings, which may be freely drawn from for figural and structural ideas. More generally, postmodern architecture abandons the central concern of modern architects with the autonomy of form and its exhaustive display of function. The modernist supercategory "form-equals-function" yields to a diversified concern with meaning, sensuality, and context; symbolism, allegory, and narrative return as major artistic resources. In contrast, late modernism represents a kind of exasperated heightening of the logic of modernist architecture itself. Architectural late modernism is, Jencks writes, "pragmatic and technocratic in its social ideology and from about 1960 takes many of the stylistic ideas and values of modernism to an extreme in order to resuscitate a dull (or clichéd) language" (15).

Two aspects of Jencks's argument are useful for my considerations of late modernist literature. First, he emphasizes the overlap and coexistence of late modernism and postmodernism. These are not successive stages but rather alternative responses to the legacy of modernism and its possible continuation. Second, he recognizes that these terms cannot be defined simply as a matter of style, for they also embrace aspects of social ideology and artistic ethos as well. As Jencks remarks, "To call a late modernist a postmodernist is tantamount to calling a Protestant a Catholic because they both practice a Christian religion" (16). And if the Thirty-Something Year War that followed on the schisming of modernism has left the artistic field razed and the scattered troops looting

whatever they came across in their retreat, Jencks's point still stands. The choices for artists working in the wake of modernism had real stakes, and these stakes have not been sufficiently recognized in the rush to postmodernism: art's relation to the past, its address to a public, and its stance toward the society and politics of the day. On this, I cannot express my agreement with Jencks too strongly. The extension of Jencks's arguments to literature, however, is limited by his specific concentration on architecture, which has a distinct stylistic and institutional history. Architectural modernism had its first heave with the socialist urbanism of the late 1920s and 1930s and its second wind with the urban development after World War II, whereas literary modernism peaked much earlier and, free of any strong ties to economic and political institutions, much more feebly. Hence, one should expect that "late modernist" literature would have an analogously different historical shape than that of architecture. In contrast with different building forms, differences in *literary* architectonics have few direct social effects; hence, questions of ethos and social vision have a less direct translation into formal considerations than in architecture. Moreover, no "postmodernist" complement existed at the moment that late modernist literature made its first appearance—as I am arguing, around 1926. Instead, this emergent literature appears in tandem with a still developing corpus of high modernism. James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake,* Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* and *Between the Acts,* Ezra Pound's *Cantos,* Aldous Huxley's *Eyeless in Gaza*, and other monuments of high modernism share the field with a new generation of late modernist works.

Fredric Jameson, in his celebrated writings on postmodernism, acknowledges the need for an intermediary concept to characterize the cultural products of the "transition" between modernism and postmodernism, although he leaves the task of theorizing this interim largely to others. Somewhat grudgingly, he admits that "we should probably . . . make some place . . . for what Charles Jencks has come to call 'late modernism'—the last survivals of a properly modernist view of art and the world after the great political and economic break of the Depression, where, under Stalinism or the Popular Front, Hitler or the New Deal, some new conception of social realism achieves the status of momentary cultural dominance by way of collective anxiety and world war."[10] As exemplary "late modernists" in literature, Jameson mentions Vladimir Nabokov, Samuel Beckett, Charles Olson, and Louis Zukofsky, "who had the misfortune to span two eras and the luck to find a time capsule of isolation or exile in which to spin out unseasonable