

# The Culture of Modernism

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## I

In the past hundred years we have had a special kind of literature. We call it modern and distinguish it from the merely contemporary; for where the contemporary refers to time, the modern refers to sensibility and style, and where the contemporary is a term of neutral reference, the modern is a term of critical placement and judgment. Modernist literature seems now to be coming to an end, though we can by no means be certain and there are critics who would argue that, given the nature of our society, it cannot come to an end.

The kind of literature called modern is almost always difficult: that is a sign of its modernity. To the established guardians of culture, the modern writer seems willfully inaccessible. He works with unfamiliar forms; he chooses subjects that disturb the audience and threaten its most cherished sentiments; he provokes traditionalist critics to such epithets as “unwholesome,” “coterie,” and “decadent.”

The modern must be defined in terms of what it is not, the embodiment of a tacit polemic, an inclusive negative. Modern writers find that they begin to work at a moment when the culture is marked by a prevalent style of perception and feeling; and their modernity consists in a revolt against this prevalent style, an unyielding rage against the official order. But modernism does not establish a prevalent style of its own; or if it does, it denies itself, thereby ceasing to be modern. This presents it with a dilemma which in principle may be beyond solution but in practice leads to formal inventiveness and resourceful dialectic—*the dilemma that modernism must always struggle but never quite triumph, and then, after a time, must struggle in order not to triumph*. Modernism need never come to an end, or at least we do not really know, as yet, how it can or will reach its end. The history of previous literary periods is relevant but probably not decisive here, since modernism, despite the precursors one can find in the past, is, I think, a novelty in the development of Western culture. What we do know, however, is that modernism can fall upon days of exhaustion, when it appears to be marking time and waiting for new avenues of release.

At certain points in the development of a culture, usually points of dismay and restlessness, writers find themselves affronting their audience, and not from decision or whim but from some deep moral and psychological necessity. Such writers may not even be aware that they are challenging crucial assumptions of their day, yet their impact is revolutionary; and once this is recognized by sympathetic critics and a coterie audience, the avant garde has begun to emerge as a self-conscious and combative group. Paul Goodman writes:

. . . there are these works that are indignantly rejected, and called not genuine art, but insult, outrage, *blague, fumiste*, willfully incomprehensible. . . . And what is puzzling is not that they are isolated pieces, but some artists persistently produce such pieces and there are schools of such “not genuine” artists. What are they doing? In this case, the feeling of the audience is sound—it is always sound—there *is* insult, wilful incomprehensibility, experiment; and yet the judgment of the audience is wrong—it is often wrong—for this is a genuine art.

Why does this clash arise? Because the modern writer can no longer accept the claims of the world. If he tries to acquiesce in the norms of the audience, he finds himself depressed

and outraged. The usual morality seems counterfeit; taste, a genteel indulgence; tradition, a wearisome fetter. It becomes a condition of being a writer that he rebel, not merely and sometimes not at all against received opinions, but against the received ways of doing the writer's work.

A modernist culture soon learns to respect, even to cherish, signs of its division. It sees doubt as a form of health. It hunts for ethical norms through underground journeys, experiments with sensation, and a mocking suspension of accredited values. Upon the passport of the Wisdom of The Ages, it stamps in bold red letters: *Not Transferable*. It cultivates, in Thomas Mann's phrase, "a sympathy for the abyss." It strips man of his systems of belief and his ideal claims, and then proposes the one uniquely modern style of salvation: a salvation by, of, and for the self. In modernist culture, the object perceived seems always on the verge of being swallowed up by the perceiving agent, and the act of perception in danger of being exalted to the substance of reality. *I see, therefore I am*.

Subjectivity becomes the typical condition of the modernist outlook. In its early stages, when it does not trouble to disguise its filial dependence on the Romantic poets, modernism declares itself as an inflation of the self, a transcendental and orgiastic aggrandizement of matter and event in behalf of personal vitality. In the middle stages, the self begins to recoil from externality and now devotes itself, almost as if it were the world's body, to a minute examination of its own inner dynamics: freedom, compulsion, caprice. In the late stages, there occurs an emptying-out of the self, a revulsion from the wearisomeness of both individuality and psychological gain. (Three writers as exemplars of these stages: Whitman, Virginia Woolf, Beckett.) Modernism thereby keeps approaching—sometimes even penetrating—the limits of solipsism, the view expressed by the German poet Gottfried Benn when he writes that "there is no outer reality, there is only human consciousness, constantly building, modifying, rebuilding new worlds out of its own creativity."

Behind this extreme subjectivity lurks an equally extreme sense of historical impasse, the assumption that something about the experience of our ages is unique, a catastrophe without precedent. The German novelist Herman Hesse speaks about "a whole generation caught ... between two ages, two modes of life, with the consequence that it loses all power to understand itself and has no standards, no security, no simple acquiescence." Above all, no simple acquiescence.

Whether all of this is true matters not nearly so much as the fact that modernist writers, artists, and composers—Joyce, Kafka, Picasso, Schoenberg—have apparently worked on the tacit assumption that it is true. The modernist sensibility posits a blockage, if not an end, of history: an apocalyptic *cul de sac* in which both teleological ends and secular progress are called into question, perhaps become obsolete. Man is mired—you can take your choice—in the mass, in the machine, in the city, in his loss of faith, in the hopelessness of a life without anterior intention or terminal value. By this late date, these disasters seem in our imaginations to have merged into one.

"On or about December 1910 human nature changed." Through this vivid hyperbole Virginia Woolf meant to suggest that there is a frightening discontinuity between the traditional past and the shaken present; that the line of history has been bent, perhaps broken. Modernist literature goes on the tacit assumption that human nature has indeed changed, probably a few decades before the date given by Mrs. Woolf; or, as Stephen Spender remarks, the circumstances under which we live, forever being transformed by nature, have been so radically altered that people feel human nature to have changed and thereby behave as though it has. Commenting on this notion Spender makes a keen distinction between the "Voltairean I" of earlier writers and the "I" of the moderns:

The "Voltairean I" of Shaw, Wells, and others acts upon events. The "modern I" of Rimbaud, Joyce, Proust, Eliot's *Pryfrock* is acted upon by events. ... The faith of the Voltairean

egoists is that they will direct the powers of the surrounding world from evil into better courses through the exercise of the superior social or cultural intelligence of the creative genius, the writer-prophet. The faith of the moderns is that by allowing their sensibility to be acted upon by the modern experience as suffering, they will produce, partly as the result of unconscious processes, and partly through the exercise of critical consciousness, the idioms and forms of new art.

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The consequences are extreme: a breakup of the traditional unity and continuity of Western culture, so that the decorums of its past no longer count for very much in determining its present, and a loosening of those ties which, in one or another way, had bound it to the institutions of society over the centuries. Not their enemies but art and literature themselves assault the *Gemütlichkeit* of autonomy, the classical balances and resolutions of the past. Culture now goes to war against itself, partly in order to salvage its purpose, and the result is that it can no longer present itself with a Goethean serenity and wholeness. At one extreme there is a violent disparagement of culture (the late Rimbaud) and at the other, a quasi-religion of culture (the late Joyce).

In much modernist literature one finds a bitter impatience with the whole apparatus of cognition and the limiting assumption of rationality. Mind comes to be seen as an enemy of vital human powers. Culture becomes disenchanted with itself, sick over its endless refinements. There is a hunger to break past the bourgeois proprieties and self-containment of culture, toward a form of absolute personal speech, a literature deprived of ceremony and stripped to revelation. In the work of Thomas Mann both what is rejected and what is desired are put forward with a high, ironic consciousness: the abandoned ceremony and the corrosive revelation.

But if a major impulse in modernist literature is a choking nausea before the idea of culture, there is another in which the writer takes upon himself the enormous ambition not to remake the world (by now seen as hopelessly recalcitrant and alien) but to reinvent the terms of reality. I have already quoted Benn's remark that "there is only human consciousness . . . rebuilding new worlds out of its own creativity." In a similar vein, the painter Klee once said that his wish was "not to reflect the visible, but to make visible." And Baudelaire: "The whole visible universe is but an array of images and signs to which the imagination gives a place and relative value. . . ." At first glance this sentence reads like something an English Romantic poet or even a good American transcendentalist might have said; but in the context of Baudelaire's experience as a poet—that experience which led him to say that "every man who refuses to accept the conditions of life sells his soul"—it comes to seem the report of a desire to create or perhaps recreate the very grounds of being, through a permanent revolution of sensibility and style, by means of which art could raise itself to the level of white or (more likely) black magic. Rationalistic psychoanalysts might regard this ambition as a substitute gratification of the most desperate kind, a grandiose mask for inner weakness; but for the great figures of literary modernism it is the very essence of their task.

We approach here another dilemma of modernism, which may also in principle be beyond solution but in practice leads to great inventiveness—that, as the Marxist critic Georg Lukacs has charged, *modernism despairs of human history, abandons the idea of a linear historical development, falls back upon notions of a universal condition humaine or a rhythm of eternal recurrence, yet within its own realm is committed to ceaseless change, turmoil, and recreation.* The more history comes to be seen as static (in the Marxist idiom: a locomotive stalled in the inescapable present), the more art must take on relentless dynamism.

It is quite as if Hegel's "cunning of reason," so long a motor-force of progress in history, were now expelled from its exalted place and locked into the exile of culture. E. H.

Gombrich speaks of philosophies of historical progress as containing “a strong Aristotelian ingredient in so far as they look upon progress as an evolution of inherent potentialities which will follow a predictable course and must reach a predictable summit.” Modernist versions of literature do assign to themselves “an evolution of inherent potentialities”: there is always the hope for still another breakthrough, always the necessary and prepared-for dialectical leap into still another innovation, always an immanent if by no means gradual progress in the life of a form. But these do not follow “a predictable course” nor can they reach a predictable summit—since the very idea of “predictable” or the very goal of “summit” violates the modernist faith in surprise, its belief in an endless spiral of revolution in sensibility and style. And if history is indeed stalled in the sluggishness of the mass and the imperiousness of the machine, then culture must all the more serve as the agent of a life-enhancing turmoil. The figure chosen to embody and advance this turmoil, remarks Gombrich, is the Genius, an early individualistic precursor of the avant garde creative hero. If there is then “a conflict between a genius and his public,” declares Hegel in a sentence which thousands of critics, writers, and publicists will echo through the years, “it must be the public that is to blame . . . the only obligation the artist can have is to follow truth and his genius.” Close to romantic theory at this point, modernism soon ceases to believe in the availability of “truth” or the disclosures of “genius.” The dynamism to which it then commits itself—and here it breaks sharply from the romantics—becomes not merely an absolute without end but sometimes an absolute without discernible ends.

It is a dynamism of asking and of learning not to reply. The past was devoted to answers, the modern period confines itself to questions. And after a certain point, the essence of modernism reveals itself in the persuasion that the true question, the one alone worth asking, cannot and need not be answered; it need only be asked over and over again, forever in new ways. It is as if the very idea of a question were redefined: no longer an interrogation but now a mode of axiomatic description. We present ourselves, we establish our authenticity by the questions we allow to torment us. “All of Dostoevsky’s heroes question themselves as to the meaning of life,” writes Albert Camus. “In this they are modern: they do not fear ridicule. What distinguishes modern sensibility from classical sensibility is that the latter thrives on moral problems and the former on metaphysical problems.”

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A modernist culture is committed to the view that the human lot is inescapably problematic. Problems, to be sure, have been noticed at all times, but in a modernist culture the problematic as a style of existence and inquiry becomes imperious: men learn to find comfort in their wounds. Nietzsche says: “Truth has never yet hung on the arm of an absolute.” The problematic is adhered to, not merely because we live in a time of uncertainty when traditional beliefs and absolute standards, having long disintegrated, give way to the makeshifts of relativism—that is by now an old, old story. The problematic is adhered to because it comes to be considered good, proper, and even beautiful that men should live in discomfort. Again Nietzsche:

Objection, evasion, joyous distrust, and love of irony are signs of health; everything absolute belongs to pathology.

One consequence of this devotion to the problematic, not always a happy consequence, is that in modernist literature there is a turn from truth to sincerity, from the search for objective law to a desire for authentic response. The first involves an effort to apprehend the nature of the universe, and can lead to metaphysics, suicide, revolution, and God; the second involves an effort to discover our demons within, and makes no claim upon the world other than the right to publicize the aggressions of candor. Sincerity becomes the last-ditch defense for men without belief, and in its name absolutes can be toppled, morality dispersed, and intellectual systems dissolved. But a special kind of sincerity: where for the romantics it was

often taken to be a rapid motion into truth, breaking past the cumbersomeness of intellect, now for the modernists it becomes a virtue in itself, regardless of whether it can lead to truth or whether truth can be found. Sincerity of feeling and exact faithfulness of language—which often means a language of fragments, violence, and exasperation—become a ruling passion. In the terrible freedom it allows the modernist writer, sincerity shatters the hypocrisies of bourgeois order; in the lawlessness of its abandonment, it can become a force of darkness and brutality.

Disdainful of certainties, disengaged from the eternal or any of its surrogates, fixated upon the minute particulars of subjective experience, the modernist writer regards settled assumptions as a mask of death, and literature as an agent of metaphysical revolt. Restlessness becomes the sign of sentience, anxiety the premise of responsibility, peace the flag of surrender—and the typewriter a Promethean rock.

Formal experiment may frequently be a consequence or corollary of modernism, but its presence is not a sufficient condition for seeing a writer or a work as modernist. This view of the matter suggests that the crucial factor in the style of a literary movement or period is some sort of inspiriting “vision,” a new way of looking upon the world and man’s existence; and while such a “vision” will no doubt lead to radical innovations in form and language, there is by no means a direct or invariable correlation. In certain works of literature, such as Thomas Mann’s stories, formal experiment is virtually absent, yet the spirit of modernism is extremely powerful, as a force of both liberation and mischief. Correspondingly, there are works in which the outer mannerisms and traits of the modern are faithfully echoed or mimicked but the animating spirit has disappeared—is that not a useful shorthand for describing much of the “advanced” writing of the years after the Second World War? A writer imbued with the spirit of modernism will be predisposed toward experiment, if only because he needs to make visibly dramatic his break from tradition; yet it is an error—and an error indulging the modernist desire to exempt itself from historical inquiry—to suppose that where one sees the tokens of experiment there must also be the vision of the modern.

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## II

At this point my essay will have to suffer from what Henry James called “a misplaced middle.” For I should now speak at some length about the intellectual sources of modernism, especially those major figures in the 19th century who initiated the “psychology of exposure”—that corrosion of appearance in order to break into reality—by means of which old certainties were dislodged and new ones discouraged. I should speak about Frazer and his proclamation of archetypal rhythms in human life, above all, the rhythm of the birth and rebirth of the gods, and the role of myth as a means for reestablishing ties with primal sources of experience in a world deadened by “functional rationality.” I should speak about Marx who unmasked—they were all unmaskers, the great figures of the 19th century—Marx who unmasked the fetishism of a commodity-producing society which “resolves personal worth into exchange value” and in which the worker’s deed “becomes an alien power . . . forcing him to develop some specialized dexterity at the cost of a world of productive impulses.” I should speak about Freud who focuses upon the irremediable conflict between nature and culture, from which there followed the notorious “discontents of civilization,” the damage done the life of instinct. I should speak, above all, about Nietzsche, a writer whose gnomic and paradoxical style embodies the very qualities of modernist sensibility. But there is no space, and perhaps by now these are familiar matters. Let me therefore turn to a few topics concerning the formal or distinctly literary attributes of modernism.

The historical development of a literature cannot, for any length of time, be hermetic. It has a history of its own, in which there occurs a constant transformation of forms, styles, and

kinds of sensibility. At a given moment writers command an awareness of those past achievements which seem likely to serve them as models to draw upon or deviate from. That, surely, is part of what we mean by tradition: the shared assumptions among contemporaries as to which formal and thematic possibilities of the literary past are “available” to them. Tradition makes itself felt; tradition is steadily remade. Whether they know it or not, writers establish their personal line of vision through a tacit acceptance or rejection of preceding masters. In that sense, then, one can speak of a literary history that is autonomous, with its own continuities of decorum, its own dialectic of strife, its own interweaving of traditions.

Yet over an extended period this literary history must be affected by the larger history of which it is part, the history of mankind. About certain moments in the life of a literature—say, that of 18th-century English poetry—one can say that the power of internal tradition is so enormous that the historian’s stress must properly be on the inner logic of form and style: Dryden through Pope, a line of masters whose innovations become tradition. About the 18th-century novel, by contrast, it would be impossible to speak intelligently without noticing the flanking pressures exerted by the society of the time.

In considering a major revolution in cultural style, it is very hard to know precisely how much causal weight to assign to accumulating modulations in the career of a literary form and how much to the thrust of external historical events as these bear down upon the writers employing that form. I would venture the hypothesis—not a very novel one—that while the internal evolution of a form can significantly affect its nature and dress, there must also occur some overwhelming historical changes for a major new cultural style to flourish. Retrospectively we can see that the shift from neo-Classicism to Romanticism was anticipated by certain late 18th-century poets, but I doubt that a serious literary historian would suppose that transition to be no more than the outcome of an immanent development of literary forms.

In any case, it is when the inner dynamics of a literature and the large-scale pressures of history cross that there follows a new cultural style, in this case modernism. The results are to be observed in at least three areas: modernist writers discard the formal procedures and decorums of their Romantic predecessors; they begin to feel that the very idea of literary tradition is a nuisance, even a tyranny, to be shaken off; and they question the Romantic faith in transcendence through individual ego or through its pantheistic merger with a god-filled universe, as well as the belief held by some Romantics that the poet should actively engage himself in behalf of a militant liberalism. And soon the new writing is signaled by a dramatic change in the social place and posture of the advanced writers.

Forming a permanent if unacknowledged and disorganized opposition, the modernist writers and artists constitute a special caste within or at the margin of society, an *avant garde* marked by aggressive defensiveness, extreme self-consciousness, prophetic inclination, and the stigmata of alienation. “Bohemia,” writes Flaubert, “is my fatherland,” bohemia both as an enclave of protection within a hostile society and as a place from which to launch guerrilla raids upon the bourgeois establishment, frequently upsetting but never quite threatening its security. The *avant garde* abandons the useful fiction of “the common reader”; it demands instead the devotions of a cult. The *avant garde* abandons the usual pieties toward received aesthetic assumptions; “no good poetry,” writes Ezra Pound in what is almost a caricature of modernist dogma, “is ever written in a manner twenty years old.” The *avant garde* scorns notions of “responsibility” toward the audience; it raises the question of whether the audience exists—of whether it should exist. The *avant garde* proclaims its faith in the self-sufficiency, the necessary irresponsibility, and thereby the ultimate salvation of art.

As a device of exposition I write in the present tense; but it seems greatly open to doubt whether by now, a few decades after World War II, there can still be located in the West a coherent and self-assured *avant garde*. Perhaps in some of the arts, but probably not in

literature. (Only in the Communist countries is there beyond question a combative and beleaguered avant garde, for there, as a rule, the state persecutes or seriously inconveniences modern writers and artists, so that it forces them into a self-protective withdrawal, sometimes an “internal emigration.”)

In the war between modernist culture and bourgeois society, something has happened recently which no spokesman for the avant garde quite anticipated. Bracing enmity has given way to wet embraces, the middle class has discovered that the fiercest attacks upon its values can be transposed into pleasing entertainments, and the avant-garde writer or artist must confront the one challenge for which he has not been prepared: the challenge of success. Contemporary society is endlessly assimilative, even if it vulgarizes what it has learned, sometimes foolishly, to praise. The avant garde is thereby no longer allowed the integrity of opposition or the coziness of sectarianism; it must either watch helplessly its gradual absorption into the surrounding culture or try to preserve its distinctiveness by continually raising the ante of sensation and shock—itsself a course leading, perversely, to a growing popularity with the bourgeois audience. There remains, to be sure, the option for the serious writer that he go his own way regardless of fashion or cult.

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Still another reason should be noticed for the recent breakup of the avant garde. It is very difficult to sustain the stance of a small principled minority in opposition to established values and modes of composition, for it requires the most remarkable kind of heroism, the heroism of patience. Among the modernist heroes in literature, only James Joyce, I would say, was able to live by that heroism to the very end. For other writers, more activist in temper or less firm in character, there was always the temptation to veer off into one or another prophetic stance, often connected with an authoritarian politics; and apart from its intrinsic disasters, this temptation meant that the writer would sooner or later abandon the confinements of the avant garde and try, however delusionally, to reenter the arena of history. Yeats and Pound, on the Right; Brecht, Malraux, and Gide, on the Left: all succumbed to the glamor of ideology or party machines, invariably with painful results. Fruitful as avant-garde intransigence was for literature itself and inescapable as it may have been historically, it did not encourage a rich play of humane feelings. On the contrary, in every important literature except the Yiddish, the modernist impulse was accompanied by a revulsion against traditional modes of 19th-century liberalism and by a repugnance for the commonplace materials of ordinary life (again with the exception of Joyce). Imperiousness of mind and impatience with flesh were attitudes shared by Yeats and Malraux, Eliot and Brecht. Disgust with urban trivialities and contempt for *l'homme moyen sensual* streak through many modernist poems and novels.

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That modernist literature apprehended with unrivaled power the collapse of traditional liberalism, its lapse into a formalism ignoring both the possibilities of human grandeur and the needs of human survival, is not to be questioned. But especially in Europe, where democracy has never been a common premise of political life to the extent that it has in the United States, this awareness of the liberal collapse frequently led to authoritarian adventures: the haughty authoritarianism of Yeats, with his fantasies of the proud peasant, and the haughty authoritarianism of Malraux, with his visions of the heroic revolutionist. It is by no means possible to pass an unambiguous judgment on the literary consequences, since major writing can be released through the prodding of distasteful doctrine. But once such writers turned to daily politics and tried to connect themselves with insurgent movements, they were well on the way to abandoning the avant-garde position. In retrospect, even those of us committed—however uneasily—to the need for “commitment” will probably have to grant that it would have been much better for both literature and society if the modernist writers had kept

themselves aloof from politics. Only Joyce, the greatest and most humane among them, remained pure in his devotion to a kind of literary monasticism; and Beckett, the most gifted and faithful of his disciples, has remained pure in that devotion to this very day.

For brief moments, the avant garde mobilized into groups and communities: Paris, Moscow, Rome during the early 20's. Most of the time, however, these groups broke up almost as fast as they were formed, victims of polemic and schism, vanity and temperament. The metaphor lodged in the term "avant garde" can be seriously misleading if it suggests a structured phalanx or implies that the modernist writers, while momentarily cut off from society at large, were trying to lead great numbers of people into a new aesthetic or social dispensation. Not at all. When we refer to the avant garde we are really speaking of isolated figures who share the burdens of intransigence, estrangement, and dislocation; writers and artists who are ready to pay the costs of their choices. And as both cause and effect of their marginal status, they tend to see the *activity* of literature as self-contained, as the true and exalted life in contrast to the life of contingency and mobs. (When now and again they make a foray into political life, it is mainly out of a feeling that society has destroyed the possibility of a high culture and that to achieve such a culture it is necessary to cleanse or bleed society.) Joyce demands a reader who will devote a lifetime to his work; Wallace Stevens composes poems endlessly about the composition of poetry. These are not mere excesses or indulgences; they are, at one extreme, programs for creating quasi-religious orders or cults of the aesthetic, and at the other extreme, ceremonies for the renewal and rediscovery of life—and then, in the boldest leap of all, for the improvisation of a realm of being which will simply dispense with the gross category of "life."

The crucial instance of the effort to make the literary work self-sufficient is Symbolist poetry. Symbolism moves toward an art severed from common life and experience—a goal perhaps unrealizable but valuable as a "limit" for striving and motion. The Symbolists, as Marcel Raymond remarks, "share with the Romantics a reliance upon the epiphany, the moment of intense revelation; but they differ sharply about its status in nature and its relation to art. Wordsworth's spiritual life is founded on moments of intense illumination, and his poetry describes these and relates them to the whole experience of an ordered lifetime." For the Symbolist poet—archetypal figure in modernism—there is no question, however, of *describing* such an experience; for him the moment of illumination occurs only through the action of the poem, only through its thrust and realization as a particular form. Nor is there any question of relating it to the experience of a lifetime, for it is unique, transient, available only in the matter—perhaps more important, only in the moment—of the poem. Not transmission but revelation is the poet's task. And thereby the Symbolist poet tends to become a *magus*, calling his own reality into existence and making poetry into what Baudelaire called "suggestive magic."

Mallarmé, the Symbolist master, and Defoe, the specialist in verisimilitude, stand at opposite poles of the aesthetic spectrum, yet both share a desire to undo the premises and strategies of traditional art. Neither can bear the idea of the literary work as something distinct from, yet dependent upon, the external world. Defoe wishes to collapse his representation into the world, so that the reader will feel that the story of Moll Flanders *is* reality; Mallarmé wishes to purge his revelation of the contingent, so that the moment of union with his poem becomes the world. Both are enemies of Aristotle.

Stretched to its theoretic limit, symbolism proposes to disintegrate the traditional duality between the world and its representation. It finds intolerable the connection between art and the flaws of experience; it finds intolerable the commonly-accepted distance between subject and act of representation; it wishes to destroy the very program of representation, either as objective mimesis or subjective outcry. It is equally distant from realism and expressionism, faithfulness to the dimensions of the external and faithfulness to the distortions of the eye. Symbolism proposes to make the poem not merely autonomous but hermetic, and not merely



hermetic but sometimes impenetrable. Freed from the dross of matter and time, poetry may then regain the aura, the power, of the mysterious. Passionately monistic, Symbolism wishes finally that *the symbol cease being symbolic* and become, instead, an act or object without “reference,” sufficient in its own right. Like other extreme versions of modernism, Symbolism rebels against the preposition “about” in statements that begin “art is about. ...” It yearns to shake off the burden of meaning, the alloy of idea, the tyranny and coarseness of opinion; it hopes for sacrament without faith. To fill up the spaces of boredom it would metamorphose itself into the purity of magic—and magic which, at its most pure, becomes a religion without costs.

Here the crucial instance is Rimbaud, breaking with the conception of language as a way of conveying rational thought, returning to its most primitive quality as a means for arousing emotions, incantatory, magical, and automatistic. Rimbaud praised Baudelaire in terms of his own artistic ends: “To inspect the invisible and hear things unheard [is] entirely different from gathering up the spirit of dead things. ...”

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Heroic as this effort may have been, the Symbolist aesthetic is inadequate in principle, a severe reduction of the scope and traditional claims of literature, and beyond sustaining in practice for more than a few moments. It cannot survive in daylight or the flatness of time. The fierce dualism it proposes cannot be maintained for long; soon the world contaminates the poem and the poem slides back into the world. Symbolism is a major element in modernist consciousness but more, I suspect, as a splendid drama to invoke than a fruitful discipline to follow.

As European civilization enters the period of social disorder and revolt that runs parallel to the life of literary modernism, there is really no possibility for maintaining a hermetic aestheticism. What follows from the impact of social crisis upon modernist literature is quite without that order and purity toward which Symbolism aspires—what follows is bewildering, plural, noisy. Into the vacuum of belief left by the collapse of Romanticism there race a number of competing world views, and these are beyond reconciling or even aligning. That is one reason it is quite impossible to sum up the central assumptions of modernism, as one can for Romanticism, by listing a sequence of beliefs and visions. Literary modernism is a battle of internal conflicts more than a coherent set of theories or values. It provides a vocabulary through which the most powerful imaginations of the time can act out a drama of doubt. Yet this commitment to the problematic is terribly hard to maintain, it requires nerves of iron; and even as the great figures of modernism sense that for them everything depends on keeping a firm grip on the idea of the problematic, many of them cannot resist completely the invading powers of ideology and system. It is at this point that there arises the famous, or but recently famous, problem of belief, perhaps the most discussed topic in the literary criticism of the past fifty years.

At a time when a number of competing world views impinge upon literature, each radically in conflict with one another, there arise severe difficulties in trying to relate the tacit assumptions of the writer to those of the reader. The bonds of premise between the two are broken, and must now become a matter of inquiry, effort, conflict. We read the late novels of D. H. Lawrence or the cantos of Ezra Pound, aware that these are works of enormously gifted writers yet steadily troubled by the outpouring of authoritarian and Fascist ideas. We read Bertolt Brecht’s “To Posterity,” in which he offers an incomparable evocation of the travail of Europe in the period between wars—“we changed our country more often than our shoes”—yet simultaneously weaves in a justification of the Stalin dictatorship. How are we to respond to all this? The question is crucial in our experience of modernist literature. We may say that the doctrine is irrelevant, as many critics do say, and that would lead us to the impossible position that the commanding thought of a poem need not be seriously considered in forming

a judgment of its value. Or we may say that the doctrine, being obnoxious, destroys our pleasure in the poem, as some critics do say, and that would lead us to the impossible position that our judgment of the work is determined by our opinion concerning the author's ideology. There is, I think, no satisfactory solution in the abstract, and we must learn to accept the fact that modernist literature is often—not in this way alone!“unacceptable.” It forces us into distance and dissociation; it denies us wholeness of response; it alienates us from its own powers of statement even when we feel that it is imaginatively transcending the malaise of alienation.

The problem of belief appears with great force in the early phases of modernism and is then intensely discussed for some decades later, most notably in the criticism of Eliot and Richards. Later there arises a new impulse to dissolve the whole problem and to see literature as beyond opinion or belief, a performance or game of surfaces. Weariness sets in, and not merely with this or the other belief, but with the whole idea of belief. Through the brilliance and fervor of its straining, modernism begins to exhaust itself.

Yet no matter what impasse it encounters in its clashes with the external world, modernism is ceaselessly active within its own realm, endlessly inventive in destruction and improvisation. Its main enemy is, in one sense, the culture of the past, even though it bears within itself a marvelously full evidence of that culture. Literature now thrives on assaulting the traditional rules, modes, and limits of literature; the idea of aesthetic order is abandoned or radically modified.

To condemn modernist literature for a failure to conform to traditional criteria of unity, order, and coherence is, however, quite to miss the point, since, to begin with, it either rejects these criteria or proposes radical new ways of embodying them. When the critic Yvor Winters attacks the “fallacy of imitative form” (e.g., literary works dealing with the chaos of modern life themselves take on the appearance and sometimes the substance of chaos), he is in effect attacking modernist writing as such, since much of it cannot dispense with this ‘fallacy.’ In its assumption that the sense of the real has been lost in conventional realism, modern writing yields to an imperative of distortion. A “law” could be advanced here: *modernist literature replaces the traditional criteria of aesthetic unity with the new criterion of aesthetic expressiveness, or perhaps more accurately, it downgrades the value of aesthetic unity in behalf of even a jagged and fragmented expressiveness.*

The expectation of formal unity implies an intellectual and emotional, indeed a philosophic composure; it assumes that the artist stands above his material, controlling it and aware of an impending resolution; it assumes that the artist has answers to his questions or that answers can be had. But for the modern writer none of these assumptions holds, or at least none of them can simply be taken for granted. He presents dilemmas; he cannot and soon does not wish to resolve them; he offers his *struggle* with them as the substance of his testimony; and whatever unity his work possesses, often not very much, comes from the emotional rhythm, the thrust toward completion, of that struggle. After Kafka it becomes hard to believe not only in answers but even in endings.

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In modernist literature nature ceases to be a central subject and symbol. Beginning partly with Wordsworth, nature is transformed from an organic setting into a summoned or remembered *idea*, sometimes into a mere term of contrast. We remark upon the river Liffey, or the Mississippi woods, or the big twohearted river, or the Abruzzi countryside, but mostly as tokens of deprivation and sometimes as mere willed signs of nostalgia. These places are elsewhere, not our home; nature ceases to be natural.

Perversity—which is to say: surprise, excitement, shock, terror, affront—becomes a dominant motif. I borrow from G. S. Fraser a charming contrast between a traditional poet:

*Love to Love calleth,  
Love unto Love replieth—  
From the ends of the earth, drawn by invisible  
bands,  
Over the dawning and darkening lands  
Love cometh to Love.  
To the heart by courage and might  
Escaped from hell,  
From the torment of raging fire,  
From the signs of the drowning main,  
From the shipwreck of fear and pain  
From the terror of night.*

—and a modern poet:

*I hate and love  
You ask, how can that be?  
I do not know, but know it tortures me.*

The traditional poet is Robert Bridges, who lived as far back as the early 20th century; the modern poet, our twin, is Catullus.

The modernist writer strives for sensations, in the serious sense of the term; his epigones, in the frivolous sense. The modernist writer thinks of subject matter not as something to be rehearsed or recaptured but rather to be conquered and enlarged. He has little use for wisdom; or if he does, he conceives of it not as something to be dug out of the mines of tradition, but to be won for himself through an exercise in self-penetration, sometimes self-disintegration. He becomes entranced with depths—whichever you choose: the depths of the city, or the self, or the underground, or the slums, or the extremes of sensation induced by sex, liquor, drugs; or the shadowed half-people crawling through the interstices of society: *Lumpen*, criminals, hipsters; or the drives at the base of consciousness. Only Joyce, among the modernist writers, negotiates the full journey into and through these depths while yet emerging into the commonplace streets of the city and its ongoing commonplace life: which is, I think, one reason he is the greatest of the modernist writers, as also perhaps the one who points a way beyond the liberation of modernism.

The traditional values of decorum, both in the general ethical sense and the strictly literary sense, are overturned. Everything must now be explored to its outer and inner limits; but more, there are to be no limits. And then, since learning seems often to be followed by ignorance, there come the demi-prophets who scorn the very thought of limits; so that they drive themselves into the corner of wishing always to go beyond while refusing to acknowledge a line beyond which to go.

A plenitude of sophistication narrowing into decadence—this means that primitivism will soon follow. The search for meaning through extreme states of being reveals a yearning for the primal: for surely man cannot have been bored even at the moment of his creation! I have already spoken of the disgust with culture, the rage against cultivation, that is so important a part of modernism: the turning-in upon one's primary characteristics, the hatred of one's gifts, the contempt for intelligence, which cuts through the work of men so different as Rimbaud, Dostoevsky, and Hart Crane. For the modern sensibility is always haunted by the problem of succession: what, after such turnings and distensions of sensibility, can come next? One of the seemingly hopeful possibilities is a primitivism bringing a vision of new manliness, health, blood consciousness, a relief from enervating rationality. A central text is Lawrence's story, "The Woman Who Rode Away"—that realistic fable, at once so impressive and ridiculous—in which a white woman seeks out an Indian tribe to surrender her "quivering nervous consciousness" to its stricken sun god and thereby "accomplish the sacrifice and

achieve the power.” But within the ambiance of modernism there is another, more ambiguous and perhaps sinister kind of primitivism: the kind that draws us with the prospect not of health but of decay, the primitive as atavistic, an abandonment of civilization and thereby, perhaps, of its discontents. The central fiction expressing this theme is Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* in which Marlow the narrator and *raisonneur* does not hesitate to acknowledge that the pull of the jungle for Kurtz and also, more ambiguously, for himself is not that it seems to him (I am quoting Lionel Trilling) “noble or charming, or even free but . . . base and sordid—and for *that* reason compelling: he himself feels quite overtly its dreadful attraction.” In this version of primitivism, which is perhaps inseparable from the ennui of decadence, the overwhelming desire is to shake off the burdens of social restraint, the disabling and wearisome moralities of civilized inhibition. The Greek poet Cavafy has written a brilliant poem in which the inhabitants of a modern city wait for a threatened invasion by barbarians and then, at the end, suffer the exasperating disappointment that the barbarians may, after all, not come. The people of the city will have to continue living as in the past, and who can bear it?

*Why should this uneasiness begin all of a sudden,  
And confusion? How serious people’s faces have become.  
Why are all the streets and squares emptying out so quickly,  
And everyone turning home again so full of thought?  
Because night has fallen and the Barbarians have not come,  
And some people have arrived from the frontier,  
They said there are no Barbarians any more.  
And now what will become of us without Barbarians?  
These people were some sort of solution.*

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If technical experiment and thematic surprise characterize modernist poetry, there are equivalent changes in the novel: a whole new sense of character, structure, and the role of its protagonist or hero. The problematic nature of experience tends to replace the experience of human nature as the dominant subject of the modern novel. Abandoning the assumption of a life that is know-able, the novelist turns to the problem of establishing a bridgehead into knowability as the precondition for portraying any life at all. His task becomes not so much depiction as the hypothesizing of a set of *as-if* terms, by means of which he may lend a temporary validation to his material.

Characters in a novel can no longer be assumed, as in the past, to be fixed and synthetic entities, with a set of traits available through notations of conduct and reports of psychic condition. The famous remark of D. H. Lawrence—that he had lost interest in creating the “old stable ego of character,” but wished to posit “another ego, according to whose action the individual is unrecognizable, and passes through, as it were, allotropic states which it needs a deeper sense than any we’ve been used to exercise, to discover are states of the same radically unchanged element”—this is not merely a statement of what he would try to do in *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love*; it also reflects a general intention among modern novelists. Character, for modernists like Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and Faulkner, is regarded not as a coherent, definable, and well-structured entity, but as a psychic battlefield, or an insoluble

puzzle, or the occasion for a flow of perceptions and sensations. This tendency to dissolve character into a stream of atomized experiences, a kind of novelistic *pointillisme*, gives way, perhaps through extreme reaction, to an opposite tendency (yet one equally opposed to traditional concepts of novelistic character) in which character is severed from psychology and confined to a sequence of severely objective events.

Similar radical changes occur in the modernist treatment of plot. The traditional 18th- or 19th-century novel depends upon a plot which reveals a major destiny, such as Henchard's in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. A plot consists here of an action purposefully carved out of time, that is, provided with a beginning, sequence of development, and climax, so that it will create the impression of completeness. Often this impression comes from the sense that the action of a novel, as given shape by the plot, has exhausted its possibilities of significant extension; the problems and premises with which it began have reached an appropriate terminus. Thus we can say that in the traditional kind of novel it is usually the plot which carries or releases a body of meanings: these can be profound or trivial, comic or tragic. *The Mayor of Casterbridge* contains a plot which fulfills the potential for self-destruction in the character of Henchard—but it is important to notice that in *this* kind of novel we would have no knowledge of that potential except insofar as we can observe its effects through an action. Plot here comes to seem inseparable from meaning, and meaning to inhere in plot.

When a writer works out a plot, he tacitly assumes that there is a rational structure in human conduct, that this structure can be ascertained, and that doing so he is enabled to provide his work with a sequence of order. But in modernist literature these assumptions come into question. In a work written on the premise that there is no secure meaning in the portrayed action, or that while the action can hold our attention and rouse our feelings, we cannot be certain, indeed must remain uncertain, as to the possibilities of meaning—in such a characteristically modern work what matters is not so much the plot but a series of *situations*, some of which can be portrayed statically, through tableaux, set-pieces, depth psychology, and others dynamically, through linked episodes, stream of consciousness, etc. Kafka's fiction, Joyce's novels, some of Faulkner's—these all contain situations rather than plot.

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Still more striking are the enormous changes which the modern novel brings about in its treatment of the fictional hero.

The modern world has lost the belief in a collective destiny. Hence, the hero finds it hard to be certain that he possesses—or that anyone can possess—the kind of powers that might transform human existence. Men no longer feel themselves bound in a sacred or even, often enough, in a temporal kinship. Hence, the hero finds it hard to believe in himself as a chosen figure acting in behalf of a divine commandment or national will.

Since the beginnings of the bourgeois era, a central problem for reflective men has been the relation of the individual to the collectivity. In modern fiction this problem often appears as a clash between a figure of consciousness who embodies the potential of the human and a society moving in an impersonal rhythm that is hostile or, what is perhaps worse, indifferent to that potential. One likes to feel, by way of contrast, that in certain kinds of ancient or traditional heroes there was a union of value and power, the sense of the good and the capacity to act it out. But in modern literature, value and power are taken to be radically dissociated. In Hemingway's novels the price of honor is often a refusal of the world. In Malraux's novels the necessity for action is crossed by a conviction of its absurdity. In Silone's novels the condition of humaneness is a readiness to wait. Between the apprehension and the deed falls a shadow of uncertainty.

D. H. Lawrence, not only a great novelist but himself a major hero of modern literature, embodies this duality. At one point he says: "Insofar as I am I, and only I am I, and I am only

I, insofar as I am inevitably and eternally alone, it is my last blessedness to know it, and to accept it, and to live with this as the core of my self-knowledge.” It is the self-knowledge of the Lawrentian hero, strong in pride, sick in strength. But there is another D. H. Lawrence: “What ails me is the absolute frustration of my primeval societal instinct. . . . I think societal instinct much deeper than sex instinct—and societal repression much more devastating. . . . I am weary even of my individuality, and simply nauseated by other people’s.” It is the yearning of the Lawrentian hero, eager for disciples, driven to repel those who approach him. This is a conflict which, in our time, cannot be resolved. The Lawrentian hero remains a man divided between the absolutism of his individuality and the frustration of his societal instinct.

Let me push ahead a bit further, and list several traits of “the modern hero,” though not in the delusion that any fictional character fulfills all or even most of them:

- The modern hero is a man who believes in the necessity of action; he wishes, in the words of Malraux, to put “a scar on the map.” Yet the moral impulses that lead him to believe in action, also render him unfit for action. He becomes dubious about the value of inflicting scars and is not sure he can even locate the map.
- He knows that traditionally the hero is required to act out the part of bravery, but he discovers that his predicament requires courage. Bravery signifies a mode of action, courage a mode of being. And since he finds it difficult to reconcile the needs of action with those of being, he must learn that to summon courage he will have to abandon bravery. His sense of the burden he must carry brings him close to the situation described by William James: “Heroism is always on a precipitous edge, and only keeps alive by running. Every moment is an escape.”
- He knows that the hero can act with full power only if he commands, for his followers and himself, an implicit belief in the meaningfulness of the human scheme. But the more he commits himself to the gestures of heroism, the more he is persuaded of the absurdity of existence. Gods do not speak to him, prophets do not buoy him, nor doctrines assuage him.
- The classical hero moved in a world charged with a sense of purpose. In the early bourgeois era, the belief in purpose gave way to a belief in progress. This the hero managed to survive, if only because he often saw through the joke of progress. But now his problem is to live in a world that has moved beyond the idea of progress; and that is hard.
- The modern hero often begins with the expectation of changing the world. But after a time his central question becomes: can I change myself? He asks, in the words of Herman Hesse’s *Demian*, “I wanted only to try to live in obedience to the promptings which came from my true self. Why was that so very difficult?”
- If the modern hero decides the world is beyond changing, he may try, as in the novels of Hemingway, to create a hermetic world of his own in which an unhappy few live by a self-willed code that makes possible—they tell themselves—struggle, renewal, and honorable defeat.
- Still, the modern hero often continues to believe in the quest, and sometimes in the grail too; only he is no longer persuaded that quest is necessarily undertaken through public action and he is unsure as to where the grail can be found. If he happens to be an American named Jay Gatsby, he may even look for it on the shores of Long Island. There is reason to believe that this is a mistake.
- The modern hero moves from the heroic deed to the heroism of consciousness, a heroism often available only in defeat. He comes as a conqueror and stays as a pilgrim. And in consciousness he seeks those moral ends which the hero is

traditionally said to have found through the deed. He learns, in the words of Kyo Gisors in Malraux's *Man's Fate*, that "a man resembles his suffering."

- The modern hero discovers that he cannot be a hero. Yet only through his readiness to face the consequences of this discovery can he salvage a portion of the heroic.

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In its Multiplicity and brilliant confusion, its commitment to an aesthetic of endless renewal—in its improvisation of "the tradition of the new," a paradox envisaging the limit of *limitlessness*—modernism is endlessly open to portraiture and analysis. For just as some of its greatest works strain toward a form freed from beginning or end, so modernism strains toward a life without fixity or conclusion. If, nevertheless, there is in literary modernism a dominant preoccupation which the writer must either subdue or by which he will surely be destroyed, that is the specter of nihilism.

Nihilism is a term not only wide-ranging in reference but heavily charged with historical emotion. It signifies at least some of the following:

A specific doctrine, positivist in stress, of an all-embracing rebellion against traditional authority which appeared in mid-19th-century Russia;

A consciously affirmed and accepted loss of belief in transcendent imperatives and secular values as guides to moral conduct, together with a feeling that there is no meaning resident—or, at least, further resident—in human existence;

A loss of those tacit impulses toward an active and striving existence which we do not even know to be at work in our consciousness until we have become aware of their decline.

In Western literature nihilism is first and most powerfully foreshadowed by Dostoevsky: there is nothing to believe in but the senses and the senses soon exhaust themselves. God is impossible but all is impossible without him. Dostoevsky is maliciously witty, maliciously inventive in his perception of the faces of nihilism. He sees it, first, as a social disorder without boundary or shame: Pyotr Verhovensky in an orgy of undoing, mocking the very idea of purpose, transforming the ethic of modernist experiment into an appeal for collective suicide, seizing upon the most exalted words in order to hollow them out through burlesque. "If there's no God, how can I be a captain then," asks an old army officer in *The Possessed*, and in the derision that follows one fancies that Dostoevsky joins, in half-contempt, half-enchancement. Nihilism appears in moral guise through the figures of Kirillov and Ivan Karamazov, the first a man of purity and the second a man of seriousness; that both are good men saves them not at all, for the demon of emptiness, says Dostoevsky, lodges most comfortably in the hearts of the disinterested. And in Stavrogin, that "subtle serpent" stricken with metaphysical despair and haunted by "the demon of irony," nihilism achieves an ultimate of representation: nothingness in flesh, flesh that would be nothing. "We are all nihilists," says Dostoevsky in the very course of his struggle to make himself into something else. His great achievement is to sense, as Nietzsche will state, the intrinsic connection between nihilism as doctrine and nihilism as experience of loss. Just as Jane Austen saw how trivial lapses in conduct can lead to moral disaster, so Dostoevsky insisted that casual concessions to boredom can drive men straight into the void.

Flaubert, though not concerned with the problem abstractly, writes: "Life is so horrible that one can only bear it by avoiding it. And that can be done by living in the world of Art." The idea of Art as a sanctuary from the emptying-out of life is intrinsic to modernism: it is an idea strong in Nietzsche, for whom the death of God is neither novelty nor scandal but simply a given fact. The resulting disvaluation of values and the sense of bleakness which follows, Nietzsche calls nihilism. He sees it as connected with the assertion that God exists, which robs

the world of ultimate significance, and with the assertion that God does not exist, which robs everything of significance.

The destruction of the moral interpretation of the world, which has no sanction anymore after it has attempted to flee into some beyond, ends in nihilism. "All is senseless. ..." Since Copernicus man rolls from the center into "X". ... What does nihilism mean? That the highest values disvalue themselves. The goal is lacking; the answer is lacking to our "Why?"

Fundamentally, then, nihilism comes to imply a loss of connection with the sources of life, so that both in experience and in literature it is always related to, while analytically distinguishable from, the blight of boredom.

Recognizing all this, Dostoevsky tries to frighten the atheist both within himself and within his contemporaries by saying that once God is denied, everything—everything terrible—has become possible. Nietzsche gives the opposite answer, declaring that from the moment man believes neither in God nor immortality, "he becomes responsible for everything alive, for everything that, born of suffering, is condemned to suffer from life." And thus for Nietzsche, as later for the existentialists, a confrontation with the nihilist void becomes the major premise of human recovery.

With remarkable powers of invention and variation, this theme makes its way through all of modernist literature. In Kafka's work negation and faith stand forever balanced on the tip of a question-mark; there are no answers, there are no endings, and whether justice can be found at the trial, or truth in the castle, we never know for certain. The angel with whom Kafka wrestles heroically and without letup is the angel of nothingness. Proust constructs a social world marvelously thick and rich in texture yet a shadow too, which a mere wind blows away; and the only hope we have that some meaning may be salvaged is through the power of art, that thin cloak between men and the beyond which nevertheless carries "the true last judgment." This very power of art is seen by Mann as a demon of nihilism trailing both himself and his surrogate figures from novel to novel, as a portent of disease in "Death in Venice" and as a creator-destroyer in *Doctor Faustus* who disintegrates everything through parody. Brecht leers at the familiar strumpet of city nihilism, vomits with disgust when she approaches too closely, and then kidnaps her for a marriage with the authoritarian idea: the result endears him to the contemporary world. But it is Joyce who engages in the most profound modern exploration of nihilism, for he sees it everywhere, in the newspaper office and the church, on the street and in bed, through the exalted and the routine. Exposing his characters to every version of nausea and self-disgust, bringing Stephen Dedalus to his outcry of "*Nothing*" in the brothel, Joyce emerges, as William Troy remarks, with "an energetic and still uncorrupted affirmation of life that is implicit in every movement of his writing." As for those who follow these masters, they seem to have relaxed in the death-struggle with the shapeless demon and some, among the more fashionable of the moment, even strike a pleasant truce with him. But the power of example remains a great one and if a writer like Norman Mailer does not choose to wrestle with the angel Kafka encountered, there are moments when he is prepared to challenge it to a bit of amiable hand-wrestling.

Nihilism lies at the center of all that we mean by modernist literature, both as subject and symptom, a demon overcome and a demon victorious. For the terror which haunts the modern mind is that of a meaningless and eternal death. The death of the gods would not trouble us if we, in discovering that they have died, did not have to die alongside them. Heroically the modern sensibility struggles with its passion for eternal renewal, even as it keeps searching for ways to secure its own end.

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But no, it will not die, neither heroically nor quietly, in struggle or triumph. It will live on, beyond age, through vulgar reincarnation and parodic mimesis. The lean youth has grown



heavy; he chokes with the approval of the world he had dismissed; he cannot find the pure air of neglect. Not the hostility of those who came before but the patronage of those who come later—that is the torment of modernism.

How, come to think of it, do great cultural movements reach their end? It is a problem our literary historians have not sufficiently examined, perhaps because they find beginnings more glamorous, and a problem that is now especially difficult because there has never been, I think, a cultural period in Western history quite like the one we call modern. But signs of a denouement begin to appear. A lonely gifted survivor, Beckett, remains to remind us of the glories modernism once brought. Meanwhile, the decor of yesterday is appropriated and slicked up; the noise of revolt, magnified in a frolic of emptiness; and what little remains of modernism, denied so much as the dignity of opposition.

How enviable death must be to those who no longer have reason to live yet are unable to make themselves die! Modernism will not come to an end; its war chants will be repeated through the decades. For what seems to await it is a more painful and certainly less dignified conclusion than that of earlier cultural movements: what awaits it is publicity and sensation, the kind of savage parody which may indeed be the only fate worse than death.

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