The Modern Tradition

BACKGROUNDS OF MODERN LITERATURE

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New York OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

PREFACE

We have grown accustomed to speak offhandedly of "modern literature," of the "modern temper," and even of "the modern," but until recently we have not made much effort to analyze the meaning of this term that we find so useful. We have postponed the task of defining it for the same reason we feel it to be important—it refers to something intimate and elusive, not objective and easily analyzed. The modern is not like the reassuring landscape of the past, open and invadable everywhere. It is at once more immediate and more obscure: a blur of book titles, a mood of impatience with anachronisms, a diffuse feeling of difference. Or it is a voice to which we intuitively respond, a language that gives new valences to words long enrolled in the dictionary, including "modern" itself.

Intellectual and cultural historians and historians of art seem to have been more inquisitive in this respect than students of modern literature. Criticism has certainly not neglected the literature of the twentieth century, but most of the comprehensive studies have not been very analytic, and most of the analytic studies have not been very comprehensive. The last volume of the *Oxford History of English Literature*, an extreme example, makes no attempt at general definition—indeed, offers no broad consideration of the period at all—but consists of separate essays on *Eight Modern Writers*. Yet it is clear that "modern" amounts to more than a chronological description. The term designates a distinctive kind of imagination—themes and forms, conditions and modes of creation, that are interrelated and comprise an imaginative whole. One characteristic of works we call modern is that they positively insist on a general frame of reference within and beyond themselves. They claim modernity; they profess modernism. That is what we vaguely acknowledge when we invoke the word to describe them. However difficult to objectify, therefore, the modern awaits definition, and there is reason to think that the study of modern literature will increasingly become a study of the modern in general. Criticism is growing bolder in method and more philosophic in purpose, responding to the breadth of intention that we perceive in modern writing.

Moreover, we no longer completely identify the modern with the contemporary—the immediate literary world in which we live without much hope of defining it. Harry Levin's recent essay, "What Was Modernism?", makes explicit what everyone has begun to realize, that the great age of the century's literature, the age of Yeats, Joyce, Eliot, and Lawrence, of Proust, Valéry, and Gide, of Mann, Rilke, and Kafka, has already passed into history. Looking back upon that age historically, we are able to see it in historical depth. We become aware of what we must call a "modern tradition," which reaches well back into the romantic era and even beyond. And the more we extend our perspective in time, the less inclined we are to see this tradition as narrowly literary. What comes to mind is rather something broadly imaginative, a large spiritual enterprise including philosophic, social, and scientific thought, and aesthetic and literary theories and manifestoes, as well as poems, novels, dramas.

If we can postulate a modern tradition, we must add that it is a paradoxically untraditional tradition. Modernism strongly implies some sort of historical discontinuity, either a liberation from inherited patterns or, at another extreme, deprivation and disinheritance. In an essay on "The Modern Element in Modern Literature," Lionel Trilling singles out a radically anti-cultural bias as the most important attribute of the modern imagination. Committed to everything in human experience that militates against custom, abstract order, and even reason itself, modern literature has elevated individual existence over social man, unconscious feeling over self-conscious perception, passion and will over intellection and systematic morals, dynamic vision over the static image, dense actuality over practical reality. In these and other ways, it has made the most of its break with the past, its inborn challenge to established culture. Concurrently, it has been what Henry James called an "imagination of disaster." Interwoven with the access of knowledge, the experimental verve, and the personal urgency of the modern masters is, as Trilling also finds, a sense of loss, alienation, and despair. These are the two faces, positive and negative, of the modern as the anti-traditional: freedom and deprivation, a living present and a dead past.

Yet the concept of a modern tradition is not simply the invention of historically minded critics. The modernists have been as much imbued with a feeling for their historical role, their relation to the past, as with a feeling of historical discontinuity. They have had a sense of an ancestral line, even if it is often an underground stream. Their suspicion of old forms has made them search for kinsmen in old rebellions. Or, striving to locate their disinheritance in the course of history, they have constantly been searching for and never quite finding their starting-point—the end of Victorianism, the beginning of romanticism, the mid-seventeenth century, the end of the Middle Ages. The paradoxical task of the modern imagination, whether liberated or alienated, has been to stand both inside and outside itself, to articulate its own formlessness, to encompass its own extravagant possibilities.

That undertaking is what Stephen Spender, in *The Struggle of the Modern*, formulates as "the vision of a whole situation." The modern, according to Spender, finds its character by confronting the past and including this confrontation within itself as part of a single total experience. It is more than a cultivation of immediacy, of free or fragmented awareness; it is the embodiment in current imagery of a situation always larger than the present, and as such it is also a containment of the resources and perils of the present by rediscovery of a relevant past. In this sense, modernism is synthetic in its very indeterminacy. Modern writers, working often without established models and bent on originality, have at the same time been classicists, custodians of language, communicators, traditionalists in their fashion.

Assuming that there is a "modern tradition" and that the phrase conveys something of the ambiguous essence of modernity, this book sets out to describe the modern movement with as much of its real complexity, and with as much depth in time and intellectual breadth, as are possible within a single volume. The purpose of the book is exploratory. It is not designed to argue a general theory of modernism but to represent the various factors that any theory will be obliged to take into account. The representation is by direct quotation. Each section is introduced by a brief prospectus, but the editors have avoided extensive paraphrase and interpretation, their object being not a simplified restatement but a manageable epitome of the writers speaking for themselves.

Specifically, the materials, with rare exceptions, consist of discursive statements by writers, artists, philosophers, and scientists. The choice of the discursive is deliberate. No attempt has been made to seek out the dominant images, the obsessive concretions of character, action, and language that doubtless count for more in the actual making of literature than any conscious programs or explicit ideas. Social and economic factors and external historical events have also been largely omitted. Given the scope of this book, such exclusions are necessary; but they have a certain value as well. By preserving this level of abstraction, one may often glimpse more readily the structures common to both image and idea, artistic purpose and historical cause—the basic modes of being that are syncretized in art on the one hand and in thought or life on the other. The central literary exhibits, from Wordsworth to Proust, from Flaubert to Joyce, are easily available. In effect, this book seeks to present the universe of discourse to which they belong.

The arrangement is by themes, not by individuals. The aim is to represent these themes either by classic statements or at least by important and lucid statements. Some writers appear more than once; they are the men who talk about what they are doing as well as doing it, men of letters as well as creators. Sometimes they will contradict themselves or appear in unexpected guises; and the declarations of different writers, or even of the same writer,

will not always have the same assertive weight. But this kind of unevenness is in the nature of the case. Ranging from momentary crystallizations of attitude through more elaborate hypotheses to confirmed beliefs and scientific doctrines, these statements are testimony of minds at work, at once creating and responding to an imaginative situation. However abstract in language, in another sense they are part of a concrete emergent vision.

Without professing to establish a set of first principles or criteria of modernism, it is possible to find some convenient landmarks or measuring points in this fluid intellectual world. The nine topics into which the book is divided have not chosen themselves, of course, yet they have arisen fairly directly from the materials, do not reflect any strong prejudices on the part of the editors, and have about them an accessibility that is in their favor. Their arrangement does not imply any strict system of logical subordination, nor are the topics to be regarded as exactly equal in importance. They have presented themselves as centers around which modern thinking whirls or clings. While each is a kind of spectrum of possibilities, the word spectrum itself is too prescriptive. These ideas jut out of their confines; they blend into each other in the way of montage, or come round upon each other, or otherwise intersect and parallel. A complete purview is out of the question, and would be if this book were twice as long. If each topic helps to lead the reader through the dense world of modernism, which is the common medium of all, the book will have served its purpose.

Since the introductions to the various sections explain the plan and range of each, and also suggest ways in which the topics are related to one another, no extended discussion is necessary here. The first two sections are mainly literary and aesthetic in emphasis. *Symbolism* is centered in art itself: the concept of imagination, the autonomy of the work of art, formalism, the creative process, and the heroic role of the artist. *Realism* has to do with art as a function of environment: historical determinants and social action, the pressures of experience and the responsibility of truthfulness. There follow two sections of a more philosophic cast. In *Nature*, several romantic and post-romantic theories are represented—worlds of organic harmony, of biological struggle, of mechanistic force, and of human or scientific experiment. Under *Cultural History* are included both the theme of human freedom in historical experience and a number of patterns—dialectical, repetitive, symbolic, or religious—by which the historical process has been schematized.

Moving to a primarily psychological plane, the next two sections are concerned with non-intellectual modes of thought. In *The Unconscious*, the center is Freudian psychology, but the topic also embraces pre-Freudian ideas of psychic energy and post-Freudian programs for the liberation of impulse. *Myth* includes both anthropological and Jungian versions of the myth-making mind, along with more properly literary doctrines of mythic imagination. The final sections turn toward the world of consciousness, toward individual subjective experience, and toward ethical and religious questions. *Self-*

Consciousness, as the title indicates, groups together various kinds of self-definition and self-assessment—such themes as self-realization, the situation and process of consciousness, the inner divisions of the self, and the pursuit of personal freedom. The existentialist analysis of these and related aspects of selfhood is presented separately under *Existence*. The concluding section, entitled *Faith*, is a survey of religious postures that have been adopted in the decline of Christianity—attitudes of attack, of reinterpretation, and of embattled orthodoxy.

In addition to this general topical arrangement, a certain structure has also been brought out within the materials of each section. But the reader is invited to look through and beyond the overt plan of the book. He will find that the selections are usually of sufficient scope to stand on their own, and that their meaning often overflows the particular categories in which they have been placed. One passage will frequently comment upon another in a far subtler way than any system of topics and subheadings can indicate. A motif that is dominant in one section will be powerfully latent in others. What is not formulated may occupy the reader fully as much as what is. The editors offer the book in the hope that it will give body to the concept of modernism and convey some of the life as well as the form of the modern imagination.

A great number of writers and publishers have contributed to this volume. Permissions to reprint are acknowledged in each case, but so large-scale an indebtedness requires a general expression of gratitude. The editors thank George Cohen for his guidance among many documents of modern art. We also wish to thank the staff of Oxford University Press for their aid and encouragement; and Adele Dalsimer and Susan Holahan for invaluable assistance.

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New Haven, Connecticut C. F., JR.
18 October 1964

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