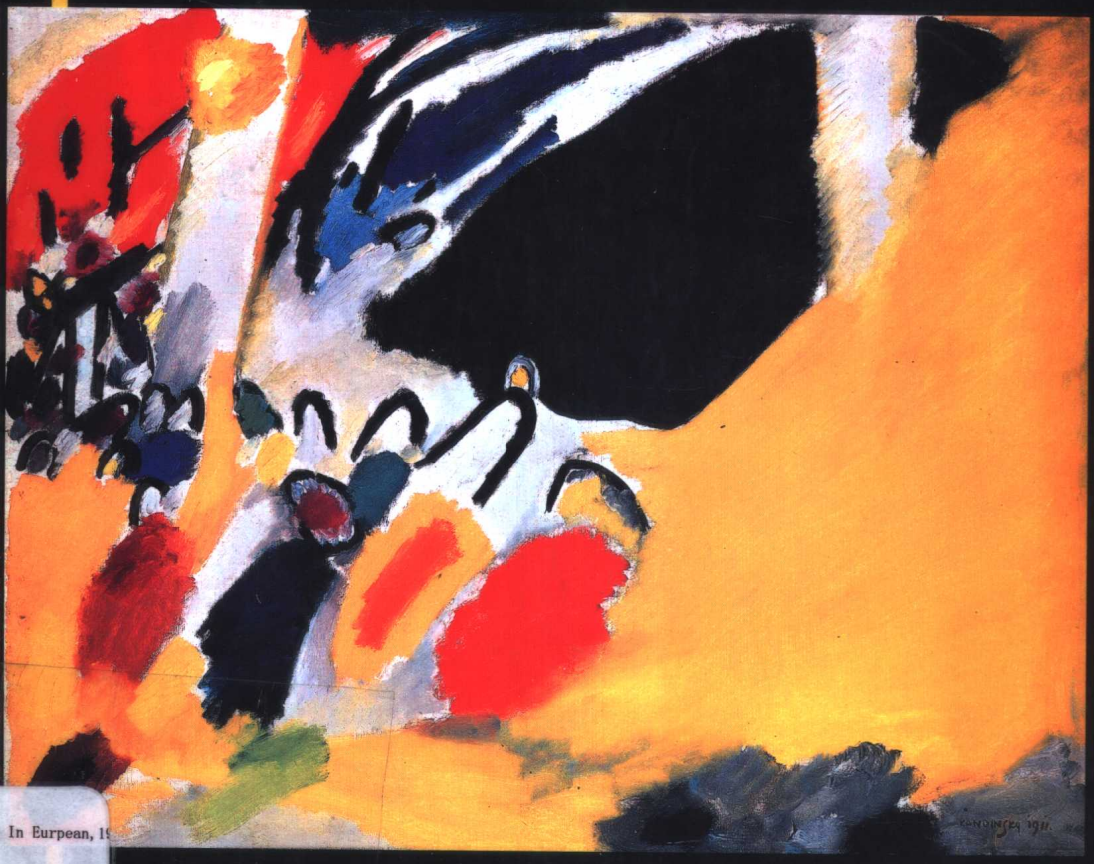
EARLY MODERNISM

LITERATURE, MUSIC AND PAINTING IN EUROPE 1900–1916



CHRISTOPHER BUTLER

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PREFACE

This book is designed to help those who know something about one of the arts involved in the Modernist movement, and who would like to know more about the larger intellectual picture and the other two arts. Many of the thoughts expressed here have grown out of a course on 'The Modern Tradition' which I had the pleasure of giving for many years with Richard Ellmann; but the book's most basic intellectual debts go even further back, to the teaching of Isaiah Berlin, who first inspired me to ask how it is that general ideas move individual men and women.

Anyone who works on an interdisciplinary topic will accumulate numerous intellectual debts to others who are expert in their various fields; but my chief debt has been to those who believe that the kind of comparative activity I attempt here is worth while—and for this kind of invaluable and continuing encouragement I would like to thank in particular Malcolm Bradbury, Ihab Hassan, and Marjorie Perloff. I owe more specific debts to Kathleen Woodward and the Centre for Twentieth Century Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, whose conferences and resources for the study of German literature are alike inspiring, to Gerhard Hoffmann at the University of Würzburg, whose conferences on Postmodernism were always willing to contain some historical retrospection, and to the Governing Body of Christ Church, who with great generosity made it possible for me to have extra time for research. Many others have helped me, in conversation or by reading parts of an originally rambling typescript. I would particularly like to thank Walter Abish, Anne-Pascale Bruneau, Barrie Bullen, Gillian Butler, Nöel Carroll, Alison Denham, Alastair Fowler, Orlando Gledhill, John Griffiths, Bill Handley, Susan Haskins, Tim Hilton, David Luke, Karen Luscombe, Judith Mackrell, Allison Miller, Siva Narayanan, Francesca Orestano, Sowon Park, Simon Rattle, Elise Ross, Karen Shepherd, Richard Sheppard, Alistair Stead, Anthony Storr, Stella Tillyard, Charles Tung, and the readers employed by the Oxford University Press, whose patience must have been sorely tried by an earlier version of this book which tried to find a not very well-defined place for everything. I am particularly conscious of the fact that all those

acknowledged above could in various ways have saved me from error; nevertheless, the errors which remain are my own, and I alone am responsible for them.

At Oxford University Press, Kim Scott Walwyn has unfailingly managed to be encouraging and constructively critical, Andrew Lockett helpfully suggested many improvements; and Jason Freeman made the process of production exceptionally pleasurable.

Since academic life is not everything, and since great art can be life-enhancing for everyone, and as a small response to their love and enthusiasm, I dedicate this book to my daughters, who have always been able to persuade me of the truth of the first two propositions in this sentence.

C.B.

Christ Church
Oxford

INTRODUCTION

In what follows I attempt to give an account of some innovative work in music, painting, and literature, from the turn of the twentieth century to the period of the First World War, and to show how it can be seen as constructing an 'Early Modernism'. The heroic figures within this initial development—Matisse, Picasso, Stravinsky, Schoenberg, Marinetti, Pound, Eliot, Apollinaire—all developed radically new conventions for their respective arts. I will show how such changes in artistic technique were related to profound shifts in intellectual assumptions.

My characterization of this generation, whose major works first appear in the decade before the First World War, as 'Early Modernist', depends on the idea that they come *after* something differently characterizable; after Romanticism, after English Victorianism (or similarly repressive social formations in other countries, as the careers of Ibsen, Strindberg, Wedekind, and Gide could show), after 'bourgeois' Realism or Naturalism—and, most particularly, after the Decadence, Aestheticism, and Symbolism of the late nineteenth century.

This sense of contrast with what has gone before is essential to the characterization of any artistic period. It is also the symptom of profound changes in dominant states of mind and feeling. The ideas which the Modernists took from Nietzsche, Bergson, Marinetti, and others made a cultural revolution whose effects are still with us, because they helped inspire that tradition in art which weighs most heavily on the present.

I have written this book because I believe that the nature of this intellectual and artistic change can only be understood in a European context, and in relation to all the arts (though I only consider literature, music, and painting in what follows). Many accounts of Modernism have an excessively literary bias, and fail to take into account the exceptional interaction between the arts in this period, as mediated by new ideas and common ends. Such restricted accounts also tend to privilege the relationship between the Anglo-American tradition and France, and to underplay the German and Italian contribution within this period. It is still not sufficiently appreciated that many Modernist achievements,

and particularly those which have a significant afterlife in Postmodernism—such as atonality and Expressionism and the internationalist politics of Dada—were distinctively German in inspiration.

My account is nevertheless the product of countless omissions, many forced upon me by the need for that critical simplification which helps to make historical narrative more intelligible. I have attempted to treat some of my central works in such a way as at least to suggest the diversity of thought behind them, but many wholly culpable gaps will remain. I move, for example, from masterpiece to masterpiece, and so tend to ignore the relationship between major and minor work within the canon I propose.

In tracing this history I have contracted an immense debt to the scholarly work of my predecessors; they have provided the detail to which I attempt to give a conceptual structure. And yet there is still a good deal to find out about this much studied period. All of my themes deserve a far more resolute and expansive pursuit than I have been able to give them within the confines of a single-volume study. The notes to each chapter, along with references for citations, attempt to provide the reader with suitable starting-points for further exploration, and I have supplemented them with a Bibliographical Note for some of the more generally focused chapters.

I have attempted to see the development of the central ideas of the Modernist period from within the mental world of the artists and thinkers I discuss. My focus is on the individual because it is only within persons that the new ideas of a period present themselves as problems and attract further thoughts and feelings which can lead to innovation and discovery, in work which, unlike that of science or much of formal philosophy, will always bear the clear marks of individual character and temperament.

The ideas with which I shall be concerned, for example those of the unconscious, of intuition, of the necessary evolution of art, of the expression of thoughts which are not dependent upon linear progression, of the relationship of abstraction to the real world, and so on, all made a profound difference to the artists I discuss: they very often liberated them at the same time as perplexing them. Nor did they come singly; what made the period of Modernism one of revolution was the conceptual interrelationship between innovations in the different arts and the ways in which these expressed highly complex and often quite fully articulated forms of life or views of the world (for example in investigating the nature of experience in the city). They are part of a general

intellectual climate which helped to motivate men and women and to shape their actions and their feelings, particularly in making art, just as much as did the more obviously material factors involved in historical and political change.

I believe indeed that the most important of these ideas derive from recurrent philosophical concerns to be found in many periods and under different social conditions, that they often run the artists involved with them into contradiction, and that the problems they centre on are no more likely to be brought to a final solution than the artist is to produce a 'final' work of art from which no others can be derived or 'progress'. Many of the issues which the Modernists faced are still open to debate in epistemology and moral thought; and the continuity of their aesthetic concerns is shown by the fact that our interpretation of the relationship of Modernism to Postmodernism is still a matter of dispute and probably will long continue to be so.

My initial theme in Chapter 1 is the sceptical analysis of previously established conventions for the arts, and this leads on to an examination of the most basic elements of artistic languages, such as logic, harmony, and perspective. These become the focus for the innovations discussed in Chapter 2. I then attempt to show in Chapter 3 how this process interacted with thoughts about divisions within the self and resulted in a new construction of personal identity, in particular to a confrontation with the primitive. This leads me to discuss in Chapter 4 the ways in which the divided artist pursued Modernist aims within an environment—the metropolis—which expansion and technological development was in any case rendering particularly baffling. I then attempt in Chapter 5 to see what a narrative ordering of the theoretical assumptions behind the innovatory activity of a more marginal avant-garde in London would look like. This leads me in conclusion to some general reflections on the nature of the avant-garde in the period from Fauvism to the beginnings of Dada in Zurich—in particular, on the ways in which its dominant ideas were diffused, on its turn towards the irrational, and on its claims to be 'progressive'.

I stop there for two reasons. One is trivial—any more extended account would go far beyond the bounds of a single volume. The other is that the nature of Modernism changes after the First World War, when a traditionalist, allusive conservativism is countered in its turn by the irrationalist pretensions of Surrealism. Modernist assumptions about art had become dominant by 1918, and they seemed to many to need adaptation to more explicitly social and political ends than had been

essayed before the war. This is hardly surprising, after a European crisis so great that hardly anyone at the turn of the century could have anticipated it. But Early Modernism evolved in a very different context.

CONTENTS

1 THE DYNAMICS OF CHANGE

1. Scepticism and Confrontation

> What Modernism and Postmodernism share in common is a single adversary which is, to put it crudely, realism or naïve mimesis. Both are forms of post-Realism. They likewise share in common a practice based on avant-garde and movement tactics and a sense of modern culture as a field of anxious stylistic formation.

These remarks by Malcolm Bradbury raise some quite general questions about the underlying conditions for a period of artistic innovation—he notes here a reaction against the past (anti-Realism), a strategy for gaining attention (the avant-garde), and a sense of relationship to the general culture of the time (anxious).[1] In what immediately follows I develop this line of thought by outlining some of the influences upon the major early Modernists. These conditions for revolutionary change involved in particular a general atmosphere of scepticism, which prompted a basic examination of the languages of the arts. (For example, should the marks artists leave on canvas be seen as an attempt to imitate our perception of the object, as in Impressionism, or be the signs of a merely subjective *con*ception, one no longer trusted to provide us with the illusion of a direct acquaintance with things?)[2]

Such changes in attitudes to the arts are motivated by particular ideas. If Bradbury is right about the attack on Realism, then there must have been a motivating reason for it. In the early Modernist period, such an attack was part of the critical examination of artistic modes of discourse whose burden was to secure the recognition of shared social practices, which Naturalism had often criticized, and Impressionism equally frequently celebrated. The anxiety of the avant-garde which attempted to succeed these movements thus arose at least partly from a sceptical loss of confidence in such modes, brought about by influential voices within early twentieth-century European culture. Nietzsche, Ibsen, William James, and others contested the totalizing religious and

political frameworks of the nineteenth century, in favour of a growing pragmatism or pluralism, and many followed Nietzsche in believing that 'What is needed above all is an absolute scepticism toward all inherited concepts'.[3]

Those intellectuals who were affected by propaganda in favour of the 'Modern' tended to see themselves as critics, who were divorced from, and marginal to, the society in which they lived. Ibsen in particular was supposed to have laid bare bourgeois self-deceptions, and Freud, the founder of a science described by his biographer as 'the nemesis of concealment, hypocrisy, the polite evasions of bourgeois society', identified himself with the courageous Dr Stockmann in Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People* (1882).[4] A sometimes despairing sceptical distance from social norms (and from the reforming zeal of Naturalist writers) is central to the novel at the beginning of the century. Hence the evolution of Marcel's consciousness in *À la recherche du temps perdu*, from a naïve acceptance of class assumptions to a detached, subjectivist criticism of them, the aristocratic political scepticism of Conrad's later work, and Gide's and Heinrich Mann's and E. M. Forster's advocacy of very different kinds of dissentient morality, divorced from conventional political and religious constraints. The common interest of painters and poets in an urban Bohemia also reinforced a sense of critical marginality, and, although this was inherited from the nineteenth century, it developed in many cases (such as those of T. S. Eliot, Gottfried Benn, and Franz Kafka) into profound forms of psychological alienation.

These pressures towards withdrawal from social consensus (and the morality it implied) had long been identified as symptoms of modernity. Matthew Arnold thought in the 1860s that:

> Modern times find themselves with an immense system of institutions, established facts, accredited dogmas, customs, rules, which have come to them from times not modern. In this system their life has to be carried forward, yet they have a sense that this system is not of their own creation, that it by no means corresponds exactly with the wants of their actual life, that for them, it is customary not rational. The awakening of this sense is the awakening of the modern spirit.[5]

Oscar Wilde restated Arnold's position in his significantly entitled dialogue, 'The Critic as Artist', a quarter of a century later: 'It is enough that our fathers believed. They have exhausted the faith-faculty of the species. Their legacy to us is the scepticism of which they were afraid.'[6] This legacy bore down heavily upon the youthful protagonists of many turn-of-the-century works, such as Gide's *Immoraliste* of 1902, the

schoolchildren in Wedekind's *Spring Awakening* (written in 1891 and staged in 1906), and Musil's military cadet, *Young Torless*, of 1906. Thomas Mann's *Tonio Kröger* (1903) believes that the 'curse' of a literary vocation 'begins by your feeling yourself set apart, in a curious sort of opposition to the nice, regular people; there is a gulf of ironic sensibility, of knowledge, scepticism, disagreement, between you and the others; it grows deeper and deeper, you realise that you are alone.'[7] And Joyce's *Stephen Hero* (1904–6) realizes 'that though he was nominally in amity with the order of society into which he had been born, he would not be able to continue so'. His sense of the modern follows Arnold's injunction to see the object as it really is:

> The ancient method investigated law with the lantern of justice, morality with the lantern of revelation, art with the lantern of tradition. But all these lanterns have magical properties: they transform and disfigure. The modern method examines its territory by the light of day.

This is Stephen the dissident student, who has been told (by a priest admittedly) that his essay on 'Art and Life', devoted to Ibsen, 'represents the sum of modern unrest and modern freethinking'.[8] This critical scepticism also sustains a myth, that young people have to break free from parental certainties, which are seen as being not just more demanding, but also, paradoxically, as more complacent than their own. But the young still needed the inspiration of their elders to do so. When the Oedipal adherents of *Jung-Wien* rose up against the previous generation in the 1890s, they called upon the supporting authority of older men, in the persons of Nietzsche, Ibsen, Wedekind, Strindberg, and others.[9]

Early Modernist innovators met the challenge of this withdrawal from the assumptions of a previous generation in two distinct ways. First, they developed Symbolist notions of stylistic autonomy, so that their work could seem to depend upon aesthetic conventions which were independent of public norms. Secondly, they relied upon the idea that creativity (and art) had to be subjective, intuitive, and expressionist in character. Kandinsky, for example, echoes Yeats in judging that 'When religion, science and morality are shaken, the two last by the strong hand of Nietzsche, and when the outer supports threaten to fall, man turns his gaze from externals in on to himself.'[10] Nietzsche's influence is all pervasive in this period. His thoughts about nihilism after the 'Death of God', the *Übermensch*, the Will to Power, the multiplicity of the self, and art as the last form of metaphysics, were widely discussed, and

(given the aphoristic and metaphorical nature of Nietzsche's style) very diversely interpreted, in avant-garde circles. Even James Joyce was a 'Nietzschean' for a while.[11] But Kandinsky's remark points to an essential aspect of Nietzsche's influence: he turned many towards subjectivism in a world no longer sustained by the moral imperatives issuing from a God.[12]

As we shall see, this metaphysical tendency towards subjective self-reliance (and the growth of a considerable anxiety about it) is reinforced by the work of Bergson (whose *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience* was published in 1889). It also leads to a growing interest in divisions within the personality, of which the psychology of Freud turned out to be the most influential symptom. His *Traumdeutung* (*The Interpretation of Dreams*), published in 1900, is entirely typical of the Modernist withdrawal from consensus in its defiance of previous authority and its revolutionary dependence upon self-analysis. It begins with a motto from Virgil: 'Flectere si nequeo Superos, Acheronta movebo' ('If I cannot bend the higher powers, I will move the infernal regions', *Aeneid*, bk. VII), which can be interpreted as meaning that wishes rejected by the 'higher mental authorities' will resort to a subjective 'mental underworld' of the unconscious.[13] But the verse is also spoken by an infuriated Juno after the Olympians have frustrated her wishes, and Freud no doubt identified with her.

2. The Withdrawal from Consensual Languages

Twentieth-century verse makes very few technical changes which go far beyond those to be found in the French Symbolist poetry of the nineteenth century, which had already experimented with free verse, typographical rearrangement, and an irrationalist association of ideas. Modernist poets had to come to terms with this earlier tradition, and in particular with the crisis it provoked concerning the poetic use of language, given Rimbaud's and Mallarmé's encouragement of the belief that poetry should devise a language which goes beyond the conventions of everyday speech. Mallarmé is reported to have said of his own poetry:

> Ce sont les mots mêmes que le Bourgeois lit tous les matins, les mêmes! Mais, voilà (et ici son sourire s'accentuait), s'il lui arrive de les retrouver en tel mien poème, il ne les comprend plus! C'est ce qu'ils ont été ré-écrits par un poète.[14]

> They are the same words that the Bourgeois reads every morning—the very

same! But then (and here his smile broadened), if he finds them again in one of my poems he no longer understands them! That's because they have been rewritten by a poet.

This 'rewriting' depended to a large degree on Mallarmé's punning disruption of the word orders permitted by French syntax and, in *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard* (*A throw of the dice will never abolish chance*) (1897), on his making a wide-spaced typographical distribution of the words of the poem, to secure 'une vision simultanée de la page' ('a simultaneous vision of the page').[15] We are challenged to read the poem on different spatial and conceptual levels, as if it were an orchestral score (Mallarmé's Preface describes it as 'une partition'). The central concepts of the text were thus given new values by being put into defamiliarizing juxtaposition, within ambiguously complicated networks of metaphoric association. The word became, for Mallarmé, a 'centre of vibratory suspense' and is to be understood

> indépendamment de la suite ordinaire, projétés, en paroi de grotte, tant que dure leur mobilité ou principe, étant ce qui ne se dit pas du discours: prompts tous, avant extinction, à une réciprocité de feux distante ou présentée de biais comme contingence.[16]
>
> independent of the ordinary sequence, projected, [as if on] the inner walls of a cave, for as long as their mobility or principle lasts, being that part of a discourse which is not (to be) spoken; all of them ready, before their extinction, to take part in a reciprocity of fires, either at a distance, or presented obliquely, as a contingency.

Under such conditions, the controlling, socially conformist voice of the poet 'disappears' in favour of his presentation of the discoveries he has made within the structure of the language. In the absence of his guiding commentary, the literary work seems to be a language-construct, within which the reader is invited to play at the game of interpretation.

Such tendencies helped to establish the work of art as somehow autonomous, in a world of its own—an idea which Symons helped to spread in England through his *Symbolist Movement in Literature*:

> Mallarmé was concerned that nothing in the poem be the effect of mere chance, that the articulation of every part with every other part should be complete, each part implying every other part, and that the meaning of the poem should be inseparable from its formal structure.[17]

The work typically projects a mysteriously visionary or dream-derived world, subject to its own laws. The technique for achieving this largely

depended on making these laws language dependent, by a subtle interconnection of symbol and metaphor. The text becomes more and more inexplicit and figural, and the reader is challenged to re-create the author's or speaker's associative processes in order to realize the nature of the whole, as in Mallarmé's *L'Après-midi d'un faune* of 1876, which is a *locus classicus* of the Symbolist poem for the twentieth century.[18] Mallarmé's most celebrated remarks concerning his aims are frequently attached to it:

> Nommer un objet, c'est supprimer les trois quarts de la jouissance du poème qui est faite du bonheur de deviner peu à peu; le suggérer, voilà le rêve. C'est le parfait usage de ce mystère qui constitue le symbole: évoquer petit à petit un objet pour montrer un état d'âme.[19]
>
> The naming of an object suppresses three-quarters of the pleasure of a poem, which consists in the happiness of guessing bit by bit; suggesting the object—that makes for the dream. It is the perfect practice of this mysterious process which constitutes the symbol; in the evocation little by little of an object, in order to make manifest a state of soul.

The ambiguous reflexivity of this connection, between the 'jouissance' ('pleasure' or 'coming') of the act of writing and that of sexual possession, is slyly intimated in the very first sentence of *L'Après-midi*, by the punning on 'perpétuer' in the priapic (but virgin) Faun's opening words:

> Ces nymphes, je les veux perpétuer.
>
> These nymphs, I desire to perpetuate.

His mythical origin is as sophisticated as the pastoral tradition which perpetuates *him*, but he is also to be seen here as 'primitive' in his sexual impulses. The 'incarnat leger' ('light rosy flesh') he observes and creates for us in the poem of this 'heure fauve' ('tawny hour') may be no more than a dream—('Aimai-je un rêve?'—'Did I love a dream?')—and this leads to a glancing admission of the wish-fulfilling function of the whole dream poem, as the Faun plays upon the bodily and the verbal aspects of the 'figure' and 'sens' that he expresses. He splits his identity: he is both priapic agent and poetic observer:

> ou si les femmes dont tu gloses
> Figurent un souhait de tes sens fabuleux.
>
> Or if the women of whom you tell
> Represent the wish of your fabulous senses.

(Or, in an alternative interpretation, 'are the metaphor for the wish that arises from the fabulous senses in which your poem can be read'.)

As he contemplates the two nymphs (one chaste, one passionate), he spins out many such analogies, between dream, the music he plays, desire, sexual satisfaction (succeeded by a 'lasse pâmoison'—'lazy swoon'), art, and instinct. He moves from the 'crime' of attempted rape to the disappointment of finding himself 'encore ivre' ('still drunk'), as the nymphs slip out of his arms.[20] The breath by which the Faun plays his flute is the 'serein souffle artificiel | De l'inspiration' ('serene and artificial breath of inspiration'), and also the instrument of sexual exploration:

> Inerte, tout brûle dans l'heure fauve
> Sans marquer par quel art ensemble détala
> Trop d'hymen souhaité de qui cherche le *la*:
> Alors m'éveillerai-je à la ferveur première,
> Droit et seul . . .

Inert, everything burns in the tawny hour wihout indicating by what art there ran off together the excess of hymen wished for by him who seeks A natural: then I will awake, to the first fervour, upright and alone.

Although the Faun comes to identify his desire with the laws of (human?) nature, that desire can never be satisfied, as its object slips away from him:

> Tu sais, ma passion, que, pourpre et déjà mûre,
> Chaque grenade éclate et d'abeilles murmure;
> Et notre sang, épris de qui le va saisir,
> Coule pour tout l'essaim éternel du désir.

You know, my passion, that every pomegranate bursts and murmurs with bees; and our blood, taken by [enamoured of] that which will seize it, flows for all the eternal swarm of desire.

Mallarmé's poetry is immensely important for later developments in the treatment of metaphor. It may be Symbolist and regressive in its aestheticism, but it is also startlingly modern in the way in which its imagery suggests a division, not just between the primitive and the civilized, but also within the Faun's consciousness, so as to license a disreputably suggestive subtext: psychoanalytic ideas are being anticipated here.[21] The Symbolism of Mallarmé, Strindberg, Yeats, and many others was also driven by the yearning to discover a hidden (but, obviously, occult and non-consensual) universe of analogy, and this