

*Form and Society  
in Modern Literature*

Thomas C. Foster

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# Preface

This study grew out of a sense of frustration I felt when I first began to study Modernist literature seriously. I found that the habits and strategies of reading I had acquired in my earlier studies of Romantic and Victorian works availed me little, while the literary theories I turned to that were roughly contemporary with Modernism, specifically New Criticism and archetypal-mythic criticism, were little better. It seemed to me that the readings I was able to generate were incomplete; while they explained parts of the work very well, they stopped short of dealing with the whole of the works. And although Marxism provided a genuine alternative to those approaches, that alternative seemed to have a deeply ingrained and even constitutional hostility to Modernism. A great deal of commentary on Modernist works, and here *Ulysses* and *The Waste Land* are prime examples, has followed the tentative lines suggested by the writers themselves, and a great deal more has been a reaction against them, a retrenchment of earlier principles and methods in the face of novelty. So, the dilemma I found myself confronting, in general terms at least, seemed to me characteristic of criticism's relation to Modern literature.

Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses* is a case in point. When I first read that book, I was struck by a conviction that it was a

novel—that it had unity and that it deserved attention as a whole—as one of Faulkner's best novels. For a long while, I labored to show that it was a single unit and that the essential structure of the narrative, from the whole novel down to individual sentences, was of a piece. I delivered a paper on the subject and began to feel pretty confident that I had accomplished my goal. Then another question occurred to me: having proved that the novel had unity, what had I said? The problem soon became less one of unity than of how I could understand that unity, that structure Faulkner elected to use, within the context about which he is writing. In a fairly short period of time, I found my whole approach to the question of poetic autonomy shifting. I had worked previously with the unstated assumption that I was studying self-contained objects with beginnings, middles, and ends, and that these objects, like Keats's urn, were oblivious to their surroundings. I now realized that my earlier assumptions were unsatisfactory, but I had not yet found anything with which to replace them.

Several things happened, more or less at once, to lead me to where I am now. I decided to take Wallace Stevens at his word when he says in "Of Modern Poetry" that poetry had to change because the world it confronted had changed. Another was that, while I rejected the Marxist notion that literature is somehow subservient to the socioeconomic structure of society, I found the concept of the literary work as process rather than product very useful. But the most important element in my progress toward a new position was that I kept reading Faulkner, and *Go Down, Moses* in particular. The more I read, the more I became convinced that the act of literary creation is a process of coming to terms with history, society, and literary history, and not simply a matter of producing well-wrought artifacts.

I then discovered that I had to bring my new principles of criticism, if they can be called that, to the Modernist works I wished to study and that I had to rethink my appraisals of existing critical theories as well. Moreover, my own confrontation with Modernist works led me to examine the attempts of other critics to define a Modernist movement or a Modern-

ist aesthetic, and here I again found a surprise. I discovered that my original plan, to work up a definition of Modernism I could live with, no longer satisfied me, and it failed due to its very nature: defining a movement required the collection of specimens, the accumulation of objects, and, for me, a return to a discarded mode of thinking. I found instead that what really interested me was attempting to articulate a way of reading books and poems, not constructing a museum in which to keep them. What I also feared was the tendency of description to become prescription (as with Aristotle and the criticism of tragedy after him) and to become a principle of exclusion when it only means to define. Instead, I wished to develop a set of principles that would enable me to encounter the works not as further exhibits but as acts of confronting their culture.

What follows is the process of articulation, of discovering that set of principles, or at least a preliminary set, that will allow some initial soundings to be taken. There are a number of issues concerning Modernism that this study will not address; many of them deal with its literary history or its ancestry, its vital dates, or the list of authors or works admitted to the congregation. These issues, which I originally intended to examine and still find interesting and perplexing, are no longer immediately relevant to my purpose. I hope that what remains will not be unduly narrow.

I have employed the generic "he" throughout this study, although I have attempted to keep its use to a minimum. Personal taste and euphony militate against any of the combined "he-she" pronouns, which I find ghastly to read. My options, therefore, are limited to the male and female personal pronouns, and being male, I usually envision a male abstraction. I would certainly encourage women writers to use "she" instead, and I hope that my own decision in this matter excludes no one.

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# 1/ Modernism, Criticism, and the Social Dimension of Literature

One of the more paradoxical aspects of literary history in the twentieth century is the way in which *modern* has become a term that applies not to contemporary literature but to a literature that is receding into the past. With the passing of time, the application of *Modernism* to the work of writers concerned with "making it new," in Ezra Pound's words, has changed the connotation from one of newness to one related to a specific moment in the past. This situation, itself absurd, leads to others even more so, such as the naming of the succeeding movement *Postmodernism*, which raises the question of how many prefixes the word will be able to stand (a game of names within names, appropriate enough for the Modernist sensibility). The modern paradox, then, is that in following what William Johnsen has called the "compulsion to be modern,"<sup>1</sup> the artist and critic-scholar have destroyed the term; in their act of being new, they have created an archaism.

This paradox is merely the first of many encountered by the student of Modern literature and, very probably, the least significant. At the same time, however, it serves as an anticipation of difficulties to be raised in attempting to define what Modernism is, or was; an accomplishment that has yet to be fully realized. Part of the reason for the failure of any

completely satisfactory definition to appear is that literary definitions are inevitably false, through vagueness or exclusivity. Nevertheless, it is necessary to examine how others have described Modernism, in order to provide a starting place for further discussion.

Even the dates of Modernism are open to debate. To be sure, the twentieth century is marked with dates of tremendous global significance, including two world wars, and yet these dates seem to have little to do with developing or even defining the artistic sensibility of the period. The movement was already well underway and the major artists (except for the American novelists) already established before the first war, whereas the movement was virtually defunct by World War II and the artists, particularly the British, had for the most part died or drifted into silence. Despite this lack of temporal landmarks, there are general guidelines, if not specific agreements, concerning the Modern period. Monroe K. Spears sees 1870 as "marking a break from the past," although the specific period of Modernism begins for him in 1909, reaches its *anni mirabiles* in the years 1922–1925, and virtually ends by 1957.<sup>2</sup> Cyril Connolly believes the period slightly shorter, 1880 marking the "point at which the Modern Movement can be diagnosed" and 1950 ending the movement absolutely. Between those dates, 1910–1925 is the peak period, while at the end of the thirties "works like *Finnegans Wake* or Gide's *Journal* or *Between the Acts* resound like farewells or epitaphs. Yeats, Joyce, and Virginia Woolf are gone within six months of each other and everything the Movement stood for is dubbed degenerate art—or converted to propaganda."<sup>3</sup> The period of most general interest among critics is outlined roughly by these dates, and the works to be examined by this study all fall in the period between the wars, the two decades of "intensest" Modernist fervor.

Still other commentators, and some of the most frequently mentioned Postmodern writers among them, see twentieth-century literature as of a piece. John Barth has frequently protested that he cannot tell where Modernism leaves off and Postmodernism takes over, claiming that he does not know, therefore, in what camp he throws his tent. As evidence,

Barth cites a bewildering variety of categories into which his own writing has been shoved by critics. While William H. Gass may see differences between his own generation of writers and the Modernists, their similarities set off both groups from writers in earlier times. In *Habitations of the Word*, he contrasts modern writers with Fielding and Richardson, who

require a fresh and interested eye, but the events themselves should intrigue it, the situations should excite. Joyce and Beckett and Barth and Borges expect a jaded eye, one already blackened by its most recent round in the ring, chary of further blows, not a bit innocent, for whom all the action, the incidents, the tension and suspense, are well known and over and dead and gone.<sup>4</sup>

Certainly perspective and intent have a great deal to do with how one defines modern literature, and Gass makes a strong case for those who wish to see that literature in the broadest terms.

Those who do not may feel more comfortable with Michael H. Levenson's *Genealogy of Modernism: A Study of English Literary Doctrine 1908-1922*. Levenson not only limits Modernism to fourteen years but narrows the scope similarly, so that he deems a very few writers Modernist: Lewis, Pound, Hulme, Ford, with Eliot and Joyce on the fringes.

If there is disagreement over the dates of Modernism, the arguments seem concurrent by comparison with various theories of what constitutes Modernist writing. The theorists cover the entire range of literary definitions from neo-Romanticism to anti-Romanticism, Naturalism, Classicism, Symbolism, and virtually any combination of these. There are, of course, agreements within the disputes, as well as disputes over the value or desirability of elements even within agreements over the elements themselves. Significantly, a preponderance of commentary has focused on the literary history of Modernism in trying to define it; that is, Modernism is an outgrowth of or a reaction to certain previous literary movements. That commentary should center its attention

there holds several implications not only for understanding Modernism specifically, but literature generally, as well.

Perhaps the best place to start is with Maurice Beebe's postmortem, "What Modernism Was":

First, Modernist literature is distinguished by its formalism. It insists on the importance of structure and design—the esthetic autonomy and the independent whatness of the work of art—almost to that degree summarized by the famous dictum that "a poem should not mean but be." Secondly, Modernism is characterized by an attitude of detachment and non-commitment which I would put under the general heading of "irony" in the sense of the term as used by the New Critics. Third, Modernist literature makes use of myth not in the way myth was used earlier, as a discipline for belief or a subject of interpretation, but as an arbitrary means of ordering art. And, finally, I would date the Age of Modernism from the time of the Impressionists because I think there is a clear line of development from Impressionism to reflexivism. Modernist art turns back upon itself and is largely concerned with its own creation and composition. The impressionists' insistence that the viewer is more important than the subject viewed leads ultimately to the solipsistic worlds-within-worlds of Modernist art and literature.<sup>5</sup>

Here, Beebe brings together several popular conceptions of Modernism, all of them growing out of the central notion that the artist is militantly antisocial in his act of creation. This notion is quite common among critics of Modernism; Edmund Wilson sees modern literature as a product of the willful separation from life, of Axel's castle.<sup>6</sup> Once he has removed the artist to the tower, the individual points he makes follow more or less logically. There are problems, however, with those considerations, as of course there are with any sweeping definitions, in that they either exclude too much of modern literature from Modernism if strictly applied or they are only partial.

For instance, his first point, that Modernism is distinguished by its formalism, is at once true and not very helpful. The Moderns are essentially formalistic, but Beebe does not make clear (perhaps it is not possible to do so) how much

formalism is required of a writer before he may be considered a Modernist and whether or not he must, like Pound and Eliot, theorize about the form of his art, about the importance of the structure of his work, before being formalistic. If, by formalism, Beebe means that writers consciously reject prescribed forms (metrical lines and regular stanzas in poetry, authorial intervention, consistent chapter development, beginning-complication-climax-denouement structure in the novel) as requirements of art in favor of a constant struggling after forms that will satisfy the demands each new work places on the writer, then his assertion seems valid enough. At the same time, however, the rejection of the style and form of one generation by another is scarcely restricted to this century; Wordsworth's rejection of eighteenth-century poetics in favor of a purer "form" is but one recent example from earlier literary history.

This argument is not entirely unfair to Beebe, for it points up a major problem in Modernist criticism: that while structure, design, and style—formalism—are integral parts of Modernist literature, no one seems to be able to point to a specific use of any one feature and say, "This is the characteristic Modernist use of structure." The argument does not suggest, of course, that there is a single structure common to all Modern writing. So far, however, few critics have dealt with Modernist formalism with the depth that many have shown in dealing with Modernist themes. While the problem exists within all genres, it is particularly apparent in the case of fiction, for which there is a wealth of information on the uses of structure and style in various individual works but comparatively little of a general nature that is useful. Nor should the situation be surprising; it is very difficult to enumerate similarities among Joyce, Lawrence, Hemingway, Faulkner, Woolf, Fitzgerald, Forster, and Ford, to name just a few who must be considered, once we have noted that all employ justified right margins in their printed forms. There has been more general discussion of the characteristic form of modern poetry, but there, too, it is difficult to find uses of form common to not only Pound and Eliot, but Yeats, Frost, Lawrence, Stevens, and Tate.

Beebe's other points suffer from similar difficulties. As he points out himself, irony is scarcely confined to this century. The Augustans are probably more detached and ironic than the Moderns, although it may be that the kinds of irony are not the same. Similarly, reflexivism, art's concern with its own creation, predates even Impressionism by at least a few hundred years, occurring, among other places, in Milton's early poetry and Shakespeare's sonnets. Reflexivism well may be more representative of Modernism as a whole than of any other movement or period. However, two points really are tied up in this one, and it might be valuable to separate the two. Art's concern with its own production and worlds-within-worlds do not seem precisely the same. For instance, the novel's concern with itself is evident in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, while *A Passage to India* does not manifest the same trait, and yet both are concerned with worlds-within-worlds psychological interest that nearly everyone acknowledges as distinctly Modernistic. Reflexivism seems more a point within the larger point than a characteristic in its own right. It certainly exists, but the question is whether it is a universal quality. Then, too, it must be remembered that Beebe first published these remarks in "Ulysses and the Age of Modernism," so that, understandably, his comments are tempered by his work with Joyce.

Beebe's treatment of Modernism is vocally anti-Romantic. He claims that the movement developed autonomously, without aid from earlier literary periods, although he is willing to credit Impressionism for passing reflexivism along to the Moderns. He also recognizes that his views stand in direct opposition to those of many other critics who believe Modernism to have developed directly from Romantic tradition. Cyril Connolly goes even further, to assert that Modernist literature is a culmination of the best traits of more than one previous movement:

The modern Movement began as a revolt against the bourgeois in France, the Victorians in England, and puritanism and materialism in America. The modern spirit was a combination of certain intellectual qualities inherited from the Enlighten-

ment: lucidity, irony, scepticism, intellectual curiosity, combined with the passionate intensity and enhanced sensibility of the Romantics, their rebellion and sense of technical experiment, their awareness of living in a tragic age.<sup>7</sup>

Connolly's remarks are unfortunately brief, coming as they do in a short introduction to a list of what he considers the one hundred best books of Modernism, for it would be interesting to watch him resolve the apparent paradox of irony on the one hand and passionate intensity on the other. Furthermore, irony as used by the Moderns is less a matter of scepticism than of detachment, there being a modest though significant difference between the two. Indeed, Joyce's ideal artist paring his fingernails hardly seems a model of passionate intensity, although perhaps Joyce the writer living solely for his art does.

Robert Langbaum, who expresses a similar theory, sees a major difference between the modern Romantics and their nineteenth-century counterparts:

Our best writers . . . are twentieth-century romanticists who have managed to sustain the potency of the self by joining it to powerful outside forces—by recognizing, for example, that the self is not, as the nineteenth-century romanticists tended to think, opposed to culture, but that the self is a cultural achievement, that it is as much outside us as inside, and that the self exists outside us in the form of cultural symbols. In assimilating ourselves, therefore, to these symbols or roles or archetypes, we do not lose the self but find it. When writers are as deliberate and self-conscious as this, however, in bridging the gap between the individual and the culture that seemed to make tragedy impossible, the art they come out with may have or suggest the richness, depth, and complexity of tragedy, but it must be in its final effect comic or rather tragicomic. That is why tragicomedy would seem to be the characteristically modern style in literature.<sup>8</sup>

While the premise that the best modern writers are romanticists is not very useful, the main idea of recognition and self-conscious usage of the archetypal existence of the self is. The

writer who comes after Freud, Jung, and Nietzsche is able to see the archetypal possibilities of myths, that our myths are implicit in our very existence, and therefore can dismiss those myths as religious-spiritual guides and use them structurally, selecting, modifying, mixing myths from various cultures and epochs, to order his art. This is the same point that the professed anti-Romantic, Beebe, addressed. Whether tragicomedy is the characteristic literary style of Modernism is another matter entirely. Inasmuch as an ironic literature precludes high tragedy, even in a tragic age, tragicomedy may well be the prevalent mode of this century, although Joyce's jocoseriousness seems closer to the mark. Langbaum's contention that our century is incapable of high tragedy is expressed by other critics as well, notably by Raymond Williams in his study, *Modern Tragedy*.<sup>9</sup>

Still, Langbaum's most interesting insights remain in the field of myth and archetype:

The psychological interest passes over into the mythical at that psychological depth where we desire to repeat mythical patterns. Life at its intensest is repetition. Mann tells us that the ego of antiquity became conscious of itself by taking on the identity of a hero or god and walking in his footsteps.<sup>10</sup>

He raises two important points in this passage. The first is that life at its intensest is repetition, and the second is that twentieth-century literature probes the psychological depths at which mythical patterns exert their influences. This great depth, in its turn, leads back to an older god, one that Nietzsche dredges up in *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music*<sup>11</sup> and that Monroe Spears applies specifically to Modernist literature in *Dionysus and the City*:

He appears to the Greeks not as a magnified but familiar human form thrown on the clouds, like the Olympian deities, but as more mysterious and disturbing. Against the Apollonian tradition dominant in Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, with its emphasis on the normal and rational, the cultivation of the aristocratic self-sufficient individual, the criterion of sanity and health, he represents the claims of the collective, the ir-