



A New Modernity?

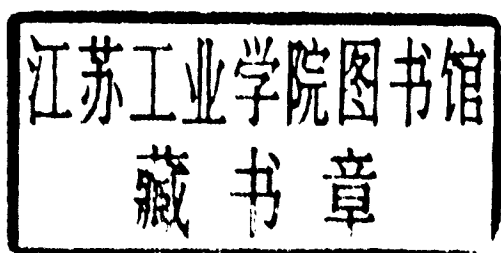


CHANGE IN SCIENCE,
LITERATURE
AND POLITICS

A NEW MODERNITY?

*Change in science, literature
and politics*

Wendy Wheeler



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I can see my fellow beings going down very gradually, and I call out to them and explain: I can see you going down very gradually. There is no reply. On distant charter cruises there are orchestras playing feebly but gallantly. I deplore all this very much, I do not like the way they all die, soaked to the skin in the drizzle, it is a pity, I am severely tempted to wail. 'The Doomsday year,' I wail, 'Is not yet clear / so let's have / so let's have / another beer.'

But where have the dinosaurs gone? And where do all these sodden trunks come from, thousands and thousands of them drifting by, utterly empty and abandoned to the waves? I wail and swim. Business, I wail, as usual, everything lurching, everything under control, everything O.K., my fellow beings probably drowned in the drizzle, a pity, never mind, I bewail them, so what? Dimly, hard to say why, I continue to wail, and to swim.

Hans Magnus Enzenberger
The Sinking of the Titanic.

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INTRODUCTION

The problem of reality

It is assumed here that the task of reality-acceptance is never completed, that no human being is free from the strain of relating inner and outer reality, and that relief from this strain is provided by an intermediate area of experience which is not challenged (arts, religion, etc.). This intermediate area is in direct continuity with the play area of the small child who is 'lost' in play.

Donald Winnicott¹

If there's one thing that the world of modernity is centrally concerned with, it is reality. Thus, when we think about the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, we think about the attempt to grasp the real world as it really is – whether in the rise of the realist novel, in the realism of empirical method in the sciences, or in the determined realism of Utilitarian philosophy. The trouble is though, as Winnicott noted, that people are not very good at handling reality; or at least they need some relief from it. And the experience of modernity, for many people, is distressingly unrelenting: uncushioned, the demand to 'face the realities of the modern world' may become intolerable. We have, indeed, been freed in some senses: freed from the grip of tradition and superstition; freed from an all-encompassing religious intolerance; freed to say and do more or less what we want, and to make whatever we have the energy to make. But then there is, famously, the other side, in which we experience our freedom as also a kind of alienation and rootlessness. We are no longer restrained, but we are not held either.

A general sense of malaise hangs over Western culture. Although our lives are incomparably easier than any lived before, we recognise, amongst so much material comfort, a dreadful spiritual impoverishment. Our 'intermediate areas of experience which are not challenged' – that is to say, our *really* free and alive experiences of being what Winnicott liked to call a 'real person in the world' – are,

in fact, increasingly invaded by what Carlyle contemptuously called 'the cash nexus' and its attendant managers.

So is it all up with us? Are we a civilisation in inevitable decline, to be replaced, as some think, by generations of cold and selfish warrior capitalists whom we would hardly recognise as human, and who rejoice in what Foucault once called 'the end of man' – or else by fundamentalist theocracies nostalgically seeking to restore certainty and faith? Or can the extraordinary adventure of human Enlightenment, with its high aims of rationality, freedom and progress for all humankind, find within itself a renewed understanding capable of a self-reflexive transformation? My argument in this book is that the resources exist for such a transformation, and that, at the end of the twentieth century, there is work being done in the fields of culture, science and philosophy which, taken together, represents the beginnings of a process of transformation which will enable us to imagine a new modernity.

THE POSTMODERN THORN

I often think that the further we move from Shakespeare in time, the closer we come to him in sensibility. I never can think about *Lear* without thinking of Beckett's *Endgame*; and Jacques Derrida's *Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, which is a sustained meditation on living with ghosts, always brings to mind *Hamlet* – Hamlet's 'the time is out of joint' apparently applies to us too. Of course, things are always changing, but there do seem to be times when change is more intense and when time *has* got out of joint. That, I think, explains our affinity with the raging and betrayed Lear and with the prototypic modern melancholic Hamlet.

What historians now call the early modern period (of Shakespeare and the Renaissance) shares some of the features of the period which we have taken to calling postmodern, particularly in its 'big' questions about human meaning and significance. Both periods express the turmoil of uncertainties economic, social and spiritual. We can now see this historical turmoil as the foment of ideas from which the Enlightenment – and subsequently our own modernity – began to emerge in the last half of the seventeenth century. Can our post-modernity similarly be seen as the chaotic grounds from which a new

modernity or second Enlightenment might emerge? Certainly both Jean-Francois Lyotard, and Zygmunt Bauman have argued that the postmodern is the necessary historical and conceptual *condition* of the modern.²

For Lyotard, the postmodern is like the crossing of the Alps in Wordsworth's *The Prelude*.³ It is the sublime moment – unknowable and unrecognisable in itself – which can only be recognised retrospectively as the 'what will have been done'. For Bauman, 'modernity is postmodernity refusing to accept its own truth'⁴; this truth is that the aims of clear, ordered and systematic rationality were always an illusion. With the postmodern we once again begin to accept the mysteries of human impulses and are even suspicious of 'unemotional, calculating reason'.

The argument in this book – close in spirit to both Lyotard and Bauman – is that, in a sense, modernity comes too soon; or, at least, that its temporality is problematic. Bauman understands that the aim of 'disenchancing' the world had to be an illusion; postmodernity brings 're-enchantment' of the world 'after the protracted and earnest ... modern struggle to disenchant it'. As he adds, 'more exactly, the resistance to enchantment ... was all along the "postmodern thorn" in the body of modernity'. And Lyotard understands that the postmodern artist (or philosopher, or scientist) always 'comes too soon' to be understood. Leibniz, for example, makes a lot of sense once you have understood Darwin and Mendel. This problem with the temporality of modernity induces a condition of cultural 'melancholia', or 'failed mourning'. That is to say that modernity involves an encounter with loss – of the certainties of tradition and God – which is precipitous; it comes before the modern world has the conceptual tools for dealing with it. In other words, to mourn successfully means that you must be able to replace the complex affective world you have lost with a new, but equally human, complex affective world. Enlightenment modernity, with its commitment to reason, was a great leap forward; but its limited view of rationality meant that it could not offer a sufficiently wide and rich cosmology in place of what had been lost. The 'disenchanted' world of Enlightenment rationality was an impoverished one. My argument here is that we are now in a position to become truly modern: our science – especially our neuroscience and science of complexity – offers us a new cosmology of great subtlety and depth, in which our understandings of our human selves and our place within the world of culture and nature will be immeasurably enriched. This will constitute a proper mourn-

ing for the old world which Western cultures began to lose four centuries ago.

In this book I attempt to bring together work from different fields – critical and creative responses to the problems of Enlightenment modernity – in order to begin to articulate what might constitute the elements of a new modernity. In Chapter 1 I draw on the work of Raymond Williams in *Culture and Society*, and on Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents*. In *Culture and Society* Williams traces the emergence of the modern idea of culture via 'cultural' responses to the experience of modernity; and, in *Civilisation and Its Discontents*, Freud traces psychical responses. My argument here is that Enlightenment modernity has involved 'rationalist' and 'individualist' responses which are characteristically toned by the psychical state of inner splitting and self-persecution which Freud describes as melancholia; I suggest that the Romantic stress on the virtues of human creativity, transcendence and love, and upon Coleridge's notion of art as producing 'unity from diversity', can be seen as an affirmation of the Freudian life drive (Eros) against the deathliness of disenchantment. Romanticism thus constitutes an attempt at cultural mourning – albeit a deeply problematic one. By setting Raymond Williams's *Culture and Society* beside Freud's *Civilisation and Its Discontents* I hope to persuade you of the claim that there is something of the death drive in the instrumentalism of modern rationalisations and bureaucratisations. Particularly where these latter are in the service of capitalist profit to the exclusion of all other human goods, the effects upon human beings are likely to be dehumanising and deathly.

In Chapter 2, I take another look at the possible effects of Enlightenment ideas of rationality. Once more looking at modernity's tendency to bring about dualistic, or split, thinking, I concentrate this time on the 'major' psychical splitting associated with psychosis and, in particular, on the emergence of so-called 'borderline' personalities in the twentieth century. I refer to evidence (both medical and cultural) which suggests that borderline psychosis has been on the increase for a number of decades; and I suggest that this may be the result of Enlightenment's gendered organisation of identifications, in relation to rationality and irrationality, with men identifying with a form of reason which is organisationally powerful but affectively impoverished. One way of expressing this might be to say that by the beginning of the nineteenth century, power resided with Adam Smith's analysis of political economy in *The Wealth of*

Nations, while his *Theory of the Moral Sentiments* lay forgotten.

In Chapter 3, I offer a literary case study of the work of the English novelist Graham Swift. Swift's work exemplifies the artistic struggle with Romanticism as a problematic solution to the most disturbing aspects of modernity. This is followed by a more general consideration of creative disorderliness as an aspect of mourning-work.

Chapter 4 offers an examination of managerialism as a characteristic modern response to ethical relativism, and considers the contemporary rise of managerialism in a post-ideological politics. I argue that politics cannot be simply about management but must always involve choices – which are, in fact, always about what is good and what is bad. I also argue that current cultural and scientific developments and changes (to be discussed in more detail in Chapter 5) require a political response.

In Chapter 5, I detail shifts in sensibility across a range of fields in which the distinct spheres of knowledge articulated in Enlightenment philosophy seem to be breaking down and in flux. I suggest that this signals the possibility of a new modernity, a form of healthy cultural mourning at last, and show how these changes are to be found at the heart of the contemporary sciences of complexity and neurobiology.

In conclusion I note that the cartesian dualism which has so fundamentally structured the modern world is in the process of being replaced by what is, in the broadest possible sense, an ecological sensibility. In this, certain kinds of distinctions – mind/body, reason/passion, and perhaps other cognate ones – seem to be giving way to a more holistic way of thinking. Our modern senses of such things as order, reason, body, and so on are being greatly and usefully expanded through a growing understanding of the creative complexity of the world, and of the creatures amongst whom we move and in whom we have our being – as do they in us.

NOTES

1. D. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, Routledge, London 1991, p13.
2. J-F. Lyotard, 'Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?', in Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A report on Knowledge*, [1979], tr. G. Bennington, E B. Massumi, Manchester University Press, Manchester 1984.
3. In *The Prelude*, the poet and his companion crossing the Alps ask a local

peasant for the right path to the summit of the pass. The peasant tells them that they have already crossed the summit of the pass.

4. Z. Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics*, Blackwell, Oxford 1993, p32.

CHAPTER 1

Modernity

Reason and progress

Terms such as modernity, romanticism, and postmodernity are always imprecise; their value is heuristic, inasmuch as they allow us to refer to our sense that, at some very approximate period in time, important changes occurred in the ways in which people understood both themselves and the time of which they were a part. In this book the word modernity refers, roughly, to a period of two hundred or so years, from the mid to late eighteenth century up to the mid to late twentieth century. My use of the term romanticism will, I hope, shortly become evident. By postmodernity I mean the period during which certainties – especially about the value of science, rationality, and progress – began to be called into question. It is quite clear to me that the Nazi Holocaust and, perhaps to a lesser extent, the use of atomic weapons against Japan at the end of the Second World War, played a very significant part in the development of a postmodern sensibility. As is always the case, however, that sensibility developed and was elaborated over time: its early manifestations appeared in the 1960s, but were not widespread until the 1970s.

The purpose of this chapter is, first, to offer a sketch of the philosophical and intellectual conditions from within which the tensions of modernity – which I am shortly to describe in a particular way – developed. Inevitably perhaps, the philosophical seeds of modernity – particularly in the work of Leibniz, which I discuss briefly below – contain the potential resolution of the conflict of ideas which have characterised this two-hundred year period. Profoundly embedded conflicts of ideas always take a long time to work themselves out; it is nevertheless surprising, given that the modern age has been, above all, a scientific age, that only fairly recently has the scientific *Zeitgeist* become sufficiently attuned to the times to produce research capable of bringing a scientific underpinning to ideas produced in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries when the spirit of modernity was just getting underway.

The chapter's second aim is to identify significant pieces of work from two modern thinkers – Sigmund Freud's *Civilisation and its Discontents* and Raymond Williams's *Culture and Society* – which can usefully be read through each other in order to provide a theoretical basis for thinking about the animating spirit of modernity, and beyond that a way of thinking about the significance of cultural symptomatology at the postmodern end of the twentieth century.

What I will argue throughout both chapter and book is that modernity is characterised by an essentially melancholic response to the loss of traditional beliefs, and that postmodernity is the coda to modernity inasmuch as it restages cultural grieving in all its potential aspects, but at a new level of intensity – both in punitive melancholic modes and also, latterly, in tentative attempts at wholesome mourning. Thus, the initial cultural symptoms of postmodernity were a nostalgic attempt – sometimes ironic or parodic, for instance in architecture – to refuse modernism's futurism and to hold on to the past,¹ and theoretical languages which were punitive in their view of human beings, as fragmented and decentred, and were couched in a prose designed to punish its readers. The second stage of postmodernism, I will argue, is oriented towards the future, towards ways of rethinking human beings as whole souls in a newly-conceived world, and towards a 'postmodern' rebuilding which might constitute a true mourning of what was lost in the first modernity. In this second stage of postmodernity, we may be able to find ways of thinking about the world which are sufficient to allow us to make a new kind of modernity from the wreckage of the first.

LOOKING AT THE FIRST MODERNITY

By the middle of the eighteenth century, the aim of philosophy – that is to say science – had fundamentally changed. In the seventeenth century, the application of reason was viewed within the contemplative model as the process of logical and clear thought whereby, at best, one might arrive at and participate in a truth already and divinely in eternal existence. By the middle of the eighteenth century, reason was no longer conceived in this context but, rather, in terms of movement or change – to know something more or new. From this time on, it is in the very movement of the mind itself that reason is expressed as critical thought: 'Diderot, himself originator of the *Encyclopaedia*, states that its purpose is not only to supply a certain body of knowl-

edge but also to bring about a change in the mode of thinking – *pour changer la façon commune de penser*. Consciousness of this task affects all the minds of the age and gives rise to a new sense of inner tension. Even the calmest and most discreet thinkers, the real “scientists”, are swayed by this movement’.²

In other words, as a revolution in scientific thought, Enlightenment modernity must be understood to be something profoundly *unbinding*; it releases movement from the stilling constraints of tradition, belief and contemplative knowledge and into the forward flow of analytic thought fed by, and always starting from, the endless facts of the physical universe. Science as exemplified by the methodological approach of Newton, in which one proceeds from facts in the material world to a theoretical explanation, rather than from a point of theoretical or metaphysical clarity to the meaning of things in the world, parts company with art; and thus philosophy, particularly as an empirical science, is poised to become the new truth-language of modernity. With the formulation of the new discipline of aesthetics in the mid-eighteenth century art increasingly takes up the language of moral sensibility which once belonged to religion.

Here, we can see the beginning of the separation of areas of knowledge which, towards the end of the eighteenth century, Kant will inscribe in his three Critiques of Pure Reason, Practical Reason and Judgement. In spite of the clarity of analytical thought that this development will allow, it is this separation which will, eventually, lead to the anxiety – characteristic of modernity and described in Raymond Williams’s *Culture and Society* – that utilitarian philosophy leads to a dehumanising of the life-world.

At the beginning of the eighteenth century the idea of moral virtue is gradually becoming separated from a religious sensibility, and, by the middle of the century, aesthetic appreciation will, in its turn, begin to define a distinct sphere in which sensitivity to works of art invokes a state of mind akin to virtue. We can trace these movements of Enlightenment thought in the work of Shaftesbury, Adam Smith and Baumgarten. By the century’s end, scientific philosophy, in the shape of Benthamite utilitarianism, will thus offer a very different kind of knowledge about the world to that found in art. In the form of Romanticism, the latter will still retain, in vestigial form, its long association with religion. As the nineteenth century progresses, Romantic thought and practice will find itself increasingly opposed to the instrumentalism of utilitarian modernisation.

Lord Shaftesbury's *An Inquiry Concerning Virtue, or Merit*, for example, written during the last quarter of the seventeenth century, argues that true virtue derives from the human possession of a moral sense, rather than merely from religious fear of punishment or hope of reward. Its conclusion, that true virtue lies in an apprehension of God's perfection and in a desire to do justice to this in the world as well as in one's own person, rather than in religious dread, is thus theistic.³ On the question of why people should be virtuous in the wider sense of caring for the good of the whole rather than simply attending to private virtue, Shaftesbury argues that the pursuit of pleasure will lead us to the maximal pleasure of social love. Adam Smith's *Theory of the Moral Sentiments* takes up similar questions and is at pains to base moral sentiment in a sensibility born out of affective identification. Smith's economic theory, as propounded in *The Wealth of Nations*, assumes moral social empathies and cohesion as the necessary basis for the pursuit of individual profit in free markets. These moral grounds, based upon the articulation of bourgeois inwardness in terms of fine feelings and (middle-class) identifications, are the 'taken for granted' of the cultures in which the doctrines of political economy, utilitarianism and *laissez-faire* are developed. As many critics have noticed, this brings about both an aestheticisation of the moral self and also the feminisation of morality, famously typified by the nineteenth-century idealisation of the woman as 'the angel in the house'. The latter is the gentle she whose domestic spirit provides the protected 'home' from which the entrepreneurial male, replenished, daily sets forth to parry and thrust in the competitive market place. As Terry Eagleton argues, 'The ultimate binding force of the bourgeois social order, in contrast to the coercive apparatus of absolutism, will be habits, pieties, sentiments and affections'.⁴ With this, he adds, power has become aestheticised as Baumgarten's "sister" of logic, a kind of *ratio inferior* or feminine analogue at the lower level of sensational life'.⁵

I shall return to the question of gender, and the gendering of ideas, later. For the moment, I simply want to note that one of the most striking things about social and political debate at the end of the 1980s and during the 1990s was an increasingly clear recognition that the combination of scientific rationality as the truth-language of modernity, and the steady development of individualism since the sixteenth century, has tended to erode the shared system of social and moral values upon which the development and success of capitalist societies depend. John Gray's analysis in *Enlightenment's Wake*, for