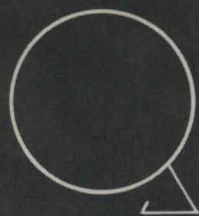


THE CONCEPT OF MODERNISM



Astradur Eysteinnsson

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Introduction

ALTHOUGH THE CONCEPT "modernism" may seem intol-
erably vague, it has come to serve a crucial function in criticism
and literary history, as well as in theoretical debates about
literature. There is little doubt that of all the concepts used in
discussing and mapping twentieth-century Western literature,
"modernism" has become the most important, either as used
by itself or as a part of the kindred concept "postmodernism."

One must of course be aware that until quite recently "mod-
ernism" was not a widespread concept, especially not outside
the spheres of Anglo-American and Scandinavian criticism,
and even today one may not encounter it frequently in the
works of, say, German and French critics and scholars.¹ It may
actually be the pressure exerted by critical and theoretical dis-
cussion in the United States that has recently made Continen-
tal-European critics more conscious of the concepts of "mod-
ernism" and "postmodernism." At the same time, we know
that when for instance German scholars use the words "mod-

1. This book does not concern itself with the "modernismo" of South American
and Spanish literature. Despite some parallels, the differences between the two
concepts are too many to warrant their critical coalescence. Moreover, the use of
the concept in Hispanic criticism, while it was established early in the century, has
had virtually no influence on the formation of the critical paradigms of modernism
that I discuss. For a survey of the Hispanic concept, see Ned J. Davison, *The
Concept of Modernism in Hispanic Criticism* (Boulder, Colo.: Pruett Press, 1966).

ern" or "die Moderne" in the specific context of nontraditional twentieth-century literature, they are employing it in a way that parallels the use of "modernism" in English. The same goes for some other terms. It now seems obvious, for instance, that when Georg Lukács wrote about "Avantgardeismus" he was in fact dealing with "modernism" but resorted to the concept of the "avant-garde" for lack of a better term at that moment in critical history (that is, in the mid-fifties).²

The same lack of terminological consensus can be observed in pre-1960s Anglo-American criticism. Edmund Wilson's *Axel's Castle* (1931) is generally considered one of the first significant critical works to outline and define a modern(ist) paradigmatic shift in literature, but the term Wilson uses for this new literature is not "modernism" but "symbolism." Similarly, Joseph Frank's seminal essay "Spatial Form in Modern Literature," first published in 1945, never uses the concept "modernism" but seems to rely on the term "modern literature" as a frame of reference for the historical and aesthetic shift that Frank sees in the use of "spatial form."

As a concept, however, "modernism" has rapidly been gaining ground, and certain critical works that never even employ the term, such as those of Wilson and Frank, are now generally held to be landmark studies in literary modernism. There is a rapidly spreading agreement that "modernism" is a legitimate concept broadly signifying a paradigmatic shift, a major revolt, beginning in the mid- and late nineteenth century, against the prevalent literary and aesthetic traditions of the Western world. But this is as far as we can assume a critical and theoretical consensus to go. Beyond this point we face strikingly variable and often seemingly irreconcilable theories concerning the nature of the revolt. Hence it is not enough to admit that "vague terms still signify," to quote Michael Levenson's opening words in *A Genealogy of Modernism*.³ Vague but widely used terms

2. This is indeed reflected in the English translation of Georg Lukács, *Wider den mißverstandenen Realismus* (1958): *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, trans. John and Necke Mander (London: Merlin Press, 1963), where "Avantgardeismus" is translated as "modernism."

3. Michael Levenson, *A Genealogy of Modernism: A Study of English Literary Doctrine, 1908–1922* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. vii.

not only still signify, they are compelled to signify in highly relevant ways.

In the opening chapter, therefore, I ask what modernism has been made to signify, and how. Examining several different theories of modernism, we shall observe how they relate to one another and how they contribute to the making of various, often mutually conflicting, modernist paradigms.

Chapter 2 proceeds to observe the various modernist paradigms as interpretations (and fabrications) of *literary history*. As a concept used for literature, "modernism" signals a historical change on the literary scene. Even when the concept is used with no reference whatsoever to literary history, its respective placement and function within a literary-historical context are always indicated or assumed. It is primarily through this context, laden with issues of tradition, modernity, and canonization, that the concept of modernism acquires its full significance: that of highlighting and "naming" the complex relation between nontraditional or postrealist literature and history in the broader sense. This literary-historical context is certainly not always obvious or readily accessible, but we may attempt to point it out or "reconstruct" it as the locus of theoretical conflict over the concept of modernism.

Controversy over the concept and its role in literary history is frequently reflected in current debates about postmodernism, as is demonstrated in detail in chapter 3. Several proponents of postmodernism use that concept to signify the rejection or the end of the modernist era. For example, in "The Literature of Replenishment," John Barth states that any discussion of postmodernism must "either presume that modernism in its turn, at this hour of the world, needs no definition (surely everybody knows what modernism is!) or else must attempt after all to define or redefine that predominant aesthetic of Western literature . . . in the first half of this century."⁴ Barth does not seem to be aware that the very claim that modernism was the "predominant aesthetic" of the first half of the

4. John Barth, "The Literature of Replenishment: Postmodernist Fiction," *Atlantic Monthly* (January 1980): 67.

century is a redefinition, one that silently dismisses the not uncommon view of modernism as an *oppositional* aesthetic.

However, what may appear as forced signification on Barth's behalf actually springs from the widespread critical assumption that modernism has now solidified into a stable category. In 1974 Maurice Beebe declared: "We can take some comfort in the realization that we can now define Modernism with confidence that we shall not have to keep adjusting our definition in order to accommodate new visions and values."⁵ In light of the controversy over modernism during the past decade or so, such complacency, which is also reflected in Beebe's conservative definition of modernism, has come to seem totally ungrounded. From another perspective, as we shall see, Beebe's understanding of modernism as a settled category stems quite logically from certain powerful critical attempts at fixing modernism into an unquestionable, and unquestioning, aesthetic practice.

The comments of Barth and Beebe call attention to the important dialectical relationships between modernism and the critical apparatus brought to bear on the concept and, on the other hand, between modernism and other key concepts used to designate and map literary-historical currents of our century. Beside the term "postmodernism," these are primarily the concepts of the avant-garde and of realism.

The much-debated relation of the avant-garde with modernism constitutes the arena of my critical inquiry in chapter 4. Most relevant discussions of avant-garde practices prove to generate equally relevant perspectives on the concept of modernism, and the various estimations of the avant-garde tend to weigh heavily in critical appraisals of modernism. The two concepts obviously have a strongly reciprocal relationship which calls for a scrutiny. I find it necessary to resist tendencies to conflate the two terms or to see the avant-garde as a subcategory of modernism. It is equally important, however, to come to terms with approaches that seek to drive a critical wedge between modernism and the avant-garde. Surveying and refuting such approaches, I shall attempt to uphold a dynamic reciprocity between the two concepts.

5. Maurice Beebe, "What Modernism Was," *Journal of Modern Literature* 3 (July 1974): 1065.

The discussion of the multifaceted concept of realism, in the final chapter, should help us realize why any deliberation of modernism as a literary or aesthetic concept belongs within a broader cultural framework in which modernism is to be seen as a semiotic and historical project. Expounding and employing the concept of realism is, broadly speaking, a way of understanding and naming the connection between the mimetic powers of literature and the prevalent social contracts of signification and communication. Realism is therefore a key term that in various ways highlights the social background against which modernism receives its significance as a “negative” practice, or as a poetics of the nonorganic text. Toward the end of my book these prominent aspects of modernist aesthetics will be brought to bear, in a dialectical manner, on a brief but broad inquiry into modern cultural configurations.

While this book inevitably has to enter the domain of classificatory criticism, my primary aim is not to settle questions concerning the placement of individual works and writers. To be sure, the basis and background of this work involve my awareness of modernism in history and my inevitably implied reading and understanding of modernist works. But this is neither a history of modernism nor an interpretation of a selection of modernist works. My main focus is on the formation of a salient concept, with a view to the critical and theoretical forces at work in engendering the respective paradigm. Moreover, as an observer of such concept formation, I make no claim of excluding myself from the discourse/debate at hand. On the contrary, as a participant in the controversy over the concept of modernism, I cannot dissociate myself from the wider socio-historical implications of that controversy.

For we are not just involved in questions of an isolated concept and its role in literary classification. What is at stake in the controversy over the concept of modernism is nothing less than the attempt to embrace conceptually—and thereby in a sense gain control over—those cultural and aesthetic agitations and changes which are seen to put a distinctively “modern” mark on literature and art, or even on Western culture in general. I say “gain control over” because I do see the debate about modernism as a *struggle* over the *meaning* of significant changes

that most critics recognize, starting in the latter half of the nineteenth century, but reaching an explosive stage in the first three decades of the twentieth. Modernism, in other words, is the "name" given to these changes, but as a significant name it has proven to be a highly troublesome signifier.

The changes "named" by the concept took place in a tumultuous era: an era of Western imperialism, enormous advances in science and technology, world war, communist revolutions, crisis in the capitalist economy, the rise of fascism. The turmoil of this era signals in several ways the "creation" of the contemporary world, and no reading of our world can overlook the way it emerged from these historical disruptions. The sweeping breadth of the concept of modernism seems to indicate that changes of enormous proportions are also seen to have occurred in literature and art. If this is so, and I tend to agree that it is, then any appraisal of these changes is going to be crucial for our understanding of the present literary and cultural situation.

Positioning modernism parallel to the tumultuous aspects of modernity, however, can lead to an unproductive view of its semiotic practices. The changes that can be observed in modernist aesthetics, the disruptions and breaks with tradition that it seems to call for, do not directly *reflect* social modernity or lend us an immediate access to its distinctive qualities. Most of us do not experience modernity as a mode of disruption, however many disruptive historical events we may be aware of. I find it more to the point to see modernism as an attempt to *interrupt* the modernity that we live and understand as a social, if not "normal," way of life.⁶ Such norms are not least buttressed by the various channels and media of communication, and this is where the interruptive practices of modernism ap-

6. The notions of a common subject ("we") and a collectively shared ("normal") way of life, even when limited to Western bourgeois reality, are bound to seem spurious in an age that many of "us" think of in terms of pluralism and endless "differences." It would be even more idealistic, however, to assume that the age of such notions has passed. Suffice it to say, at this stage, that the signs for "norms," while they remain functional, are always "under erasure." For a useful discussion of signs under erasure, see Gayatri Spivak's "Translator's Preface" to Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976).

pear in their most significant and characteristic forms. In refusing to communicate according to established socio-semiotic contracts, they seem to imply that there are other modes of communication to be looked for, or even some other modernity to be created.

The Making of Modernist Paradigms

THIS CHAPTER does not offer a comprehensive survey of the uses of our concept, but rather a critical inquiry into dominant, paradigmatic conceptions of what constitutes modernism. I shall examine how modernism has been understood and what the concept has been made to signify, or, to put it differently, how we collaborate with historical reality (including texts designated "modernist") in constructing the paradigm called "modernism."

The term itself appears to provide us with a semantic base on which to ground such an endeavor. "Modernism" signals a dialectical opposition to what is not functionally "modern," namely "tradition." But this pivotal characteristic seems to be progressively less prevalent in recent critical discourse, in part because we now often perceive modernist literature itself as a "tradition." Actually, the antitraditional aspects of modernism and their implications were played down at an early stage by writers and critics seeking an aesthetic order in which to ground a modern poetics. Thus, while the rage against prevalent traditions is perhaps the principal characteristic of modernism, and one that has provided it with a name, this feature has always been counteracted by a desire to forestall the anarchistic implications of such a stance. I am not thinking primarily of the attempts of Eliot, Pound, and others to create alternative, often highly personal and idiosyncratic, "tradi-

tions." This in itself can be seen as just another way of undermining the authority of tradition and unveiling the arbitrariness of the traditions that the modernists felt they were up against. I have in mind, rather, the more strictly formal-aesthetic politics of critics and commentators on modernism (some of whom were also practicing modernists). In their various guises, these approaches constitute a broad and powerful critical paradigm.

The Rage for Order

In his famous essay "Ulysses, Order, and Myth," which appeared in 1923, T. S. Eliot lays the groundwork for a great deal of subsequent criticism and appraisal of modernism. He contends that Joyce's use of Homer's *Odyssey* has the importance of "a scientific discovery," making *Ulysses* not a novel, because "the novel is a form which will no longer serve; it is because the novel, instead of being a form, was simply the expression of an age which had not sufficiently lost all form to feel the need of something stricter." This "something stricter" is the use of myth as "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."¹

Here Eliot strikes a chord that has been sounded in innumerable theories of modernism to this day. Modernism is viewed as a kind of aesthetic heroism, which in the face of the chaos of the modern world (very much a "fallen" world) sees art as the only dependable reality and as an ordering principle of a quasi-religious kind. The unity of art is supposedly a salvation from the shattered order of modern reality. The aesthetics of modernism have been made to look like a solution to Stephen Dedalus's problem in *Ulysses*, when he complains that history is a nightmare from which he is trying to awake. Eliot's aesthetics in fact strongly resembles Stephen's, presented in an ironic manner by Joyce in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*: "The esthetic image is first luminously apprehended as

1. Frank Kermode, ed., *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich/Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975), p. 177.

selfbounded and selfcontained upon the immeasurable background of space and time which it is not. You apprehend it as *one* thing. You see it as one whole. You apprehend its wholeness. That is *integritas*."² This organic theory of art, derived partly from classical, partly from romanticist aesthetics, is echoed in different ways in a great number of works on modernism—very often through a reference to Eliot's essay or Joyce's novel—and is frequently taken to constitute the center of the revolutionary *formal* awareness and emphasis that most critics detect in modernist works.

In "Spatial Form in Modern Literature," Joseph Frank says that for T. S. Eliot "the distinctive quality of a poetic sensibility is its capacity to form new wholes, to fuse seemingly disparate experiences into an organic unity."³ Frank finds that a spatial form of this kind is indeed the distinctive mark of "modern" literature, undermining the "inherent consecutiveness of language" (10) and suspending "the process of individual reference temporarily until the entire pattern of internal references can be apprehended as a unity" (13). In so doing modern literature locks past and present "in a timeless unity" and achieves a "transformation of the historical imagination into myth—an imagination for which time does not exist" (60).

Maurice Beebe relies partly on Frank in defining modernism, which he sees as being distinguished by four features: formalism and aesthetic autonomy; detachment and noncommitment or "'irony' in the sense of that term as used by the New Critics"; use of myth as a structuring device; and a development from Impressionism to reflexivism, centering its attention upon "its own creation and composition."⁴ There is no mention at all of the historical or social relevance of modernist

2. James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), p. 212. As an implied author Joyce is of course not uniformly ironic throughout the novel, but he wields the narrative voice in such a way that there is a fluid play of identification with and distance from the young aesthete. In view of their mode of presentation, it is surprising how literally Stephen's aesthetic theories have been read by critics as the author's forthright statements, if not his manifesto.

3. Joseph Frank, "Spatial Form in Modern Literature," *The Widening Gyre: Crisis and Mastery in Modern Literature* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1963), p. 10.

4. Beebe, "What Modernism Was," p. 1073.

works, to which Beebe actually refers to as “the closed worlds of Modernist art” (1077).

Such a portrayal of modernism, especially in the Anglo-American context, is clearly influenced by New Criticism, which Beebe does not fail to invoke. Eliot’s position of authority, both as poet and critic, is also instrumental in this particular New Critical construction of the modernist paradigm. It is crucial not so much because of Eliot’s view of the use of myth as a structuring device⁵—the New Critics were not all that interested in mythology—as because of his persistent emphasis on form as an autonomous vehicle of aesthetic significance. From a certain perspective, modernism, in its rejection of traditional social representation and in its heightening of formal awareness, would seem the ideal example of New Critical tenets and of the New Critical view of the poem as an isolated whole, whose unity is based on internal tensions that perhaps remain unresolved but nonetheless do not disturb the autonomy of the work. Indeed, when critics use the term “modernist criticism” they often seem to be referring to New Criticism, and they appear unaware that there need be no “natural” connection between modernist works and this particular critical or analytical paradigm.

To this day, however, critics persist in reading modernism through the spectacles of New Criticism. Recently this tendency has been apparent in the discussion surrounding post-modernism (see chapter 3), which is frequently seen as rejecting *this particular kind* of “modernism,” together with the aesthetics of the organic, unified, autonomous and “pure” work of art. Of course, one might point out another, similar connection between modernist literature and modern criticism and theory, namely that between modernism and Russian formalism, whose emphasis on the autonomy of the literary work—based on an opposition between “poetic” and “ordinary” or “communicative” language—prefigures that of New Criticism

5. As I shall discuss later, Eliot, in his essay on the mythic order of Joyce’s *Ulysses*, is actually not at all interested in the interpretive implications of mythological parallels or allusions. He is mainly concerned with securing a structural grid on which to latch the work that can find no such coherent structural means in the chaos of modern history. Hence, myth comes to serve as an aesthetic substitute for the “lost” whole of historical reality.