

Modernism Reconsidered

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Modernism Reconsidered

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Preface

In reference to the "modern" qualities of a story by Chekhov, Virginia Woolf wrote: "The emphasis is laid upon such unexpected places that at first it seems as if there were no emphasis at all; and then, as the eyes accustom themselves to twilight and discern the shapes of things in a room we see how complete the story is, how profound, and how truly in obedience to his vision."

If we take the modern period to include the years between the late 1880s and the beginning of World War II, we can say with some confidence that our eyes have "accustomed themselves" to the light and that, as critics and scholars, we have kept very busy discerning "the shapes of things." The emphases are no longer unexpected. How could they be, since so many of them are of our own making? Modernism is no longer so simply associated with formalism, fascism, or dehumanization as it was by some critics in its earlier phases. Still, considering its proximity, the critical outlines and assumptions about it are surprisingly firm.

In many ways this is admirable, a sign both of the compelling nature of many modernist works and the extraordinary outpouring of scholarship and criticism they have inspired. Distinguished biographies, meticulously edited volumes of letters and journals, as well as hundreds of critical studies have mapped out the modern terrain with alacrity and sophistication. Yet like all important achievements, the critical and scholarly legacy has its burdensome side. The immortals have been named and the doors to the pantheon closed. Tendencies and theories have been noted and stressed and, quite naturally, works have been ranked.

What is to be done? Or, more precisely, what is *left* to be done? The broadside is useless. There have always been those who thought Joyce a fraud, Eliot a prig, Yeats mad, Woolf precious, Lawrence a fanatic, and Pound a savage. They have all been debunked, almost from the very beginning, and yet their reputations are more solid than ever. Part of the reason seems to be that there is enough

self-mockery in most of their work to have served as a form of immunization. Furthermore, attacks on these authors have a familiarity that makes them sound too quaint to be lethal.

If useful discussions of modernism are to continue, they must build on what has been done without taking it to be sacrosanct. The original texts themselves are not Scripture, though sometimes they are treated as such; and even the best commentaries are still far from Augustinian in authority. The work of the scholar and critic is never finished, not only because new information invariably can be found, but because each generation has its own experience, its own way of asking questions, its own way of reading.

The contributors to this volume were asked to reconsider authors who, for one reason or another, have been excluded by critics from the great modern constellation; to examine works by major writers that are not usually regarded as among their most typical or greatest achievements; or to explore some of the received opinions about modernist theories and the assumptions that inform the literature of the period. The response has produced a collection of essays that range widely over the era and the modes common to it. Inevitably, major works and writers have not all been included. Our purpose has not been "coverage," but the reexamination of texts and ideas. In the process, perhaps there will have been some slight shift in those emphases to which we may have grown almost too accustomed.

R.K.

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Towards Early-Modern Autobiography: The Roles of Oscar Wilde, George Moore, Edmund Gosse, and Henry Adams

Fascinated by the masks he could fashion for himself, Yeats praised Oscar Wilde's ability to strike an unconventional pose, to sustain the "discipline" of a new role, and to observe public reaction to his performance. By contrast, he argued, Wordsworth was "often flat and heavy" because he had "no theatrical element" in his character but simply "an obedience to a discipline which he [had] not created."¹

Setting aside the value judgment, we might apply Yeats's comment specifically to *The Prelude* and extend it to other nineteenth-century self-presentations. We might then agree that Wordsworth and the major Victorian autobiographers, however dramatic may have been their sense of discovery and commitment, however resourceful their rhetorical strategies, were all indeed untheatrical. Each, to be sure, recognized his role in life and played it effectively: Wordsworth as the dedicated poet, Darwin as the scientific observer, Ruskin as the critical spectator, Newman as religious leader, Mill as defender of intellectual liberty. But each assumed his role as something given by endowment, circumstance, and vocation, rather than as a part he himself was devising and staging for special effect. The question of sincerity in their autobiographies

1. W. B. Yeats, *Autobiographies* (London: Macmillan, 1973), pp. 469-470.

scarcely arises, for by the time of reviewing their careers, each of them had supplied ample objective evidence that the role claimed was his true and sufficient identity.

In the more "theatrical" late-Victorian generation, on the other hand, the author of a self-history was less confident of the truths of selfhood, and his self-presentation, or role playing, involved a different sort of self-consciousness. Though acutely aware of his audience, he felt alienated from the ordinary world and no longer accountable to it. "The egoistic note," Wilde remarked in 1897, "is . . . and always has been to me, the primal and ultimate note of modern art, but *to be an Egoist one must have an Ego.*"² The "personality," in other words, as opposed to the "nature" of a man that Edwin Muir would prize,³ must validate itself by the uniqueness of private impressions and the individuality of personal style, the singularity of gesture and voice. If the self as a separate entity seemed elusive and amorphous, or if, perhaps, it did not exist at all, it must be invented, dressed up, and projected. It mattered little that the creation of a self-image might distort the masker's actual experience or willfully commingle fiction with fact.

In the most striking late-Victorian autobiography, Wilde himself rehearsed his boldest role. Though written as a letter from Reading Gaol and first published in full more than sixty years later, *De Profundis* reads like a long, carefully wrought monologue in an immediate cultural tragedy. Lord Alfred Douglas, the addressee, is cast as the ruthless, self-seeking antagonist who precipitates the hero's downfall; and many pages denounce his perfidy. But the letter must transcend diatribe, must destroy all bitterness of heart; it should prove, Wilde insists, "as important a crisis and turning-point" in Douglas's life as "the writing of it" proves in Wilde's own (p. 448). The writer, the speaker, is, of course, the real subject, the actor at center-stage. At frequent intervals he reminds us of his tragic credentials, of the greatness he has lost or betrayed. He

2. Letter to Lord Alfred Douglas, probably June 1897; italics Wilde's; in Rupert Hart-Davis, ed., *The Letters of Oscar Wilde* (New York: Harcourt Brace and World, 1962), p. 590. All further references to the *Letters* and to *De Profundis*, the title later applied to the letter of January-March 1897, are taken from this edition and are identified by page numbers in the text.

3. See Edwin Muir, *An Autobiography* (New York: Seabury Press, 1968), p. 181, where Muir celebrates his friend John Holms as a "nature," a selfless "soul" rather than a contrived "personality."

declares himself the scion of a noble and honored family, the master of every literary form he touched, "once a lord of language," an incomparable shaper of public thought and feeling: "The gods had given me almost everything. I had genius, a distinguished name, high social position, brilliancy, intellectual daring" (p. 466).⁴ For every good reason, then, "I was a man who stood in symbolic relations to the art and culture of my age. I had realised this for myself at the very dawn of my manhood, and had forced my age to realise it afterwards" (p. 466).⁵ Now that he has fallen, though he may revile Douglas, he must recognize the real tragic flaw in himself, since "nobody, great or small, can be ruined except by his own hand" (p. 465). Henceforth he must practice deep humility. The model he chooses in his grief is Christ, the Man of Sorrows, whom he refashions quite arbitrarily in his own image as the "artist in sympathy," the arch-individualist, the first Romantic, and the determined anti-Philistine. When released from prison, he will, he vows, go down to the sea for healing and a new baptism—he remembers Euripides' saying that the sea "washes away the stains and sins of the world." There Nature, he trusts, or at least fantasizes, will restore him: "She will hang the night with stars so that I may walk abroad in the darkness without stumbling, and send the wind over my footprints so that none may track me to my hurt; she will cleanse me in great waters, and with bitter herbs make me whole" (p. 510).

Whether or not, as Wilde once remarked, "one should always be a little improbable," the prose of *De Profundis* as here is often implausible, derivative, and self-indulgent. The actor himself is scarcely persuaded by his rhetorical compunction, and he can hardly expect his audience to be. In an earlier passage of confessed abasement, concluding with a quotation from one of his own plays, he declares, "I would not a bit mind sleeping in the cool grass in summer, and when winter came on sheltering myself by the warm close-thatched rick, or under the penthouse of a great barn, provided I had love in my heart. The external things of life seem to me now of no importance at all. You can see to what intensity of individu-

4. Jacques Barzun introduces a reprint of *De Profundis* (New York: Vintage, 1964), with an acute comment on Wilde's view of himself as a kind of tragic hero.

5. See also p. 458, on the family name, and p. 500, where he extols his comedies above Congreve's.

alism I have arrived, or am arriving rather, for the journey is long, and 'where I walk there are thorns' " (p. 467).⁶ But the aesthetic, urban self-image he has presented throughout his career is too strong for him—or for us—to take his rural excursion seriously, and he at once seeks refuge in a self-conscious, ironic realism: "Of course I know that to ask for alms on the highway is not to be my lot, and that if ever I lie in the cool grass at night-time it will be to write sonnets to the Moon" (p. 467).

Nonetheless, despite splashes of false sentiment, Wilde seems truly to mean much of what he says. If his claim to honored family is somewhat shaken by what we know of his raffish parents, his estimate of his own literary prowess is not wholly unjustified. By virtue of *The Importance of Being Earnest* and *Intentions*, his achievement both as writer of comedy and as critic is unassailable. He was, indeed, as most cultural historians now see him, the representative man of letters of the English nineties. And fallen from his brief eminence, he did suffer cruelly for his indiscretion and folly. Few descriptions of humiliation could be more moving than his account of standing handcuffed, in conspicuous prison garb, for half an hour on the central platform at Clapham Junction, while successive trains poured forth a jeering mob.

But our sympathy wavers as soon as he shifts his rhetoric to extravagant hyperbole or precious metaphor, when he recalls his majesty as King of "that beautiful unreal world of Art" or strives to reproduce not just his sorrow but "the purple pageant of [his] incommunicable woe" (pp. 458, 463). At such moments the actor's mask is more apparent than the reality of the self behind it; we begin to wonder what sort of Ego, if any at all, the Egoist actually has. By the end, however, the jarring lines count for less than the virtuoso performance; we come to see the role as an act of courage, the necessary protection of a hurt self against a demeaning pity.

For most of his private life, lived as it was largely in public, Wilde avoided self-confrontation. To be sure, he had his own special insights, his "spots of time," and he even borrowed directly from Wordsworth when he discussed the problem of sustaining such vision: "One can realise a thing in a single moment, but one loses it in the long hours that follow with leaden feet. It is so difficult to

6. The last clause is quoted from *A Woman of No Importance*, Act IV.

keep 'heights that the soul is competent to gain' " (p. 474).⁷ But he dreaded revealing the long dull stretches of commonplace routine, the emptiness of the "ordinary" Wordsworthian perception. In his art he repeatedly invoked epigram and apothegm to generalize or dismiss his personal experience, and abundant defensive wit to conceal his unruly sentiment. Some months after his release from Reading Gaol, once more seeking an adequate mask but now finding none, he wryly remarked, "A man's face is his autobiography; a woman's face is her work of fiction."⁸ In his most characteristic writing from the beginning through *De Profundis*, he himself made no great distinction between the two genres.

George Moore, with a less immediate need for dramatic gesture, also created fictions of the self. At least eight of his books belong to the autobiographical mode as he conceived it, an amalgam of incident, impression, and invention, commingling records of private life, sometimes embarrassingly frank, often heightened or distorted, with long stretches of confident art criticism and much literary gossip, all calculated to demonstrate his intelligence, sophistication, and importance.

Moore's motivation as perpetual autobiographer is most apparent in his trilogy, *Hail and Farewell*, where he claims to have been woefully neglected by parents who from his early childhood persuaded him of his personal ugliness, incompetence, and stupidity. He is quite aware that he may have overcompensated for his "inveterate belief in [his] own inferiority." Nonetheless, he insists, "Within the oftentimes bombastic and truculent appearance that I present to the world, trembles a heart shy as a wren in the hedgerow or a mouse along the wainscoting."⁹ His swaggering bravado, then, which the Yeats circle dismissed with contempt, was simply the "theatrical element" in a deliberate and often desperate self-assertion that Yeats elsewhere applauded.

Moore's first and most flamboyant self-advertisement, *Confes-*

7. The last words here are quoted (not quite accurately) from *The Excursion*, IV, 139.

8. Quoted in a letter of April 17, 1898, from Robert Ross to Leonard Smithers, *Letters*, p. 730n.

9. George Moore, "Ave," in *Hail and Farewell* (New York: Appleton, 1925), I, 73, 75.

sions of a Young Man, published in 1888, exploits some of the materials treated rather more discreetly in his later autobiographies but offers no explanation for the young man's rebellious behavior. The confessor is ostensibly one Edward Dayne, but the disguise is very thin; the author seems uncertain whether his first name is Edward or Edouard or Edwin (he uses all three forms), and in the French edition of 1889 he drops the alias altogether and calls himself George Moore. His inspiration, he says, is St. Augustine, but whereas that great exemplar told "the story of a God-tortured soul," he intends to tell for the first time "the story of an art-tortured soul."¹⁰ He accordingly creates and maintains the pose of an expatriated aesthete living in Paris, producing no art but talking endlessly about it and enjoying the ambiance of artists. Even the possibility of a foolish duel poses no serious threat to his determined dilettantism: "We went out to dinner, we went to the theatre, and after the theatre we went home and aestheticised till three in the morning"; or, as a revised version reads, "After the theatre we went home and aestheticized till the duel became the least important event and Marshall's picture the greatest" (pp. 190, 231).¹¹

The young man's opinions are expected to dismay and repel the respectable reader. Declaring himself bored with the "decencies of life," Dayne, or Moore, boasts of his faults and foibles, his willful hedonism and monstrous dissipations. He toys with sadistic emotion and the idea of decadence. He avows an "appetite for the strange, abnormal and unhealthy in art." He alleges "feminine depravities in his affections": "I am feminine, morbid, perverse. But above all perverse, almost everything perverse interests, fascinates me. Wordsworth is the only simple-minded man I ever loved, if that great austere mind, chill even as the Cumberland year, can be called simple" (p. 76). But he has, of course, none of Wordsworth's concern for the common man or the "ordinary sight." The pyramids, he contends, were well worth all the millions of wretched lives sacrificed to build them, if eventually they may "fill a musing hour with wonderment." His literary models, he boasts, are Gautier and Baudelaire, in whom he thinks he finds a defiantly pagan amor-

10. George Moore, *Confessions of a Young Man*, ed. Susan Dick (Montreal, McGill-Queens University Press, 1972), p. 35. All further citations are taken from this edition and are identified by page numbers in the text.

11. The revised version dates from 1918.

ality and a rejection of Christian pity, which he himself dismisses as "that most vile of all vile virtues." Looking into the future, he deplors the coming victory of "pity and justice," the light he chooses to call darkness, "which is imminent, which is the twentieth century" (p. 124).

Moore has clearly no great gift of prophecy, and his flagrant irreligion plumbs no Nietzschean depths, nor carries any real conviction. It is largely an irrelevance, serving only to shock the pious and to sanction his own aesthetic autonomy and his release from moral and social concern. By the end, when his "exquisitely hypocritical reader" is asked, ironically no doubt, to accept the short and fragmentary record as "this long narrative of a sinful life," *Confessions of a Young Man* has become its own parody. Moore obviously prides himself on his wit, daring, and outrageous overstatement. But the part he plays lacks all real intensity; the noisy aesthete, far from being a genuinely art-tortured soul, can scarcely imagine the pains of aesthetic creation.

In his *Confessions* Moore twice disparages Edmund Gosse as the typical Philistine of literature, begotten in a London club by an overstuffed armchair (pp. 138, 228). Nonetheless, the two men remained close friends for nearly forty years, and Moore took credit upon himself for suggesting that Gosse write the personal history that was to prove his most enduring book.¹² Gosse's talent as "objective" novelist, at least as evinced by his one slight romance, was far smaller than Moore's, but his capacity for sustained autobiographical narrative was surely greater. *Father and Son* is a well-shaped chronicle of the self, as "theatrical" in presentation as Yeats could have wished. Begun in the early nineties and published anonymously after delays in 1907, it remains the best example of the movement of late nineteenth-century autobiography toward a self-consciously literary form, more intent on dramatic coloring than on verifiable factual accuracy, a genre in which ultimately the author may seem to create a self in the very act of writing and in

12. See Edmund Gosse, *Father and Son*, ed. William Irvine (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), p. xxxvii, and Evan Charteris, *The Life and Letters of Edmund Gosse* (New York: Harper, 1931), p. 307. All citations from *Father and Son* are taken from the Irvine edition and are identified by page numbers in the text.

which his existence in any other state of being may be questioned or denied.

At the outset of *Father and Son* Gosse warns the reader that his narrative will blend comedy and tragedy in odd, perhaps disturbing, proportions. He clearly aims at a tragic pathos, but he freely employs comic devices, the strategies of satire and irony, to lend dramatic edge and distance to his story. He designs the whole as a sort of *Bildungsroman* describing his lonely childhood, the restraints imposed upon him by his father's narrow fundamentalism, and eventually his liberation at seventeen, when he leaves his home, his village, and the religious Brethren to make his independent, agnostic way in the secular city. As the past unfolds in sharpened detail, many earnest episodes fall into comic perspective: the child experiments with idolatry by worshiping a chair; the child expresses dismay that his widowed father is about to marry a "pedobaptist"; the father fulminates against a Christmas pudding as the accursed relic of pagan ritual; the father prays with the son for guidance to refuse an invitation to a tea party, and the son rises from his knees to declare that the Lord has granted him permission to attend; at the party itself the son shocks his audience by reciting morbid "graveyard" verses he himself only half-understands. Throughout the narrative minor figures among the servants and the "Saints" appear with comic heightening; the son's governess, Miss Marks, in particular, emerges as "somewhat grotesque . . . a kind of Dickens eccentric, a mixture of Mrs. Pipchin and Miss Sally Brass" (p. 69). But the "tragic" note intrudes upon the comedy. The boy's mother dies a sad, solemn death, her last gesture dedicating him irrevocably to the Lord and a life of perfect piety. The narrator evokes the pathos of the scene but then moves at once from object to subject, from the dying woman to himself and self-pity: "But what a weight," he comments, "intolerable as the burden of Atlas, to lay on the shoulders of a fragile child" (p. 53).

Gosse casts himself as the protagonist of this tragi-comedy, the innocent victim of repression driven to subterfuge and deceit in order to preserve his selfhood. Like Mill's *Autobiography*, his narrative describes a rigorous education supervised by a well-meaning parent of sorely limited vision. But the spiritual or intellectual distance between parent and child in Gosse's book is immeasurably greater than in Mill's. Whereas Mill eventually assimilates, deep-

ens, and enriches his father's philosophy, Gosse questions the "Great Scheme" of enforced dedication, comes to repudiate his father's creed as a wholly untenable fanaticism, and sharply dramatizes, in a fashion quite alien to Mill, his escape from stifling commitment. Subtling his story "A Study of Two Temperaments," he announces in his first sentence that the "struggle," the clash of the two, is to be his theme and that final "disruption" will be the inevitable result of the conflict. As in earlier autobiographies, an epiphany prepares the self for decisive conversion, but here it is deliberately contrived and placed as a climax in a novelistic structure. The son at boarding school, just before beginning his apprenticeship in London, contemplates the setting sun in the hope of a great apocalypse, the Lord's opening of the heavens to carry him off to Paradise. But when he discovers that no assumption is about to take place, he is half-ashamed of what he recognizes as a "theatrical attitude," in which perhaps he has never really believed. The anticlimax, at all events, is cruelly crushing:

The tea-bell rang,—the last word of prose to shatter my mystical poetry. "The Lord has not come, the Lord will never come," I muttered, and in my heart the artificial edifice of extravagant faith began to totter and crumble. From that moment forth my Father and I, though the fact was long successfully concealed from him and even from myself, walked in opposite hemispheres of the soul, with "the thick o' the world between us." (p. 210)

The epiphany, whatever its origin in actual experience, has the effect of fiction; the "mystical poetry" invites its immediate ironical reduction to the commonsensical, though still highly literary, "prose."

Throughout his narrative Gosse so molds his materials that they seem less remembered than invented, or at least embellished for the occasion. Nonetheless, he expects us to accept his story as "scrupulously true," in all respects "a genuine slice of life," for, he insists, "this record can . . . have no value that is not based on its rigorous adhesion to the truth" (pp. 3, 4, 194). The preface offers us a "document," the "diagnosis of a dying Puritanism," and the text is intended to have large implications, to depict the struggle not just of "two temperaments" and "two consciences" but also of "two epochs." Yet its truth as representative cultural history is

debatable. At times it reads like yet another generalized Edwardian indictment of Victorianism. But to most Victorians, who enjoyed a measure of conviviality and folk ritual, including Christmas and plum pudding, the austerities of the Brethren would have seemed eccentric and repulsive. Few Victorian children suffered the son's almost total deprivation of imaginative literature, and no Victorian scientist, as even Gosse admits, was prepared to endorse the father's egregiously theologized biology. For the more convincing aspects of the record we must turn to the uniquely personal relationship between father and son, and even there our estimate of the "truth" will rest on our response to a skillful blend of fact and special pleading.

Father and Son is designed as the son's apologia, his self-defense against intransigent principle. But the unintended irony of the book—its strength as well as its weakness—lies in the fact that we may find ourselves ultimately more sympathetic with the father than with the son. Whatever his narrowness of view, his literalism, his fear of art and artifice, his misplaced ingenuity in the attempt to forestall the heresies of Darwin, the father remains a strong character, a man of unimpeachable integrity, loyal though mistaken in some of his loyalties, sincerely committed to his faith. He survives the son's descriptions weighted against him, efforts to read his unspoken thoughts, insinuations that he was unduly fond of the sound of his own voice lifted in private prayer or that he delighted in gymnastic gesticulation as he made his devout entreaties. The son, by comparison, is disingenuous and evasive. When as a youth alone in the city, overcome "by an invincible *ennui*," he breaks his promise to his father to keep up daily Bible readings and conceals his deception: "The dilemma was now before me that I must either deceive my Father in such things or paralyse my own character" (p. 216). It does not occur to him that another alternative might be possible—the honest disclosure of his own changing attitude. In the long run the father, not deceived, is strong enough in love to forgive. The son, for all his declared devotion to Truth, cares most for his own comfort and his final escape from the burden of "dedication." As a boy he found, he claims, an inner resource: "Through thick and thin I clung to a hard nut of individuality deep down in my childish nature" (p. 142). As a liberated young man he is able at last to exercise "a human being's privilege to fashion his inner life for