The Myth of Modernism and Twentieth Century Literature

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Make It New
Ezra Pound

Aftermath: Second or later mowing; the crop of grass which springs up after the mowing in early summer.
Oxford English Dictionary

Introduction

Once certain words could be used interchangeably, such as 'modern', 'new', 'twentieth century' and 'contemporary'. Thus, in the 1930s there appeared *The Faber Book of Modern Verse* and the little magazines *New Verse, Twentieth Century Verse* and *Contemporary Poetry and Prose*, with overlapping contents. Since then the words have developed in different directions. 'Twentieth century' once indicated the new, the exciting, the unfamiliar, the promising and the slightly threatening: things still preserved in the anachronistically futuristic title display which opens Twentieth Century Fox films. The 'twentieth century' was first seen in this way at the end of the nineteenth century; by now it is nearly over and it denotes not a future but a past. Its rich associations, now more threatening than promising, are being transferred to the looming twenty-first century, or, more portentously, the 'third millennium'. Twentieth century now refers to no more than a period, which is how I use it in the title of the present book, indicating that its subjects extend from the Bloomsbury Group to the Marxist-structuralists. 'Modern' and 'contemporary' began to move apart in the early 1960s, with the publication of Stephen Spender's quietly seminal book, *The Struggle of the Modern*. Spender used 'modern' to refer to the great wave of innovation and transformation which affected all the arts in Europe and America in the years immediately before the First World War and which seemed at the time to embody the essence of twentieth century newness. Its representatives were Picasso and Stravinsky and Marinetti and Apollinaire as well as Eliot and Pound and Joyce and Wyndham Lewis. The modern was replete with paradox: it repudiated the present and the recent past in order to establish contact with a more authentic remote past; yet in its interweavings and superimpositions of past and present it seemed to make both terms problematical, as Eliot implied in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' and *The Waste Land*. The modern artist was alienated from the everyday social world, and yet he had a vision of a new, unified and transformed

order of things. Art assumed a new importance, as the aestheticism of the late nineteenth century was metamorphosed into the more radical and ambitious programme of the modernists. So, too, did subjectivity, with parallels to the development of psycho-analysis. Outer objects became symbols and correlatives for inner states of feeling. At the same time, the transforming vision of the modern had its political implications: a revolutionary art might lead to a revolutionary culture and a new social order. But the political implications might be either right-wing or left-wing. Mayakovsky and Brecht brought modernism and Communism together. If the Russian Futurism of Mayakovsky took the Marxist path (and only for a time, until it was suppressed by Stalinist social realism), the Italian Futurism of Marinetti merged easily into Mussolini's Fascism. The 'fascist' proclivities and leanings of the major anglophone modernists have been extensively discussed with reference to Yeats, Eliot, Pound, Lawrence and Lewis. Frederic Jameson, though a Marxist, admiringly discusses Lewis in his book *Fables of Aggression* as 'the modernist as fascist', a left-wing revolutionary *manqué*, who saw through the shams of modern society though he adopted the wrong prescription for dealing with them. I am personally sceptical about assuming any necessary connection between modernist literary art and right-wing sentiments; if the writers named above showed them, others did not, such as Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Ford and Beckett. Attitudes to the Spanish Civil War were something of a touchstone.

Against the 'modern' Spender set the 'contemporary', exemplified by Wells, Shaw and Bennett. The 'contemporary' writer was not alienated from the society he lived in; he might well be a reformer and zealous to improve it, but he began with an act of acceptance of the here-and-now, in contrast to the rejections of the modernists. He upheld the traditional qualities of rationality and will, as opposed to the open responsiveness to the flux of experience which was one aspect of the modernist aesthetic; and he had no doubts about what Lawrence called 'the old stable ego', whereas the modernists saw the self as fragmented and potentially in dissolution. And if the contemporaries had a workmanlike respect for the craft of writing they did not regard art with the transcendental seriousness of the moderns. Spender was writing at a time when the high artistic

aims of modernism had been superseded in England by the formal conservatism and unambitious common-sense realism of the young poets and novelists of the Movement, who were very much 'contemporaries' in his sense. Since Spender wrote, the empirical distinction between the modern and the contemporary has become blurred, largely because of the diffusion of modernism not as vision but as technique. Young writers are now clever enough to deploy a whole range of modernist devices, just as the once puzzling or disturbing distortions and juxtapositions of cubism and surrealism have become part of the basic idioms of commercial design. The differences in style and structure between the novels of the Amises, *père et fils*, illustrate this point. Furthermore, English writing has come a long way from the insularity of Movement days and is subject as a matter of course to a variety of influences which if not precisely 'modern' are certainly not 'contemporary' either, such as the 'magic realism' of Borges, Garcia Marquez and Calvino.

'Modern' is now established as a historical category, with paradoxical results. In ordinary parlance the word still means new or recent or up-to-date, whereas for critics a 'modern' text might be seventy years old, and the 'modern' is inevitably followed by the 'post-modern'. A further paradox is suggested by the title of the large compilation of literary and philosophical documents going back to the eighteenth century, edited by Ellmann and Fiedelson, called *The Modern Tradition*. This book was published in 1965 and was certainly planned and in preparation when Spender's came out in 1963. It would be a mistake to regard him as the only instigator of what was a broad trend, but *The Struggle of the Modern* gave it a clear and accessible formulation. The collective phenomena which Spender described as modern were for a time known as 'the modern movement', which was the title of a book by Cyril Connolly, but that phrase seemed lame and long-winded, and before long was replaced by 'modernism', which is now in common usage. There was already a well-established sense of 'modernism', referring to the reforming movement in Catholic theology which was condemned by the Pope before the First World War but which has since largely triumphed in the wake of the Second Vatican Council. Confusion between the theological and literary senses need not often arise, and the latter is altogether too convenient not to use. Nevertheless, it has its

dangers. The emergence of modernism as a literary category coincided with the explosion in the academic study of modern literature and the erection of the major modernists into canonical figures. 'Yeats scholarship' has been followed by Eliot scholarship, Lawrence scholarship, Beckett scholarship. . . . The rage or outrage which their works once provoked are either forgotten or relegated to interesting footnotes to literary history. Twenty years ago, in *Beyond Culture,* Lionel Trilling wrote with puzzled concern about the bland way in which the great challenging modern texts of extreme experience were effortlessly assimilated by the academy. The process has gone a lot further since then. In 1918 Eliot wrote of *Ulysses* and *Tarr:* 'Both are terrifying. That is the test of a work of art. When a work of art no longer terrifies us we may know that we were mistaken, or that our senses are dulled: we ought still to find *Othello* and *Lear* frightful.' Most Shakespeare scholars, and their students, it seems reasonable to assume, do no such thing. Eliot himself, some of whose greatest poetry springs from fear and terror, is no longer allowed to be very disturbing, having been safely enclosed with commentaries, readers' guides and casebooks (one of which I must plead guilty to having edited myself). It was this situation which Fredric Jameson addressed himself to in *Fables of Aggression,* where he sees Wyndham Lewis as less tamed and ordered by academic exegesis than the other modernists; reading him, he says, we 'sense that freshness and virulence of modernizing stylization less and less accessible in the faded texts of his contemporaries.' And yet what is Jameson's own book, so original and challenging in itself, but one more attempt at academic placing of a major modernist author, written by an eminent and influential critic of a remarkably subtle and scholastic cast of mind? F. R. Leavis's relation to Lawrence, a generation earlier, was broadly similar.

The dominance of a limited canon of unquestionably great authors is to be resisted, since it implies that non-canonical authors are not worth spending time on. It is best resisted, though, not by arguing against the idea of a canon, or even against the idea of literature itself, as in some recent Marxist discourses, but by discovering, reading, discussing and making available other texts which may be excellent and interesting without necessarily bearing the numbing accolade of 'great'. In this

context feminist criticism, despite its sometimes jejune theoretical foundations, has been unexpectedly positive and stimulating, by drawing attention to a lot of intestesting but neglected or forgotten books which happen to be by women. See, for instance, the extensive programme of paperback reprints embarked on by the Virago publishing house.

Of the words I set down in the opening sentence of this introduction, 'new' has endured best, perhaps because it is least specific. To call a book 'new' is to say something important about it, without saying whether its spirit is modern or post-modern, contemporary or plain old-fashioned. Works of literature which remain worth reading are always somehow new, or have something new to say, which does not mean that they are 'timeless' in some simplistic sense. Their historicity has to be understood and respected, but their literary importance is more than historical and has to address a reader living *now*, not *then*, Gadamer's formulation of the need for a fusion of the 'horizons' of the text and of the reader is helpful. When Ezra Pound called a volume of his essays *Make It New* he was alluding to this point, I believe, though 'new' itself has not entirely escaped historicizing, as when we have to refer to the old New Criticism (and perhaps the old *nouveau roman).* Modernism is inevitably becoming historical, even though its greatest texts still seem 'modern' in the everyday rather than the critical sense: *Women in Love* or *The Waste Land* for instance. Nevertheless, we cannot forget that we are late twentieth-century readers of early twentieth-century literature, and the distance is bound to grow greater as we move into a new century.

In fact, the modernist achievements and innovations are currently under attack or revision. *The Waste Land* is a special and remarkable case. When it was first published it was widely regarded as a hoax, and it has never been totally accepted or decisively rejected, so that every few years there are fresh challenges and fresh defences; it seems that for the foreseeable future this poem will provide an arena for critical argument, which may indicate its continuing but unstable vitality. Many of the assumptions of modernist criticism are now in question, such as the notion of the literary text as a separate monad or icon, possessing its own peculiar unity and harmony: by deconstructionists who believe that texts ultimately embody *aporia* and

contradiction rather than unity and harmony, and by Marxists who believe that unity and harmony are ideologically objectionable, since to pursue them in literature might encourage one to pursue them in life, with a resultant slackening of the class struggle; and by Harold Bloom and his followers, who reject the iconic text in favour of a Freudian restatement of the importance (or the anxiety) of influence. Bloom has also overturned the map of English poetry outlined by Pound and Eliot and systematized by Leavis; he has restored the Romantics, and Shelley in particular, to a prominence from which they once seemed to have been permanently dislodged.

If forced to take sides I would align myself with some revisionist version of the New Criticism rather than its opponents. It is in any case inevitable in pedagogic situations, having arisen in Cambridge in the 1920s from an extraordinary coming together of Eliot's creative and critical example and the demands of undergraduate teaching in the expanding English School. The present situation is undoubtedly far more complicated than it was in the heyday of modernism and its immediate critical consequences in the work of *Scrutiny* and the American New Critics. Modernism, or rather the ahistorical myth of modernism, was seen as a total revolution, a once-for-all transformation. Nobody would, or could, write novels like Arnold Bennett or poetry like Tennyson or plays like Shaw or criticism like Edmund Gosse, ever again. The myth is still very strong, as much among creative writers as in the academy, and more so in America than in Britain. Yet modernism, though demythologized, is not reduced in importance when it is seen as a historical phenomenon.

When the major phase of modernism ended is a matter for speculation. By 1930, when Lawrence died, the seminal texts had been written, though major canonical works continued to appear in the 1930s and 40s: *Finnegans Wake, Four Quartets,* the *Pisan Cantos*. What happened afterwards, with reference to English writing, is what is implied by 'aftermath' in the epigraph, a word with pleasant associations of new and later growth in its original agricultural sense, though it has acquired subsequent implications of loss and destruction; both seem appropriate in placing later developments. Modernism has never completely triumphed in English literary culture; such major writers as

Hardy and Kipling were unaffected by it, and in the 1920s, despite Eliot's rapid rise to fame and influence, he was much less widely read than the Georgian poets. The later writing looked at in this book shows conflicting attitudes to modernism: a desire to continue or at least use it versus a desire to evade or ignore it. In the early 1960s, about the time Spender published *The Struggle of the Modern,* there was an interesting attempt by conservative critics to discover, or construct, a truly native, non-modernist line of development in English poetry, which by-passed Pound and Eliot, and ran through Hardy, Housman, Edward Thomas, Robert Graves, to John Betjeman and Philip Larkin. Donald Davie rejected this approach, but he took it seriously in *Thomas Hardy and British Poetry.* The later responses to modernism in England are neatly emblematized by Davie and Larkin, and discussed in one of these essays. Both were originally Movement poets, exact contemporaries, of similar background and education. Larkin became rightly regarded as the leading poet of his generation; his public pronouncements have been consistently anti-modernist, and he is capable of a provocative philistine insularity. Yet a moderately attentive reading of Larkin's poetry shows that he has not been unaffected by the modernist innovations in poetic language; his tone is not that of a Georgian or a naive *pasticheur* of Hardy. Davies has always been a standard-bearer for modernism, a life-long admirer of Pound, yet still feeling an undertow towards the qualities exemplified by Hardy.

The assumption that nothing worthwhile followed modernism in England is made from time to time by academic critics of sufficiently aloof and austere temperament, like Leavis or George Steiner. It is not, of course, one that I share, believing that supposedly minor works may give pleasure and instruction and that the good need not be the enemy of the best. The problem of coping with the modernist example and legacy, whether by emulating it or ignoring it or reinterpreting it, continues in late twentieth-century literature and criticism. I believe it forms a recurring theme in these essays.

These essays have been lightly revised in places, but I have not attempted any substantial rewriting or updating; their dates of publication (which in one or two cases are appreciably later than the date of composition) remain part of their meaning. They first

appeared in the following publications, to whom my thanks and acknowledgements are due:
Contemporary Literature, 'Davie, Larkin and the state of England'; *Critical Quarterly,* part of 'Poets of the 1940s' and 'Leavis and Eliot'; *Encounter,* 'Eliot's ghostly voices' and 'The decline and fall of the Catholic novel'; *Enemy News,* 'Wyndham Lewis: II'; *Form* (Bangladesh), 'A note on *Sons and Lovers'; New Review,* 'The Bloomsbury pastoral' and 'Mr Bennett and Ms Drabble'; *PN Review,* part of 'Poets of the 1940s' and 'The Terry Eagleton story; *The Tablet,* 'Wyndham Lewis: III'; *Times Higher Educational Supplement,* 'The 1930s'; *Times Literary Supplement,* 'Wyndham Lewis: I', 'Ezra Pound' and 'George Steiner: on culture and on Hitler'; *Donald Davie and the Responsibilities of Literature,* ed, George Dekker (New Carcanet Press), 'Pound and Donald Davie'.

Contents

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The Bloomsbury pastoral

A minor character in Virginia Woolf's first novel, *The Voyage Out*, published in 1915, reflects, 'of course they would want a room, a nice room, in Bloomsbury preferably, where they could meet once a week. . . . ' The sentiment was picked up more recently by a popular song about the joy of a 'Room in Bloomsbury'. The idea of Bloomsbury, however tenuous and indefinable, has been alive for seventy years now. When Sir Leslie Stephen died in 1904, his sons and daughters, Thoby, Adrian, Vanessa and Virginia, abandoned the gloomy and oppressive family home in Hyde Park Gate and set up in Gordon Square, at that time an unfashionable and inexpensive locality. There the young Stephens were joined by Thoby's Cambridge friends and an idea, a legend, a way of life, was born. Later, other parts of Bloomsbury were colonized so that from an obscure postal district it became a magical region where, as the phrase had it, 'all the couples are triangles and everyone lives in squares.' In time the idea of Bloomsbury seemed to lose its potency, denoting a rather faded kind of intellectual superiority, a self-consciously emancipated attitude to personal relations, and a dated experimentalism in the arts. But the myth persisted. Twenty years ago J. K. Johnstone's *The Bloomsbury Group* made a strong case for the coherence and seriousness of Bloomsbury ideas and attitudes. Since then we have had a long row of books on the subject, mostly memoirs, letters or biographies; including Leonard Woolf's autobiography in several volumes, which was solidly informative if rambling and ill-written; Michael Holroyd's 1,100 pages on Lytton Strachey, a form of scholarly overkill that contrasted curiously with Strachey's own severely selective essays in biolgraphy; and, above all, Quentin Bell's admirably succinct and evocative life of his aunt, Virginia Woolf. And much, much more, by or about central or peripheral figures:

Clive Bell, Roger Fry, Rupert Brooke, Dora Carrington, Mark Gertler, Lady Ottoline Morrell, right down to a Boy at the Hogarth Press.

On the face of it there is still more to come and the market seems to be holding up well. After a wait of eleven years the second volume of Ottoline Morrell's memoirs has now appeared (*Ottoline at Garsington: Memoirs of Lady Ottoline Morrell 1915-1918,* edited by Robert Gathorne-Hardy). The long delay was necessary, it seems, because too many people referred to adversely in the book were still alive and it took time for mortality to do its work. With ironic appropriateness the editor himself died once he had seen the book through the press. In his introduction Robert Gathorne-Hardy vehemently defends Ottoline Morrell's memory against Michael Holroyd's belittling account of her in his life of Lytton Strachey. Meantime Holroyd himself, whilst retaining a controlling interest in Strachey Enterprises, has turned to another dominant figure of the period, Augustus John. Too vigorous and colourful to be a Bloomsbury person, his presence was certainly felt in that quarter. To quote from *The Voyage Out* again: ' "There's a clever man in London called John who paints ever so much better than the old masters," Mrs Flushing continued. "His pictures excite me—nothin' that's old excites me." ' Augustus John's portrait of Ottoline Morrell is the frontispiece to this volume of her memoirs; it is forceful and striking rather than particularly flattering, but Ottoline insisted on hanging it in her drawing-room at Garsington. 'Whatever she may have lacked', John remarked after her death, 'it wasn't courage.' In 1908 when John was doing a succession of water-colours and drawings of Ottoline, she fell for him heavily and flung at him not only her baroquely conspicuous person but a succession of expensive presents. John coped manfully but he was relieved when the affair dwindled into friendship. All of which is described in the first volume of Holroyd's new biography of John (*Augustus John: Volume I: The Years of Innocence*). This book shows the same relentless accumulation of detail as the life of Strachey but Holroyd's ventures into art criticism are both briefer and more convincing than the long and usually turgid essays in literary criticism in the Strachey book. Holroyd has also collaborated in bringing out a nice book of John's pictures (*The Art of Augustus John* by Malcolm Easton and Michael Holroyd)