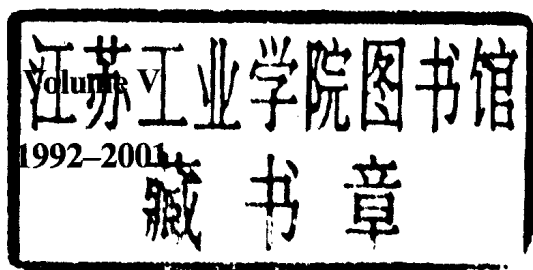




# MODERNISM

Critical Concepts in Literary  
and Cultural Studies

*Edited by*  
*Tim Middleton*



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## VALUE

*Randall Stevenson*

Source: Randall Stevenson, *Modernist Fiction: An Introduction*, London, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992, pp. 201–23.

**The end of modernism**

In 1930 it was impossible – if you were young, sensitive, imaginative – not to be interested in politics; not to find public causes of much more pressing interest than philosophy. In 1930 young men . . . were forced to be aware of what was happening in Russia; in Germany; in Italy; in Spain. They could not go on discussing aesthetic emotions and personal relations . . . they had to read the politicians. They read Marx. They became communists; they became anti-fascists. (Virginia Woolf, ‘The Leaning Tower’, 1940)<sup>1</sup>

Not all the ‘young men’ Woolf refers to immediately conformed to the pattern she outlines. At least one member of ‘the group which began to write about 1925’ (p. 170) whom she considers in ‘The Leaning Tower,’ Christopher Isherwood, went on discussing ‘aesthetic emotions and personal relations’ in his early fiction, and in ways very similar to those of the modernists. Isherwood later acknowledged that he had ‘learned a few lessons from these masters and put them into practice’;<sup>2</sup> various ‘echoes’, as he calls them, of the work of James Joyce and Virginia Woolf appear in his first two novels, *All the Conspirators* (1928) and *The Memorial* (1932). In each, interior monologue often predominates over conversation or action, much as it does in Woolf’s fiction. In *All the Conspirators*, there are also sections of randomly associating thoughts closer to the stream-of-consciousness method of Joyce, and the novel’s concern with art and writing – sometimes apparently autobiographical – resembles Joyce’s interests in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), or Woolf’s use of the artist Lily Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse* (1927). *The Memorial* shows affinities between Isherwood’s style and modernism extending into the areas of structure and temporality. The



novel's sections are headed '1928', '1920', '1925' and '1929': conventional chronology is further renounced, in favour of 'time in the mind', by the intense memories and recollections that break into the characters' interior monologues. Repeated flashbacks and deferred explanations show Isherwood apparently acting on Ford Madox Ford's suggestion that 'to get . . . a man in fiction you could not begin at his beginning . . . you must . . . work backwards and forwards over his past'. Isherwood later explained that in *The Memorial* he tried 'to start in the middle and go backwards, then forwards again . . . time is circular, which sounds Einstein-ish and brilliantly modern'.<sup>3</sup>

Such 'brilliantly modern' techniques make *The Memorial* an outstanding novel, deserving fuller critical attention than it has usually received. A significant aspect of Isherwood's modernist technique, however, is how quickly it disappears from his fiction later in the 1930s. His next novel, *Mr Norris Changes Trains* (1935), set in Berlin, has very little of the structural complexity or inward registration of thought that mark *The Memorial* and *All the Conspirators*. Instead, it is largely straightforward in chronology, and objective in recording visual detail and observation of characters' behaviour and the state of their city. *Goodbye to Berlin* (1939) is similar. Preference for direct, uncomplicated contact with observed reality is emphasised by Isherwood's narrator describing himself as 'a camera with its shutter open, quite passive, recording, not thinking' (p. 11). In a way, of course, a genuinely 'passive recording' is unrealisable: just as a camera has to be pointed somewhere, any recording in language is 'pointed' by its point of view and style. Nevertheless, Isherwood's idea of the narrator as a camera shows how far he had moved away from modernism by the end of the 1930s. Discussing Joyce's work in 1929, Eugene Jolas suggested that 'the epoch when the writer photographed the life about him with the mechanics of words . . . is happily drawing to its close'. Writing ten years later, Isherwood apparently wanted to open up this epoch once again. Though *All the Conspirators* and *The Memorial* so clearly 'echo' modernist determination to 'illumine the mind within rather than the world without', in the thirties Isherwood's priorities reversed – 'the world without', rather than inward attention to mind and consciousness, becoming the principal focus of his attention.

Isherwood's career is exemplary in this way, indicating the shape and the strength of modernist influence at the end of the 1920s, but also how quickly this seemed to fade in the decade that followed. Modernist fiction continued to appear during it – Woolf's *The Waves* in 1931; Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* in 1939; the early novels of some of the writers mentioned at the end of Chapter 4 – but in general the 1930s are considered to be a period of decline or redirection of modernism's innovative energies. Many of the generation of novelists Woolf points to, emerging in the late 1920s, followed the same pattern of development as Isherwood, or more or less began from the conclusion – in favour of realist rather than modernist methods – that he eventually reached. Both George Orwell and Graham Greene, for example, sometimes

echo the modernists. Orwell's third chapter in *A Clergyman's Daughter* (1935) resembles the 'Nighttown' section (Chapter 15) of *Ulysses*, and the interior monologues and occasional stream of consciousness of Greene's *England Made Me* (1935) also suggest a debt to Joyce. Such echoes, however, are occasional and fragmentary in work which is on the whole much more conventional in style. Orwell, in particular, deliberately looks back to model his strategies on the work of writers modernism rejected, such as H. G. Wells.

In 'The Leaning Tower', Woolf indicates several factors – some obvious, some more complex – that help account for this general movement away from modernist methods in the 1930s. As the passage already quoted suggests, novelists were inevitably subject to the intensifying pressure of the decade's politics and 'public causes'. By the mid-1930s British writers – and to some extent the public in general – were preoccupied by the rise of Hitler in Germany, by the continuing menace of Mussolini in Italy, and perhaps above all by the Spanish Civil War. In addition, as Woolf rather complacently concedes, though there was 'neither war nor revolution in England itself', there was nevertheless 'the influence of change . . . the threat of war' (II, p. 170). In fact, the economic depression that followed the collapse of the Wall Street stock market late in 1929 – as well as facilitating Hitler's rise to power in Germany – thoroughly dominated British affairs throughout the 1930s. Even by 1931, the pound had been devalued, the Labour Party ousted by a National Government created to deal with the emergency, and unemployment had reached a scale that provoked hunger marches and riots.

Such crises, domestic as well as international, were likely to have discouraged novelists in the 1930s – as Woolf suggests – from continuing to write about the kind of 'aesthetic emotions', profound relations or subjective states that had occupied the attention of the modernists. 'Young men' writing in 1930 might have been drawn back to realist style, to straightforward representation of 'the world without', simply by the urgency of what was happening in that world, in reality itself. A major factor in Christopher Isherwood's change of tactics between *The Memorial* and *Mr Norris Changes Trains*, for example, might have been the need to represent to the British public, as clearly and immediately as possible, the threat of Adolf Hitler that Isherwood had discovered for himself on visits to Berlin in the early 1930s. A lucid, documentary style, with the supposed objectivity of a camera, 'recording, not thinking', might have seemed the best possible vehicle for communicating the threatening political problems of the time.

Background and education also particularly disposed members of Isherwood's generation to attend to these problems. Woolf points out in 'The Leaning Tower' that for her own generation, the modernist generation,

when the crash came in 1914 all those . . . who were to be the representative writers of their time, had their past, their education, safe behind them, safe within them. They had known security; they had

the memory of a peaceful boyhood, the knowledge of a settled civilisation. (pp. 169–70)

Rather than having ‘their education . . . safe within them’ by 1914, the generation after the modernists, the 1930s generation, experienced a schooling that was significantly shaped by the First World War. As Woolf points out, the majority of the new writers emerging in the 1930s were educated at public schools. In these traditional bastions of English social structure, they encountered with particular immediacy the kind of establishment values that were implicated in the conduct of the war and therefore considered profoundly corrupt by many members of the younger generation at the time. This common educational background probably contributed to the readiness of 1930s’ writers to ‘become communists or anti-fascists’; to adopt anti-establishment political commitments that further heightened their attentiveness to the ‘public causes’ of their day.

Though sharpened by the circumstances of their education, attentiveness to contemporary events was in any case almost inevitable for 1930s’ novelists. Unlike the modernists, they lacked an experience that could have distracted them from the immediate life of their times. Modernist writers, after-all, were confronted challengingly enough by public causes and events: these could hardly have existed more disturbingly than they did in the course of the First World War. The difference, however, as Woolf indicates, is that the modernists were able to look back to a stable pre-war past; to engage with memories of ‘a peaceful boyhood, the knowledge of a settled civilisation’. As suggested in Chapter 3, knowledge of security lost in the past created for the modernists particular incentives to reshape time and history in their fiction; to re-establish connections with a vanished epoch. In *A la recherche du temps perdu*, for example, or in *To the Lighthouse*, Proust and Woolf indicate the recovery of the past through art and memory as one of few consolations available to a generation living on in a desolate post-war world. Such consolation was difficult enough for the modernists to establish: it was still less accessible to the generation which succeeded them.

This is reflected in the dates Isherwood chooses for the four sections of *The Memorial* – 1928, 1920, 1925, 1929. However much the younger generation of writers wished to follow the modernists in reshaping time and history in their fiction – in working ‘backwards and forwards over the past’ – there were difficulties for them in extending this process back into the years before the war. For Christopher Isherwood, born in 1904, and his contemporaries, these years and the ‘knowledge of a settled civilisation’ they might have offered existed not as an adult memory but at most as a recollection of early childhood. Perhaps as a result, his generation was readier than the modernists to deal with contemporary history not through imaginative strategies that transformed or sought to escape its processes, but instead through direct, political commitment to transforming reality and historical

process themselves. Lacking an ideal or settled civilisation in memory, younger writers in the 1930s were more disposed to commit themselves to the creation of one in actuality; to espouse the political ideologies – communism or socialism – likeliest to assist in this process; and to direct their fiction at the immediate ‘public causes’ and political problems of their world.

### The evasions of modernism

The disposition to deal directly with political issues led not only to the shift away from modernist styles and structures exemplified by Isherwood’s writing, but at times to hostile criticism of modernism, often on the grounds of its supposed evasiveness and self-indulgence. Looking back on the modernist inclination of his early novels, Isherwood commented ruefully on the ‘excessive reverence for Mrs Woolf’ that had marked this stage of his writing. Other contemporary novelists were more vehement in their rejection of modernism. In his essay ‘Inside the Whale’ (1940), for example, George Orwell suggests of the modernists that

what is noticeable about all these writers is that what ‘purpose’ they have is very much up in the air. There is no attention to the urgent problems of the moment, above all no politics in the narrower sense . . . when one looks back at the twenties . . . in ‘cultured’ circles art-for-art’s sake extended practically to a worship of the meaningless. Literature was supposed to consist solely in the manipulation of words.<sup>4</sup>

Factors that turned novelists against the styles dominating the previous decade also affected 1930s’ critics, some of whom denounced modernism in terms similar to Orwell’s, or stronger. Commitment to communism and anti-fascism encouraged particular interest in what was happening in Russia at the time: some British critics were therefore quickly aware of Karl Radek’s famous denunciation of modernism at the Soviet Writers Congress of 1934, and inclined to extend some of its implications in their own work.<sup>5</sup> Philip Henderson, for example, incorporates a reference to Radek’s attack on Joyce into the highly critical view of modernism he outlines in *The Novel Today: Studies in Contemporary Attitudes* (1936). Henderson considers that

it is the duty of writers, as those who express the creative needs of the race, not only to hope for the establishment of a reasonable society, but actively to assist, as writers, towards bringing such a society into being. (p. 52)

He therefore regrets that ‘many modern writers dare not look too closely at social reality’ (p. 14) but choose instead to remain ‘enmeshed in the chaos of

subjectivism' (p. 81). Reacting to 'a sense of the collapse of their world', modernist writers, in Henderson's view,

retired further and further into private worlds detached from social reality, their characters attempting to lead lives either-entirely on an intense emotional, passional plane as with Lawrence, or on a plane of aesthetic abstraction and contemplative withdrawal from all significant activity whatsoever, as in the case of Joyce and Virginia Woolf. (p. 103)

Henderson's criticism of modernism's 'detachment from social reality' was echoed by other commentators at the time, such as Alick West, in *Crisis and Criticism* (1937), or Ralph Fox, who complained in *The Novel and the People* (1937) of the 'false outlook on life . . . in Proust and Joyce' and of their apparent reluctance to see 'the individual as a whole, as a social individual' (p. 105).

Adverse criticism of modernist writers was not new to the 1930s: many of the first reactions to their work, to Joyce's *Ulysses* in particular, expressed a more complete – sometimes shocked – rejection than anything that came later. The 1930s' criticism, however, remains particularly significant for two reasons. Firstly, its preference for 'social reality' – rather than anything 'enmeshed in the subjective' and apparently detached from it – helps define the particular climate of opinion in which modernism slipped away from the more central position it had occupied in the literary imagination of the previous decade. Secondly, the views expressed by Henderson and others in the 1930s indicate a direction followed by some later criticisms and expanded into a more thoroughgoing, substantial rejection of modernism. Thus in 'The Ideology of Modernism' (1955) the Hungarian Marxist Georg Lukács develops more fully and articulately the same sort of thinking as Henderson follows in the passages quoted above. For Lukács, as for Henderson, modernism is limited by its characters' existence in 'private worlds, detached from social reality'. Lukács considers that 'attenuation of reality underlies Joyce's stream of consciousness': this 'rejection of narrative objectivity, the surrender to subjectivity' contributes to 'reduction of reality to a nightmare' – to a vision of 'ghostly un-reality, of a nightmare world'. In this modernist world, both social relationships and their historical context seem to Lukács to disappear:

in the work of leading modernist writers . . . Man . . . is by nature solitary, asocial, unable to enter into relationships with other human beings . . .

Man, thus conceived, is an ahistorical being.

By directing attention away from social reality, and through what Lukács calls 'the denial of history, of development, and thus, of perspective', mod-

ernist writing establishes an 'assumption that the objective world is inherently inexplicable' and therefore beyond improvement or change. For Lukács,

the ideology of most modernist writers asserts the unalterability of outward reality . . . human activity is, *a priori*, rendered impotent and robbed of meaning.<sup>6</sup>

Lukács's criticisms are worth quoting at length, as they provide what is probably still the most substantial negative view of modernism, one necessary to consider in any assessment of this phase of writing. Moreover, Lukács's views are usefully typical of a wider range of negative reactions. Though not all criticism of modernism is based specifically on its supposed lack of political or social relevance, most hostile views do take something of the same form as those of Lukács. Hugh Walpole, for example, offered in the 1930s a negative perspective different from many other commentators at the time, complaining of what he calls the 'modern' phase of recent fiction that 'there *is* a moral world, and . . . the novelists of [this] generation are losing a great deal by disregarding it' (p. 29). Though emphasising different priorities, Walpole's reasoning remains comparable to that of Lukács. For each, modernism ignores conventional fiction's capacity to contribute wisdom or ideas to the organisation of ordinary life and the social sphere. This 'attenuation of reality' leaves modernism out of touch with the world and bereft of a central dimension in its experience – political, in Lukács's view; moral in Walpole's. A reply to Lukács's criticisms, therefore, can help to provide something of an answer to other commentators, and to criticism of modernism in general, contributing to an evaluation of this phase of writing as a whole.

It might at first be supposed that such a reply could be easily and clearly based on the fiction of D. H. Lawrence, shown throughout the present study to be thoroughly concerned with the new conditions and pressures in what he calls 'the modern industrial and financial world'. 'The Industrial Magnate' chapter of *Women in Love* probably gives as full an account as any twentieth-century novel of the restructuring of industry around Taylorist imperatives, and of the reifying consequences of this process both for a particular workforce; and ultimately for the whole of modern industrialised society. In more general terms, *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love* offer a very wide-ranging history of social change in Britain between the Industrial Revolution and the time of the First World War. An actual social historian could hardly offer anything more thorough or compelling, at least in tracing the effects of these changes within the modern psyche.

And yet, even in the course of presenting what seems such thorough social awareness, Lawrence's fiction nevertheless reveals something of the evasive assumption of 'the unalterability of outward reality' that Lukács

complains of. In *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, for example, Lawrence records that

when Connie saw the great lorries full of steel-workers from Sheffield, weird, distorted smallish beings like men, off for an excursion to Matlock, her bowels fainted and she thought: Ah God, what has man done to man? What have the leaders of men been doing to their fellow-men? They have reduced them to less than humanness; and now there can be no fellowship any more! It is just a nightmare. (p. 159)

Lawrence raises a genuine question about social organisation: 'What have the leaders of men been doing to their fellow-men?' He even offers a genuine answer – 'They have reduced them to less than humanness' – confirmed by many pages at this point in the novel presenting 'apartness and hopelessness [in] . . . this terrifying new and gruesome England' (pp. 159, 163). But although conditions of modern industrial reality are established, and questions raised about them, Lawrence's presentation of a 'new and gruesome England' does not extend to a point where it could suggest means of progress or even the possibility of change. Instead, just as this point seems to be reached, the whole issue of industrialism's dehumanising effect on modern life is consigned to the domain of 'nightmare'. Since no answers or alternatives can be further pursued rationally in this domain, the clear vision of terrible and gruesome processes in *Lady Chatterley's Lover* remains one which accepts them as inevitable. Connie's reflections in the passage that follows extend this view of a terrible yet unalterable modern existence. She considers industrial development in the past, and surveys the dreary, wasted landscape that is its result in the present, but adds, 'God alone knows where the future lies' (p. 161). Any possibility of purposeful movement towards a better future is further negated when, thinking of the colliers – reduced like the steel-workers to a less than human existence – Connie comments, 'Supposing the dead in them ever rose up! But no, it was too terrible to think of' (p. 166).

There are other indications in Lawrence's fiction that he finds – like Connie – that however nightmarish contemporary reality may be, any attempt to alter its inhuman structuring may be worse still, too difficult or too terrible to contemplate. It is only at the end of *The Rainbow* that he suggests the possibility of 'a new architecture' for society as a whole, with 'the old, brittle corruption of houses and factories swept away' (p. 496). Yet even here, the forces that might sweep the world clean, changing 'the face of the world's corruption' (pp. 495–6), are, as suggested in Chapter 3, vague and visionary, mystical rather than practical – a 'new germination' (p. 496), rather than a new set of economic or social structures. Such an ending remains largely consistent with the rest of Lawrence's fiction. Throughout his work,

alternatives to the rigours of 'the modern industrial and financial world' are generally presented in emotional rather than rational terms – most often shown arising from the redeeming power of individual relationships and the dark energies of sexuality contained within them. *The Rainbow* differs from Lawrence's other fiction only in being more than usually optimistic – or just mystic – in envisaging this redeeming potential extended over a whole society, rather than just two elect members of it, such as Birkin and Ursula in *Women in Love*.

Such faith in relationships and their redeeming psychic energies is consoling but also limiting. Part of Lawrence's complaint about modern industrialism, repeated in Connie's reflections quoted above, is that its Taylorist rationalisation of labour left workers effectively more like machines than human beings. Lawrence's own rejection of the rational, however, simply concedes, as an inevitable adjunct of the nightmare modern world, one of the faculties that most urgently needed to be contested and repossessed. The kind of economic reasoning draining 'humanness' out of modern life might reasonably have been resisted: analysed and challenged on its own terms. Instead, by relying on the dark, mystic and intuitional, Lawrence leaves little solid ground for purposeful change in society, but at best only for the construction of personal refuges more or less outside it – for the creation of 'private worlds, detached from social reality', in fact. Views of modern reality as nightmare, and the projection principally of visionary or emotional solutions to its problems, are in the end, as Lukács suggests, a kind of evasiveness, even of escapism. Lawrence's own flight from an irredeemable, industrialised Britain is anticipated by his fiction some time before his actual departure with his wife Frieda in the 1920s.

Lawrence's ultimate evasion of issues of political or historical change is particularly disappointing – given the extent of social awareness his fiction also shows – but not unusual. As Lukács suggests such evasiveness or 'denial of history' is discernible more generally in modernist fiction. Joyce's *Ulysses*, for example, seems equally committed to the view that the course of history is something to be ignored or escaped rather than confronted or altered – a view overtly stated in one of the novel's most quoted lines: 'History, Stephen said, is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake' (p. 28). This, of course, is not necessarily Joyce's own opinion. Stephen is closer to expressing Joyce's views in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* than he is in *Ulysses*, which on the whole presents Leopold Bloom in a much more favourable light. Yet Bloom, in his own way, denies history almost as firmly as Stephen, remarking in Chapter 12, 'Cyclops', that

it's no use . . . Force, hatred, history, all that. That's not life for men and women, insult and hatred. And everybody knows that it's the very opposite of that that is really life . . .

Love says Bloom. I mean the opposite of hatred. (p. 273)



Bloom's alternative to the pangs of history sounds rather like D. H. Lawrence's, love providing a way out of the depredations of force and hatred; the integrity of individual relationships compensating for wide social disintegration. This kind of possibility is in a way further endorsed by the novel's conclusion – Molly's sleepy recollections of love and passion assembled, as suggested in Chapter 3, into an affirmation of mankind that transcends particular time, place or history and soothes her back into unconsciousness again. It is a conclusion in one way emblematic of the wider tactics of modernism in transforming or escaping history through vision; in making it dream-like or impalpable. Such tactics confirm the appropriateness of Fredric Jameson's suggestion that modernist narrative possesses a 'political unconscious'. Contemporary society and history are assigned a 'nightmare' character often enough by modernist novelists to suggest that the unconscious – the domain of dreams and nightmares, beyond rational control – is the only place they wish to envisage for politics. Such thinking curiously inverts other new habits of mind of the modernist age. In particular, Freud's doctrines suggest that dream and nightmare are worth bringing to light and analysing to see what they contribute to understanding of the real psychic condition of the patient. Modernist fiction, on the other hand, consigns the real conditions of history to the realm of nightmare apparently in order to avoid analysing them, or at any rate to avoid taking such analysis far enough to suggest more than a release of sexual or emotional energies as an antidote to force and hatred in the modern industrial and financial world.

When history and contemporary politics are not suppressed into nightmare in this way, they are often escaped or transcended through myth or art. A sense of timeless and transcendental order in myth particularly appealed to the modernists, especially to the poets, and most notably to T. S. Eliot in *The Wasteland* (1922). In discussing fiction, however – specifically *Ulysses* – Eliot talks of myth and Joyce's pattern of references to Homer also offering the contemporary novel

a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history.<sup>7</sup>

In Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, Lily Briscoe similarly refers to an artist's brush as 'the one dependable thing in a world of strife, ruin, chaos' (p. 170). Woolf and Eliot seek a transcendence of strife, ruin, futility and anarchy by means of myth or art: neither, however, much considers how the problems of contemporary life might be addressed in fact. Instead, as Lukács suggests, historical reality is held to be nightmarish but unalterable. Priority is given to establishing shape or significance only in art: for this to be achieved, art has to remain aloof from the supposedly anarchic historical reality it surveys. Art therefore seems to become, for the modernists, as suggested in Chapter 4,