

SOME MUTTERINGS ON MODERNISM

What you hold is a (feeble?) effort to save your having to wear out your ears listening to me ramble on. What I'll endeavor to do is give you a capsule introduction to the phenomenon called "Modernism," which dominates American writing from around 1910 to at least 1940. There's some real disagreement about when it ended (there usually is, when it comes to literary "movements") and what to call where we are now. A common label for contemporary writing is "Post-Modernist," although it certainly carries on a lot of the efforts and principles of its predecessor.

This little whatever begins -- like a good sermon -- with a text, taken from one of the patron saints of Modernism, the Anglo-Irish poet William Butler Yeats:

THINGS FALL APART; THE CENTRE CANNOT HOLD;
MERE ANARCHY IS LOOSED UPON THE WORLD,

* * * *

THE BEST LACK ALL CONVICTION, WHILE THE WORST
ARE FULL OF A PASSIONATE INTENSITY.

In a nutshell, that is the Modernist world, the world as it seemed to intelligent, imaginative, well-informed young minds around about 1910, the world in which a large number of poets and novelists and composers and painters and even physicists moved and worked. The "Big Names," in literary terms, include (restricting ourselves now to Americans) T. S. Eliot, Robert Frost, Wallace Stevens, Marianne Moore, William Carlos Williams, e e cummings, and the woman who went under the name "H. D." [her given name was Hilda Doolittle]; and on the fictional side of things, Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and William Faulkner. There is great argument about whether to put Willa Cather on the team; and it is unquestionably true that the Modernists claim some older writers as necessary ancestors -- notably Emily Dickinson and Henry James.

The English writer Virginia Woolf said (more or less; I can never get the quotation exactly right) "On or about December, 1910, human nature changed." She certainly knew she was being absurd; but she was also being dead serious: *something* fundamental had changed. The date is important, since it's before the First World War, which is too often given credit for "causing" Modernism. What Woolf's one-liner does manage to do is confirm many, if not all, of the Modernist's worst fears.

The simplest way to put it is that there emerges a radical and thorough distrust of all systems of meaning and order, from organized religion to political "patriotism" to mythologies and even down to words themselves.

The Modernists were brought up in a world in which things were describable and more-or-less comprehensible, a world full of organizing principles like God, the Church, the family, the State, politics and economics. It was not, by any means, that everything was tidy and right; but at least the wrongness was understandable and communicable.

But no longer. One after another, fundamental ordering principles fall by the wayside. Look for a moment at the handout with the very small type attached to this lecture (sorry for the eyestrain; it was the only way to make it fit on to one page). First a few Modernist voices, some comic, some matter-of-fact. I've intentionally included Heisenberg and Einstein, not just to appeal to my current audience but to map out the extent of the disarray; and the adventure it offers, in a way.

The list of books are a kind of "deconstructive reading list": books that a young person is likely to have read (or heard of), which challenge first principles, apparently at great and effective length. Darwin is important not because he "rejected God" (he didn't) but because he argued, and seemed to prove, that the human species followed certain inexorable rules -- the same rules followed by every other species. His work undermined notions of human will, human choice, and the uniqueness (and superiority) of the human animal. Freud argued that, instead of being creatures who think, reason, analyze, and decide, humankind are all controlled by something, some part of their own mental apparatus, of which they are not even aware: the *unconscious*. He also, of course, insisted that sex, and the repression of sexual impulses, was a dominant force in all sorts of human enterprise, even art. Frazer's vast and detailed book studied fertility rituals in many, many cultures; and ended up saying that the Biblical Easter story is just another one of those. Eliot's "The Waste Land" seems to set out to destroy our habitual notions of what poems are, what they look like and sound like, and what subjects they address. *Ulysses* undertakes the same task with regard to novels. As far as Einstein goes, it isn't that most people, then or now, understand what "relativity" is or how it works. But "relativity" becomes a fashionable cliché -- there are no fixed or absolute values; instead, "everything's relative." The same goes for Heisenberg's "Indeterminacy" or "Uncertainty" principle: not only is everything *relative*, it's *indeterminate* (and perhaps *indeterminable*) as well.

What is to be done, in this "chaos of the sun" (to borrow a phrase from Wallace Stevens)? Again, if you were leaning toward the idea that "Things [have fallen] apart," the so-called "Great War" would certainly confirm your belief. The death toll was staggering (setting records only to be broken by the fire-bombing of Dresden and the dropping of the A-bomb in World War II), and apparently achieving little. My favorite instance is the Battle of the Somme, in early 1916. The battle, all in all, lasted a month, and achieved

casualty levels in the millions. And the net gain, the net movement of the trenches, was something like . . . 100 yards. "Much ado about nothing," indeed.

So: what's to be done? "Make it new" shouts Ezra Pound (and apparently Einstein was listening, if Heisenberg is right about him). Which, in fact, means two rather different things:

1) Make something which has never been made before. Which is hard work, since it will involve (as Eliot argues) even a remaking of language itself (which, in turn, will make it damned hard to find readers)

2) or, take the old and re-new, reshape, reform it. This may explain why Modernist art is so full of references to the past -- allusions, footnotes, and the like. Joyce's *Ulysses* tries to make Homer's *Odyssey* (and Dante's *Divine Comedy*, and half a dozen early Catholic thinkers, besides) wear new clothes. It is only worth mentioning that you often have to read Modernist writing with an ear open to echoes of the past, and a mind willing to grapple with those echoes, since the "old systems" no longer hold true, after all.

The "dislocation" which the Modernists feel is played out in what they write; they "dislocate" or resist the reader, too. They shift points of view, shift narrators, press language to (and perhaps beyond) the limits of comprehensibility.

What, in such a world, are the fundamental and necessary virtues, at least for an artist? I offer one possibility, by way of another Modernist literary God, James Joyce. He has a character, Stephen Dedalus, a sensitive well-educated young man (and perhaps, in some ways, a self-portrait), ponder how to get by in this mess of a Modernist world. And Dedalus comes up with a trinity of necessary virtues (he's had a good Catholic upbringing, so the fact that it's a trinity is probably not accidental):

silence
exile
cunning

SILENCE:

(1) because words (especially literary words or any words that try to convey or evoke belief) are wholly unreliable; or they are simply impossible to find and use safely;

(2) because careful, wary listening is essential (one must fully hear the misguided and misleading voices). The essential moment in a Modernist novel is often silent, a moment of looking and listening and meditating;

(3) but of course "silence" is no resting place for a writer. Alas. A "silent" poet is no poet at all, is she? That's why Eliot argues for another step, from attentive silence to "dislocation."

EXILE:

(1) because it is a simple fact of life -- everyone is "displaced," in this dislocated Modernist world;

(2) because -- to a writer -- distance is necessary. Joyce had to leave Dublin to write about it. Faulkner heroes (or at least narrators, which is not at all the same thing) are often "away from " the South, remembering and (trying to) recreate it. Fitzgerald writes a whole, wonderful novel (*Tender is the Night*) about a Yalie in a new world, Europe.

CUNNING:

(1) So at least *some* mental processes are possible and even necessary: skepticism? doubt? cleverness and connivance (and even manipulation);

(2) but it's not a very "proud" word, is it? -- it seems wilfully to set itself against older, more self-assertive values such as belief, imagination, reason

Which leaves open the question "Who has these traits?" And the related question "Do they suffice?"

To answer the "Who has them?" question we should be awake to the possibility that the fundamental consciousness is *not* within the story, but reading it, observing it, sorting it out -- the true "hero" is the receiving consciousness. If there's someone in the story or poem who is trying to sort things out, pay particular attention to him/her -- even if he/she seems an unlikely "hero."

The other necessary act is to learn to live in a constant state of paradox: one more quotation, this time from Wallace Stevens:

The final belief is to believe in a fiction, which you know to be a fiction, there being nothing else. The exquisite truth is to know that it is a fiction and that you believe in it willingly.

That may be "exquisite," (the word has at least two relevant reasons - highly crafted and beautiful, as in an exquisite piece of sculpture; and intense, as in exquisite pain) but it is also, I suggest, pretty darned bleak.

If you come away from a piece of Modernist writer feeling (a) confused and disoriented, and (b) annoyed (or worse), don't assume you've "missed the point." It's very likely you have precisely gotten the point, that the work tries to map the particular "difficulty" of the world the writer sees and feels, and to re-create it in the reader. Pay attention, if you can, to what you are confused (or annoyed) *about*, what the terms or forces or parameters of

confusion, disbelief, and despair are sent to be, in the work you've been reading, and what habitual expectations the work has evoked and then denied or contradicted. Good luck!