

# MODERNISM

## AN ANTHOLOGY



EDITED BY LAWRENCE RAINEY



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# *M*ODERNISM

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## Introduction

The modernists were giants, monsters of nature who loomed so large that contemporaries could only gape at them in awe. Consider the case of Donald Hall, an American poet who was 23 in 1951, a recent graduate of Harvard who had served as editor of the university's celebrated literary magazine, the *Advocate*, just as T. S. Eliot had once done; his early poems were already drawing recognition, he had just won a fellowship to Oxford, and he was traveling to London, armed with an invitation to meet T. S. Eliot, the most honored poet of his age, the man who only three years before had received the Nobel Prize for literature, and the author of the century's greatest poem, *The Waste Land*. Eliot, notwithstanding his many distinctions, was still fulfilling his mundane duties as an editor at the firm of Faber and Faber, and Hall had been told that his meeting with the great man would take place at the publisher's offices at 24 Russell Square. Hall was terrified. His appointment was for 3:00 in the afternoon. He turned up an hour early, then decided to kill time by scrutinizing the neighboring buildings. Finally, at 3:00, he was duly escorted to Eliot's small office and greeted by the great man himself. He turned out to be as diffident and distant as report had portrayed him. Their conversation went poorly. "I was so convinced of the monumentality of this moment – 'I will be speaking of this, ages hence' – that I weighed every word as if my great-grandchildren were listening in," Hall later recalled, "and I feared to let them down by speaking idiomatically, or by seeing the humor in anything." Eliot commented briefly on some of Hall's poems, the hour passed swiftly, and by 4:00 it was time to leave. Hall leapt to his feet, spluttered ponderous thanks, and awaited Eliot's farewell:

Then Eliot appeared to search for the right phrase with which to send me off. He looked me in the eyes, and set off into a slow, meandering sentence. "Let me see," said T. S. Eliot, "forty years ago I went from Harvard to Oxford. Now you are going from Harvard to Oxford. What advice can I give you?" He paused delicately, shrewdly, while I waited with greed for the words which I would repeat for the rest of my life, the advice from elder to younger, setting me on the road of emulation. When he had ticked off the comedian's exact milliseconds of pause, he said, "Have you any long underwear?"

I told him that I had not, and paused to buy some on my dazzled walk back to the hotel. I suppose it was six months before I woke up enough to laugh.<sup>1</sup>

The reader who comes to modernism for the first time faces much the same dilemma as Hall did. Modernism is preceded by its reputation, or even by several reputations: it is endowed with authority so monumental that a reader is tempted to overlook the very experience of encountering modernist works; or it is attended with such opprobrium (the modernists were all fascists or anti-Semites, or if not that, "elitists") that one might wonder why anyone had bothered to read them at all. It is easy, too easy, to slight the grisly comedy or miss the mordant wit, to skim the surface of dazzling surprises, to neglect the sheer wildness and irredeemable opacity at the heart of modernist works.

Declaring modernism "finished" and "over" and "dead" has been a recurrent gesture in academic literary studies. We could epitomize it by inventing an imaginary professor (call him Professor X) who, let us say in



1956, would write an essay titled, "What Was Modernism?"<sup>2</sup> The *frisson* of the title would have been twofold: the term "modernism" was still a relatively new coinage, quite *au courant*, yet Professor X was already describing it with the past tense. Yet this daring gesture had at least a semblance of reason. To observant contemporaries of Professor X it was clear that modernism was receding into the past. Eliot was no longer writing works that startled and disturbed with the ferocious power of *The Waste Land*; instead he was attempting to write what is called "a well-made play," one that would conform to the standards of West End theaters in London – and this after the first English production of *Waiting for Godot* in 1955, a work which might have demolished the notion of the well-made play forever. Yet *Waiting for Godot* itself can remind us just how difficult it was to assign an ending to modernism. Beckett, after all, had served for years as amanuensis to James Joyce, whose influence in his early works is unmistakable. Worse still, his career would continue well into the 1980s. Would it never end?

Our imaginary Professor X was not entirely mistaken in adopting the past tense in his question about modernism. For by 1956 it was true that many of the first generation or even the first and second generations of modernists were in their grave. William Butler Yeats had died in 1939; Virginia Woolf and James Joyce had passed away in 1941; Gertrude Stein in 1946; Wallace Stevens only months before the appearance of Professor X's imaginary essay, in 1955. William Carlos Williams had already had the first of several strokes, while Wyndham Lewis was now blind. Lewis would die in 1957, Williams in 1963, and Eliot in 1965, leaving behind only Marianne Moore and Ezra Pound, who met one another for the third and last time in 1969, before they died in 1972. Samuel Beckett, who would live on till 1989, had already become "the last modernist."<sup>3</sup>

If dating modernism's ending has been difficult, defining the term's meaning has become something of an academic obsession. The task is all the more difficult because the term has been extended to cover disparate yet cognate fields, acquiring different chronologies and shadings of meaning as it moves from art history to architecture to music and intellectual history. Art historians, for example, agree in assigning a definite beginning to modernism. "Look there," they will say, pointing to a color reproduction of Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (1863), or perhaps his *Olympia* (1865), or perhaps to the much later work, Picasso's *Demaiselles d'Avignon* (1907). "There is modernism, as plain as day." And music historians, however much they disagree about precursors and transitions, largely concur in citing Stravinsky's *Le Sacre de printemps* (1913) as the moment modernism appears in music. Architectural historians also disagree about precursors (the Crystal Palace in 1851?) and the steps that led to modernism's emergence; but while they are less inclined to name a specific building (Wright's Larkin Building of 1903? or his Robie House of 1906?) as marking an identifiable beginning, they agree in naming the grand figures of architectural modernism (Frank Lloyd Wright, Walter Gropius, Le Corbusier, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe), in specifying its basic principles (rationalism, functionalism, anti-ornamentalism, etc.), and even in tracing a broad, narrative arc in which the architectural idiom of daring pioneers slowly becomes the lingua franca of corporate office buildings and reigns supreme in the International Style of the 1950s. Such unanimity is much less prevalent in literary studies, for reasons we shall soon see.

One reason why the term "modernism" has undergone such a remarkable extension in the range of materials it can cover in English may be simply the result of historical-linguistic accident. In Italian, for example, the semantic potential of the cognate term *modernismo* had already been largely consumed by 1900, when it became current usage to designate a grouping of Catholic theologians and reformers who wanted the church to modernize. The same is true of the cognate terms in French (*le modernisme*) and German (*der Modernismus*), and even today "modernism" in either language is not used to demarcate an artistic and cultural phenomenon, but a theological one. (In both instead, one speaks of "the modern," or *le moderne*, *die Moderne*; and while some Italian academics have recently adopted the term *modernismo* in a manner analogous to that of Anglo-American usage, it has still not seeped into journalism or popular speech.) In the predominantly Protestant culture of the English-speaking world, instead, "modernism" was an invitingly empty term, a noun awaiting semantic content.

We should remember, too, that even the Anglophone adoption of "modernism" was relatively late and recent. Graham Hough, writing in 1960, wasn't sure what to call the phenomenon he was attempting to describe:

The years between 1910 and the Second World War saw a revolution in the literature of the English language as momentous as the Romantic one of a century before... [But it] has not yet acquired a name.<sup>4</sup>

And one year later, when Boris Ford edited *The Modern Age*, the last volume in the *Pelican Guide to English Literature*, the term "modernism" still made no appearance.<sup>5</sup> Only a decade further on, however, and the term was being freely used by Bernard Bergonzi in his essay on "The Advent of Modernism."<sup>6</sup> Somewhere between 1956, then, when Professor X had first pondered "What Was Modernism," and 1971, when Bernard Bergonzi felt that he could confidently trace "The Advent of Modernism," the term acquired a discernible currency among literary critics, shorthand to designate what Hough had called "a revolution in the literature of the English language," a change which took place during "the years between 1910 and the Second World War." From literary studies the term migrated into other disciplines of the humanities, the history of art, music, and architecture. "Modernism is a term now frequently used," Peter Faulkner could write in 1983, "in discussions of twentieth-century literature – indeed, of *all forms of twentieth-century art*" (italics mine).<sup>7</sup> Such was the vertiginous history of a word. But what did it mean? Or perhaps we should ask, what has it meant in various times and places?

If we return to Graham Hough for a moment, we can glimpse one answer, or maybe two answers, to that question: "The years between 1910 and the Second World War saw a revolution in the literature of the English language as momentous as the Romantic one of a century before..."<sup>8</sup> Hough, quite plainly, was alluding to a thesis about modernism which had gathered around the figure of T. S. Eliot. A deeply skeptical man who had always harbored reservations about the assumptions guiding Romantic culture and their lingering effects on the mindset of the twentieth century, in 1928 Eliot had announced a deep transformation of his life and thought: his express adherence to a programmatic aesthetics, his new-found affiliation with conservative politics, and his conversion to Christianity. He was, he now declared, a "classicist in literature, a royalist in politics, and anglo-Catholic in religion."<sup>9</sup> Those views, to which Eliot adhered for the rest of his life, could in turn be roughly squared with some of Ezra Pound's tenets. True, Pound's mature political views were considerably more extreme than Eliot's bland toryism (he was an early and ardent supporter of Mussolini), and he was a secularist who sometimes dreamed of an impossible return to some pre-Christian or mythological worldview. Yet he shared Eliot's distrust for Romantic culture and the Victorian heritage, and he intermittently issued declarations that might be considered "classicist." Moreover, their later divergences mattered less than their early collaboration in the years 1914–22. Yes, Hough regretted that the "revolution in the literature of the English language" had "not yet acquired a name," but he now proposed dubbing it not "modernism," but "Imagism," a name which had been adopted by Ezra Pound and a handful of other poets in 1912 to designate their programmatic ambitions. "Imagist ideas," wrote Hough, "are at the centre of the characteristic poetic procedures of our time."<sup>10</sup>

Though nobody would urge this thesis with such bluntness today, it summarized one early consensus about modernism. Its origins were somehow to be discerned in the early formulations of Ezra Pound, formulations whose premises had been deepened and extended by Eliot's work, ultimately bringing about a profound change in the literary and cultural climate of the age. This, in short, was one story that could be told about modernism, one which could also be broadened to accommodate Joyce, or at least one version of Joyce. After all, *Ulysses* had been published serially in the same reviews that sheltered Eliot and Pound. He too, despite the superficial unruliness of his work, might somehow be assimilated to a vague aesthetics of neoclassicism: the chaotic surface merely concealed the deep symbolic structures that shaped and informed his great work, structures that evinced a search for order every bit as profound as Pound's or Eliot's. London, then, was the critical setting for modernism, and the extraordinary decade that ran from 1912 to 1922, the *annus mirabilis*, culminating in the publication of *The Waste Land* (1922) and *Ulysses* (1922), was the critical period for debate and further investigation.

Another quite different account could also be given, however; one that was promulgated in its exemplary form in the pedagogy of that distinguished critic and teacher, Harry Levin. From the 1950s well into the 1970s, Levin taught an almost legendary, year-long course at Harvard on "Joyce, Proust, and Mann." Students were required to read all of *A la recherche*, all of *Ulysses*, and one or more novels by Thomas Mann, and it was even stipulated that they read either the French or the German author in the original. On many it left an indelible impression, and even today one can hear echoes of it in critical debates when these three names

are unfurled like some triumvirate of High Modernism. “High Modernism” – and those capital letters are essential – was seen as both an extension of late Symbolism and an intransigent enactment of aesthetic aloofness. The Joyce which emerged from this view was lofty and patrician, utterly contemptuous of popular culture, and the *Ulysses* which came out of it was not the wild, unruly work which many have admired, but one in which every detail had been cunningly devised to accord with the dictates of a rigorous, coherent symbolic structure. Modernism, in this view, was a pan-European and cosmopolitan phenomenon, one promulgated by an international community effectively removed from the contingencies of time and place. Indeed, one key component of this account was the assertion that it was modernism’s central achievement to have devised rigorous, difficult, yet coherent forms that were set over and against the chaotic contingencies of the present. And support for that view could be found among the modernists themselves. In a famous review of *Ulysses*, published in 1923, T. S. Eliot had argued that Joyce’s use of Homeric myth had provided “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” (see p. 167 this edition). Here was a view that could easily accommodate Yeats, for example, who became no longer an Irish poet mired in the tedious details of Irish politics, but an English-language counterpart to an aesthete such as Paul Valéry, one who shared with Joyce a concern with mythic or similar kinds of order. Here, in short, was another story one could tell about modernism, one in which its more unruly energies were seen as disciplined and controlled under the aegis of form, form dictated by mythic and symbolic structures located outside and against the historical horrors of the modern world.

Hough and Levin epitomize two of the recurrent stories or paradigms that have been invoked to account for modernism, one intensely focused on London and another resolutely breezing across the Continent in search of symbolic structure and intransigent aestheticism. For all their self-evident weaknesses, both identified points of debate which have continued into the present, albeit in much-altered terms. Though the kind of primacy which Hough assigned the London years of 1912 to 1922 is asserted by few scholars today, that place and time continue to exert an abiding fascination even now. Likewise, while few would accept the easy conflation of very different artists and traditions which Levin urged, the relationship between Anglo-American modernism and its Continental counterparts has remained a perennial subject of discussion, a topic which is also implicit in the shape and structure of this volume.

Another approach to modernism has been less interested in the stories or paradigms that we might use to account for modernism, more interested in modernism as an *-ism*, i.e. a body of doctrines (something on the order of stoicism or communism), a systematic or at least coherent collection of principles, ideas, or attitudes. Modernism, in this view, has identifiable contents, an ensemble of attitudes which either consciously or unconsciously were shared by the major modernists, or were embodied in their works. And these ideas – or so goes one important variant of this argument – had some significant relationship to the social and historical world in which they developed, even if that relationship was largely or wholly negative. Modernism, in short, is related to modernization, perhaps a product of it, perhaps a symptom of it, perhaps a reaction against it, or perhaps something that emerges in tandem with it. Stated so baldly and abstractly, such a view might seem to have little to commend it. But consider the prose of Marshall Berman:

The maelstrom of modern life has been fed from many sources: great discoveries in the physical sciences, changing our images of the universe and our place in it; the industrialization of production, which transforms scientific knowledge into technology, creates new human environments and destroys old ones, speeds up the whole tempo of life, generates new forms of corporate power and class struggle; immense demographic upheavals, severing millions of people from their ancestral habitats, hurtling them halfway across the world into new lives; rapid and often cataclysmic urban growth; systems of mass communication, dynamic in their development, enveloping and binding together the most diverse people and societies; increasingly powerful national states, bureaucratically structured and operated, constantly striving to expand their powers; mass social movements of people, and peoples, challenging their political and economic rulers, striving to gain some control over their lives; finally, bearing and driving all these people and institutions along, an ever-expanding, drastically fluctuating capitalist world market. In the twentieth century, the social processes that bring this maelstrom into being and keep it in a state of perpetual becoming, have come to be called “modernization.”

The visions and ideals nourished by these processes, Berman goes on, have “come to be loosely grouped together under the name of ‘modernism.’”<sup>11</sup> But many observers have found this definition of “modernism” much too vague, and even the definition of “modernization” which Berman offers, when stripped of its

overheated prose, amounts to little more than a familiar catalogue often recited by sociologists of modernity: science, technology, industrialization, demographic changes, increasing urbanization, new mass communications technologies, growing state and corporate bureaucracies with attendant management systems. All can be readily found in the nineteenth century as well, and in themselves they hardly suffice to account for the precipitous rise of literary modernism, or contribute much to accounting for the dense specificity of modernist works.

Variants of arguments about modernism's contents or principles give importance to modernist attitudes towards history or the past, while others stress changing views of space and time. An extreme version of the latter has been argued by Stephen Kern in *The Culture of Time and Space, 1880–1918*. According to this account, sweeping changes in technology and culture “created distinctive new modes of thinking about and experiencing time and space,” modes that can be readily discerned in artworks by the Italian Futurists or the French Cubists.<sup>12</sup> The problem with this argument is that the abstractions about space and time lack any organic connection with the works which Kern adduces; his readings of artworks remain wooden and unconvincing, strangely out of touch with contemporary art-historical writing, and almost willfully blind to aesthetic texture.

A very different kind of approach has focused not on the contents of modernism, not on the ideas or attitudes which it embodied or expressed, but on its procedures, the various devices, techniques, stratagems, and strategies by which modernist works achieve their effects. If modernism has a history, in such accounts, it is essentially a formal one, with one innovation paving the way or clearing the path for another. Multiple and unsteady points of view, stream of consciousness, illusionism with a self-consciousness of formal structure, collage, montage, juxtaposition, a display of raw medium (language, sound), a unified but lost order beneath apparent fragmentation – these are only a few of the techniques which have been repeatedly highlighted in these discussions. Such accounts, generally formalist in orientation, are often rather Whiggish in nature, with each new device or technique merely a prelude to still further innovation. In the most extreme formulations, the modernists even anticipate many of the concerns and devices which have been thought to characterize postmodern writing and art. Or in more comic variants, the term “postmodernist” is elevated to mean something like “very good” or “praiseworthy” and retroactively applied to individual modernists: Gertrude Stein or Ezra Pound, for example, are really “postmodernists” *avant la lettre*, and we should ignore their perverse propensity to associate with misogynists such as Picasso or that heir of late symbolism and proponent of neoclassicism, T. S. Eliot.<sup>13</sup>

The necessarily schematic account which I have just given suffices to indicate some of the major poles of thinking which have governed attempts to account for modernism. In recent years a new line of argumentation has attempted to draw a firm distinction between modernism and the historical avant-garde, one that allegedly pivots on their attitude toward popular culture. In this view, modernism is characterized above all by its suspicious, even hostile attitude towards the popular. “Mass culture has always been the hidden subtext of the modernist project,” one in which popular culture is construed as a threat of encroaching formlessness, gendered as female, and held at bay by affirming and redefining the boundaries between art and inauthentic mass culture. Here lies the dividing line between modernism and the avant-garde. “The avant garde,” instead, “attempts to subvert art’s autonomy, its artificial separation from life, and its institutionalization as ‘high art,’” and this impulse accounts for its “urge to validate other, formerly neglected or ostracized forms of cultural expression,” chief among them popular culture. Modernism, in this view, becomes little more than a reactionary, even paranoid, fear of popular culture. Moreover, attached to this thesis about the avant-garde and modernism is a second claim: postmodernism, it is urged, seeks “to negotiate forms of high art with certain forms and genres of mass culture and the culture of everyday life,” and therefore it is the legitimate heir of the historical avant-garde.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, “postmodernism itself can now be described as a search for a viable tradition apart from, say, the Proust–Joyce–Mann triad and outside the canon of classical modernism.”<sup>15</sup>

Our old friends from Harry Levin’s famous class have come back to haunt us – and with a vengeance. Yet many would quarrel with this curiously restricted definition of “classical modernism.” After all, Thomas Mann’s lifelong ambition was to develop a prose style that would approximate the style of Goethe’s late masterpiece *Elective Affinities* (*Wahlverwandtschaften*) (1809). But is this really an ambition that one would normally classify as modernist? Many would demur. Yes, Mann wrote a number of novels that take up themes and motifs found in modernism; but that does not make him a modernist, anymore than H. G. Wells

becomes a modernist because of the modernist motifs discernible in his wonderful romp of a novel, *Tono-Bungay* (1908). Proust's position is notoriously complicated, and we can set him aside for now. But to have Joyce cited in the context of a thesis that modernism is hostile to popular culture is truly astonishing. For what book is more charged with the detritus of popular culture, each artifact treated respectfully or even lovingly, than *Ulysses*? And for some readers the central episodes of *Ulysses* are directly indebted to the structure of middle-brow forms such as British pantomime and music hall.<sup>16</sup>

An alternative approach, instead, has argued that it is futile to search for an ensemble of modernist ideas or attitudes (whether towards time, space, history, etc.) or to isolate a set of formal devices (collage, montage, stream-of-consciousness, juxtaposition, etc.), or even to correlate items from both categories and urge that together these embodied a vague yet potent ideology that challenged dominant cultural norms, assaulted the bourgeois concept of art, or anticipated the concerns of postmodernism. Such arguments are sustained only by confining one's attention to conceptual and formal values viewed in isolation from their social actualization. Viewed in institutional terms, the avant-garde was neither more nor less than a structural feature within the institutional configuration of modernism, the whole constituted by a specific array of marketing and publicity structures that were integrated in varying degrees with the larger economic apparatus of its time. Modernism itself, on this view, was more than just a series of texts, or a set of ideas that found expression in them, or a set of devices in which those were embodied. It was a social reality, a constellation of agents and practices that converged in the production, marketing, and publicization of an idiom, a shareable and serviceable language within the family of twentieth-century tongues. The institutional profile of that social constellation can be traced in the staging venues and social spaces where it operated – the salons and lecture halls, the little reviews and the deluxe or limited editions – the agoras in which the changing relations among authors and audiences were enacted, and in which the work, the “business” of modernism, got done. What drove that ensemble of institutions was a small elite of patron-investors: John Quinn, Harriet Shaw Weaver, Scofield Thayer, James Sibley Watson Jr., Otto Kahn, Peggy Guggenheim, the author Bryher – to name just a few. It was their money which funded the little reviews and purchased the limited or deluxe editions, both venues that were located in a profoundly ambiguous social space, simultaneously sequestered and semi-withdrawn from the larger institution of publishing, and instead situated within a submarket of collecting. What the patron-investors provided with their subsidies and endowments was an institutional space momentarily immune to the pressures of an expansive and expanding mass culture. Yet that same space was simultaneously being transformed by its proximity to the small (and hence malleable) submarket for rare books and deluxe editions, a submarket just then being “modernized,” just then becoming aware of the potential value of works by authors still living, in part as a result of its interconnectedness with the world of collecting in the visual arts. Patronage was pervasive. Ezra Pound, James Joyce, T. S. Eliot, W. B. Yeats, Marianne Moore, the American poet H. D., Wyndham Lewis, Djuna Barnes – all of them received intermittent or sustained patronage in their careers. Only those who were already well-to-do or even wealthy, such as Virginia Woolf and Gertrude Stein, survived without it. Moreover, even those few who worked for a living, such as the insurance executive Wallace Stevens or the practicing doctor William Carlos Williams, were its beneficiaries insofar as the journals in which they published, such as the *Dial* (widely considered the preeminent review of Anglo-American literary modernism from 1920 to 1929), were sustained by patronage on a truly massive scale. How massive? The annual deficits for the *Dial* from 1920 through 1922 were, respectively, \$100,000, \$54,000, and \$65,000, a cumulative deficit of \$220,000 that was paid for by its two patrons at the rate of \$4,000 per month from each. This was at a time when the annual salary of the private secretary to the editor of *Vanity Fair* was \$1,400. A speculative reader may try to guess how much remuneration the same position receives today and accordingly scale up the size of the subsidy which kept the *Dial* afloat, translating it into current dollars. The result is staggering.

Modernism's interchanges with the emerging worlds of consumerism, fashion, and display were far more complicated, more ambiguous than often assumed. At times they brought modernism perilously close to being the kind of phenomenon that art critics deride with the scathing term “smart art.” But they may also have been productive as well. The ambiguity of modernism's institutional status may itself account for much of its perennial uncertainty concerning the nature of representation in art, its insistent pressure on the means by which illusions and likenesses are made. Modernism's radical interrogation of the cultural repertoire, which permanently altered the relations of the arts with society at large, may owe much to its equivocal status



as an institution that was half-withdrawn from, yet half-nestled within, the larger apparatus of cultural production.<sup>17</sup> Academic critics who postulate a schematic opposition between “the subversive, experimental energies of the avant-garde culture of the early part of the century” and the ways in which those were later “formulated, controlled, contained, marketed and cancelled” in the university or the museum, bear witness only to the poverty of historical imagination with which they address the past.<sup>18</sup>

But where does modernism stand today? What is its status among contemporary critics or intellectual historians, and is it still considered a compelling resource for the present? These questions are difficult to answer, in large part because every attempt to situate modernism within a narrative of cultural history inevitably brushes up against a problem at once historical and philosophical: what is the norm or background against which modernism is being assessed? Earlier critics who followed some of T. S. Eliot’s hints, for example, typically set modernism against the background of Romanticism and either tacitly or explicitly characterized it as a form of neoclassicism. But Eliot’s authority is no longer as monolithic as it was, and increasingly it is recognized that the neoclassical leanings of the later Eliot may be not only a poor guide to modernism, but also a poor guide to the earlier Eliot. Perhaps another approach to this issue might begin by taking up the question of narrative.

Whatever literary modernism was, it was impatient with or overtly hostile to received conventions of fiction. That hostility is often perceived as part of modernism’s impulse to repudiate that Victorian literature (above all fiction), that had sold itself to a mass reading public – yet another instance of modernism’s contempt for popular culture. But it may be more productive to take a more circuitous route and to situate the conventions of narrative in a broader perspective by turning back to Aristotle’s *Poetics*, that seminal meditation on tragedy and epic, or fiction, which has exerted such influence over Western aesthetics. Aristotle, we recall, was bent on defending imaginative mimesis, or fictional resemblance, against the charges which Plato had earlier leveled against it, charges which had ultimately led Plato to exclude poets from his ideal Republic. For Aristotle, therefore, it was necessary to show that mimesis leads to forms of comprehension or understanding which have philosophical significance. To do so, he puts the experience of wonder at the heart of mimesis, for elsewhere Aristotle (following the lead of Plato) had placed wonder at the very origins of philosophy, a sign of humanity’s primordial thirst for comprehension. The wonderful, therefore, becomes crucial to literary experience as well. Discussing those famous emotions, fear and pity, which tragedy must inspire, Aristotle writes toward the end of chapter 9:

Such an effect is best produced when the events come on by surprise; and the effect is heightened *when*, at the same time, *they happen on account of one another*. The tragic wonder [*thaumaston*] will then be greater than if they happened of themselves, or by accident; for even coincidences are most wonderful when they have an air of design.<sup>19</sup>

Aristotle is saying that a fictional event can and should be surprising (or wonderful), but at the same time it must have an intelligible relationship with antecedent events, must entail sequential intelligibility. It may be surprising or shocking, for example, that Oedipus is blinded. But he must not be merely the victim of bad luck or the caprices of the gods; his fate must be a consequence of his earlier actions, must entail the kind of connectedness and relatedness which, if it is discerned by the audience, entails a form of comprehension that is analogous to, or of the same sort as, the comprehension which is achieved by philosophy.

Elsewhere, however, in a later part of the *Poetics* (ch. 24), Aristotle also expresses contradictory views about the wonderful or the marvelous:

The element of the wonderful is required in tragedy. The irrational, on which the wonderful depends for its chief effects, has wider scope in epic poetry, because there the person is not seen [i.e., doesn’t appear in the flesh onstage]. Thus, the pursuit of Hector [in Bk. 22 of the *Iliad*] would be ludicrous if placed upon the stage – the Greeks standing still and not joining in the pursuit, and Achilles waving them back. But in the epic poem this absurdity passes unnoticed. Now the wonderful is pleasing; a sign of this is the fact that everyone tells a story with some addition of his own, knowing that his hearers like it. . . . Accordingly, the poet should prefer probable impossibilities to improbable possibilities. The tragic plot must not be composed of irrational parts. Everything irrational should, if possible, be excluded; or, at all events, it should lie outside the action of the play.<sup>20</sup>

This is a curious passage. For while Aristotle plainly relates the wonderful to the irrational – “the irrational, on which the wonderful depends for its chief effects” – he also urges that every element of the irrational be

excluded from tragic plots, a stipulation that would seem to entail excluding the wonderful as well, even though Aristotle elsewhere (ch. 9) makes wonder indispensable to the literary experience and assigns it kinship to pity and fear. One way to explain this contradiction would be to follow the suggestion of Aristotle's finest contemporary commentator, Stephen Halliwell, who urges that "there are degrees of wonder, which lies on the boundary between the explicable and the inexplicable, and so can slip into the latter (and hence become the irrational) or, properly used, may stimulate and challenge understanding."<sup>21</sup> In any event, wonder retains a troubled and potentially troubling status in Aristotelian aesthetics. But why should that matter in relation to modernism? To answer that we need a broad account of the place which Aristotle's aesthetics have come to occupy in modern cultural history.

The recovery of Aristotle during the Renaissance was one of the great achievements of the humanists. But it also dealt a virtual death-blow to the reputation of Dante, the greatest poet of the Middle Ages. For if there was ever a work in which there was an excess of the wonderful, a term explicitly related to the appearance of the divine in Aristotle's example from Book 22 of the *Iliad*, it is the *Divine Comedy*. The miraculous, a strong version of the wonderful, is pervasive in Dante's work. But Renaissance theorists of the epic, enthralled by Aristotle, would have none of it. So complete was the Renaissance demolition of Dante's masterpiece that from 1598 to 1703, a period of more than a century, only three editions of the *Divina Commedia* sufficed to satisfy demand in the whole of Western Christendom. Aristotle was the great theorist of realism, demanding that works have a high degree of spatiotemporal, logical, and causal connectedness; and it should also come as no surprise that Henry Fielding should have invoked the *Poetics* as his guiding light in the preface to *Joseph Andrews* (1742), that seminal work for the foundation of the English novel.

All which should give us a view of sufficient breadth to permit a sketch of modernism's place within a broader cultural history. For if we recognize that the wonderful, cognate with shocks and surprises, lies on the border of the inexplicable, we also begin to glimpse the discontinuous yet coherent outline of its family resemblance to terms which predominate in that most common yet legitimate complaint about modernism, its difficulty, its wild and irredeemable opacity, its resolute insistence on wonder so condensed that it turns into horror. Modernism, with all its machineries of extremism, was anything but eager to resolve the experience of wonder/horror into the ready comprehensibility of spatiotemporal and logical-causal connectedness. Quite the contrary. Its antinarrative aesthetics constituted an unprecedented rupture with a major strand, perhaps *the* major strand, of post-Renaissance aesthetics in the West.

To enquire about the cultural status of modernism today, then, may entail asking two further questions. One might be to ask what critics and intellectual historians posterior to the modernists have made of this recalcitrant, unruly heritage. There is no single answer, of course. Critics in the 1960s and 1970s still wrote in the shadow of Eliot's enormous reputation; modernism, it was held, was a reaction against Romanticism, and individual works by other authors were cajoled to conform to some vague standard of neoclassicism. Hugh Kenner, a ferociously intelligent and delightful contrarian, held out for an alternative view: the first half of the twentieth century was not the age of Eliot, but *The Pound Era*. But the advent of fiction and architecture that was labeled "postmodern" in the 1970s and 1980s made the question of defining modernism both less urgent and more urgent. Modernism was no longer the cutting edge in the arts; yet it was indispensable to understand it if one was to come to terms with contemporary developments. In this new climate, attempts to characterize modernism were often advanced with the idea of defending, justifying, or advocating the postmodern over and against modernism. The result was dispiriting, a travesty which eviscerated modernism of its wild opacity and reduced it to little more than a collection of the most reactionary political views which modernists such as Wyndham Lewis, T. S. Eliot, and Ezra Pound had adopted during the 1930s. Modernism was a closed, hermetic, elitist, misogynist, homophobic, moderately liberal or conservative (at best), reactionary (at second best), Fascist (at worst), and anti-Semitic (is there worse than worst?) movement which had cloaked its nefarious ideology under a spurious neoclassicism, a factitious formalism of the finished work of art. A sentence such as the immediately preceding became routine during the decade or so that ran from roughly 1985 to 1995. But since then, the climate has changed again. Postmodernism, which had been defined as anything from an arched eyebrow to a fundamental reordering of our perception of ourselves and our place in the world, is plainly waning in prestige. In literature, especially, it has been dismissed as little more than fiction and poetry for overeducated white males. The rise of ethnic fictions has been accompanied by a discernible revival of realism, sometimes labeled neorealism, while interest in postcolonialism has entailed a return to the kinds of systemic issues (globalization, diasporic or

cosmopolitan communities) that have formed part of the modernism and modernity debates. Meanwhile, quietly and tenaciously, feminist critics have inexorably altered the scope of works included in the modernist canon: authors once deemed classic but then strangely forgotten (such as Gertrude Stein), authors swiftly hailed but just as swiftly forgotten (Djuna Barnes), and authors utterly forgotten but newly esteemed (Mary Butts), occupy a far more central place in the contemporary canon of modernism. Race, and the way it permeated modernist thinking about language and the arts, has also acquired a new centrality.<sup>22</sup>

Such changes might be easily dismissed as mere matters of academic fashion. But such a judgment would be premature. Of course the academy is prone to mercurial changes in fashion; but the same is true for journalism or even medicine. All these institutions form part of a complex civil society, and one dismisses such changes only at one's peril. Their internal debates inevitably filter out to form part of our common culture, however fractured and overloaded with information it may be.

There is a second, more urgent question embedded in the necessarily schematic account of how modernism has fared at the hands of critics since the 1960s, a question about the place which the future assumes in giving narrative shape and significance to events (or cultural events, such as modernism) which took place in the past. The philosopher Arthur Danto has usefully pointed out both the gaps and the possibilities created by shifting historical horizons. On the one hand, without a knowledge of events that are later to the one that we are describing, our historical account may be seriously inadequate and incomplete. On the other hand, we should be wary of "descriptions of events . . . which make an essential reference to later events – events future to the time at which the description is given. In effect [such works] are trying to write the history of what happens *before* it has happened, and to give accounts of the past based upon accounts of the future."<sup>23</sup> But how can we thread our way between these conflicting imperatives?

Jürgen Habermas, in remarks directly indebted to Danto, has also emphasized the extent to which knowledge of the future is indispensable to enabling accounts of the past:

Historical accounts make use of narrative statements. They are called narrative because they present events as elements of stories [*Geschichten*]. Stories have a beginning and an end; they are held together by an action. Historical events are reconstructed within the reference system of a story. They cannot be presented without relation to other, later events . . . The sentence, "The thirty years war began in 1618," presupposes that at least those events have elapsed which are relevant for the history of the war up to the Peace of Westphalia, events that could not have been narrated by any observer at the outbreak of the war. . . . The predicates with which an event is narratively presented require the appearance of later events in the light of which the event in question appears as an historical event.<sup>24</sup>

Habermas, in effect, is reminding us how improbable is the imaginary scenario in which a German burgher of 1618 runs through his town shouting, "Oh my God! Today is the first day of the Thirty Years War!" There is nothing wrong with a historian narrating events from a perspective in time future to his subject-matter, of course, or knowing more about that subject than its contemporaries could have – e.g. the length of a given war. "But such knowledge," Michael André Bernstein has warned, "should not delude the historian into thinking that the future was inevitable simply because it happened, nor should he use it to judge the way contemporaries, existing without such information, viewed their own circumstances and decided upon particular courses of action."<sup>25</sup>

This is pertinent to the question about the status of modernism because we are still so uncertain about which events will have to take place before we can give an adequate account of its significance. If postmodernism is now a spent force and neorealism is increasingly prevalent (it is certainly true at present that realism dominates all creative writing programs in the US), then perhaps a great age of literary experimentalism has simply drawn to a close, one inaugurated and sanctioned by modernism, one extended and finally depleted in postmodernism. But even that term, "experimentalism," puts too much emphasis on the purely formal dimensions of modernist writing and gives too little weight to the grim and grisly qualities of modernism, the tattered fabric of interruptions, gaps, and ruptures that make up modernist writing. Still, if nothing else, such an account reopens the question of modernism to a new generation of readers whose own experience of contemporary writing will inevitably be formed in ongoing dialogue with the contradictory heritage of modernism.



As for the modernists themselves, they could be disconcertingly cavalier about the transmission of their work to the future. Once again an example from T. S. Eliot springs to mind. Late in his life, in 1962, he was approached by a 17-year-old high school student about doing an interview. His claim on Eliot's attention was exceedingly slight: his parents had hosted dinners for Valerie Eliot, his second wife, before her marriage. But Eliot was never one to forget a kindness and he promptly agreed, even though the publication would only appear in a school magazine. Young Tim Jeal duly performed the interview, carefully gave the resultant text for approval to the illustrious interviewee, and finally sent it off to the printer. Proofs were subsequently checked by Jeal, his co-editor, and even a helpful teacher. Six weeks later, the moment at last came when the long-awaited publication arrived in the post. Jeal opened it eagerly, only to find to his horror that in every instance where the words "Waste Land" should have appeared, the word "Washstand" had been substituted. Horrified, Jeal telephoned Eliot and nervously explained that he had to come over right away, that something terrible had happened. When he arrived at Eliot's home, he hastily recounted the inexplicable disaster, then stood in terrified silence, awaiting the great man's castigation. A splutter broke from Eliot's lips, then another much louder and deeper, then a third so deep that it forced him to sit down. Eliot was laughing uncontrollably.

Eliot eventually calmed down and suggested to Jeal that he insert an erratum slip into the issues, which would more than suffice to rectify the error. As for himself, however, he wanted 12 copies of the journal – uncorrected and without the erratum slip, raw "Washstand." Later he wrote his final letter to young Jeal:

When you have had as much experience of printers' errors as I have, you will not worry so much when you find a few. . . . I was delighted when I found *The Waste Land* turned into *The Washstand*. And there is another point worth mentioning. Some people (and a few libraries) now collect first editions of anything I write; and collectors are just as crazy as stamp collectors: if there is a misprint, that makes a first edition more valuable. In a few years time *The Washstand* text will be worth much more than *The Waste Land*.<sup>26</sup>

It might almost have been an allegory for critical understanding of modernism. The more carefully we scrutinize *The Waste Land*, the more we get *The Washstand*. But perhaps, if T. S. Eliot was right, that is no bad thing.

#### NOTES

- 1 Donald Hall, *Remembering Poets* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), 91–2.
- 2 I am alluding to a famous essay by Harry Levin, "What Was Modernism?," first published in Stanley Burnshaw (ed.), *Varieties of Literary Experience* (New York: New York University Press, 1962), 307–29, and later collected in Harry Levin, *Refractions: Essays in Comparative Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966).
- 3 See Anthony Cronin, *Samuel Beckett: the Last Modernist* (London: HarperCollins, 1996).
- 4 Graham Hough, *Image and Experience: Studies in a Literary Revolution* (London: Duckworth, 1960), 4–5.
- 5 Boris Ford, *The Modern Age* (London: Penguin, 1961), vol. 7 in *The Pelican Guide to English Literature*.
- 6 Bernard Bergonzi, "The Advent of Modernism," in Bergonzi (ed.), *The Twentieth Century*, vol. 7 in *The Sphere History of Literature in the English Language* (London: Barrie and Jenkins, 1970).
- 7 Peter Faulkner, *Modernism* (London: Methuen, 1977), ix.
- 8 Hough, *Image and Experience*, 5.
- 9 T. S. Eliot, *For Lancelot Andrewes* (London: Faber and Gwyer, 1928), ix.
- 10 Hough, *Image and Experience*, 5.
- 11 Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1982), 16.
- 12 Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space, 1880–1918* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 1.
- 13 The best examples of this kind of work are the many studies by Marjorie Perloff, which repeatedly turn on a distinction between a poetics derived from Symbolism (Eliot is the wicked exemplar of this trend), and an anti-Symbolist poetics (Pound, Marinetti, Gertrude Stein, and various postmodern poets are the good exemplars of this trend): see *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981); *The Futurist Moment: Avant-Garde, Avant Guerre, and the Language of Rupture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986); *Radical Aritifice: Writing Poetry in the Age of Media* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); *Wittgenstein's Ladder: Poetic Language and the Strangeness of the Ordinary* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).