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When we speak of the style of an age, we can mean two very different things. We can mean that 'general form of the forms of thought', of which Alfred North Whitehead spoke, which affects all a period's writing and is 'so translucent . . . that only by extreme effort can we become aware of it'.[9] But we can also mean a conscious mannerism, elected by some writers and artists though not by all, which expresses 'a prevailing, dominant, or authentically contemporary view of the world by those artists who have most successfully intuited the quality of the human experience peculiar to their day and who are able to phrase this experience in a form deeply congenial to the thought, science, and technology which are part of that experience'.[10] The term 'Modernism' can hardly be taken in the former sense; for in any working definition of it we shall have to see in it a quality of abstraction and highly conscious artifice, taking us behind familiar reality, breaking away from familiar functions of language and conventions of form. It could be said that this is simply its initial shock, stage one of movement that leads us all into Modernism. And one can argue, to a point, that in graphics, architecture, design, and especially in the conventions of media like film and television, Modernism has become an invisibly communal style. Yet in some ways this is to defeat Modernism's presumptions; the shock, the violation of expected continuities, the element of de-creation and crisis, is a crucial element *of* the style. It has more commonly been urged that Modernism is our style in the second sense; these are the artistic forms consequent on modern thought, modern experience, and hence the Modernist writers and artists express the highest distillation of twentieth-century artistic potential. But many twentieth-century artists have rejected the label and the associated aesthetics, the modes of abstraction, discontinuity, and shock. And it can be well argued that the twentieth-century artistic tradition is made up, not of one essential strand, but of two – roughly antithetical, though meeting from time to time. This, for instance, is the view of Stephen Spender, who, in his book *The Struggle of the Modern*, sees two streams: the 'moderns' and the 'contemporaries'.[11]

The case for Modernism's total dominance has often been put and

is easy to see. One of the word's associations is with the coming of a new era of high aesthetic self-consciousness and non-representationalism, in which art turns from realism and humanistic representation towards style, technique, and spatial form in pursuit of a deeper penetration of life. 'No artist tolerates reality,' Nietzsche tells us; the task of art is its own self-realization, outside and beyond established orders, in a world of abnormally drawn perspectives. 'What strikes me as beautiful, what I should like to do, is a book about nothing, a book without external attachments, which would hold itself together by itself through the internal force of its style' – this Flaubertian dream of an order in art independent of or else transcending the humanistic, the material, the *real*, has been crucially important to a whole segment of the modern arts. And what such artists have achieved can be considered – has been considered – the ultimate achievement of artistic possibility in the twentieth century, part of the progress and evolution of the arts towards sophistication and completion. The art that makes life, the drama of the artist's consciousness, the structure that lies beyond time, history, character or visible reality, the moral imperative of technique; are not these the basis of a great aesthetic revolution into literary possibilities greater than ever dreamt of? Hence Virginia Woolf, holding that the modern stylistic revolution came from the historical opportunity for change in human relationships and human character, and that modern art therefore had a social and epistemological *cause*, nonetheless believed in the aesthetic nature of the opportunity; it set the artist free to be more himself, let him move beyond the kingdom of necessity to the kingdom of light. Now human consciousness and especially *artistic* consciousness could become more intuitive, more poetic; art could now fulfil *itself*. It was free to catch at the manifold – the atoms as they fall – and create significant harmony not in the universe but within itself (like the painting which Lily Briscoe completes at the end of *To the Lighthouse*). The world, reality, is discontinuous till art comes along, which may be a modern crisis for the world; but within art all becomes vital, discontinuous, yes, but within an aesthetic system of positioning. Or, as Wallace Stevens puts it, the poet must be able to abstract reality 'which he does by placing it in his imagination', by giving it the substance or meaning of a fiction. There may be a poverty in the universe and a trauma in man, but the artist has

the means to transcend both history and reality by the dispositions of his technique, creating Joyce's 'luminous silent stasis of aesthetic pleasure'.

The movement towards sophistication and mannerism, towards introversion, technical display, internal self-scepticism, has often been taken as a common base for a *definition* of Modernism. Certainly, a number of technical features do reappear from movement to movement, even when these are radically at odds in other ways: anti-representationalism in painting, atonalism in music, *vers libre* in poetry, stream-of-consciousness narrative in the novel. And certainly, as Ortega y Gasset has said, the aesthetic refinement involves a dehumanization of art, the 'progressive elimination of the human, all too human, elements predominant in romantic and naturalistic production'.[12] This has meant, though, not only radical remaking of form, but also, as Frank Kermode says, the tendency to bring it closer to chaos, so producing a sense of 'formal desperation'.[13] This, in turn, suggests that Modernism might mean not only a new mode or mannerism in the arts, but a certain magnificent disaster for them. In short, experimentalism does not simply suggest the presence of sophistication, difficulty and novelty in art; it also suggests bleakness, darkness, alienation, disintegration. Indeed Modernism would seem to be the point at which the idea of the radical and innovating arts, the experimental, technical, aesthetic ideal that had been growing forward from Romanticism, reaches formal crisis – in which myth, structure and organization in a traditional sense collapse, and not only for formal reasons. The crisis is a crisis of culture; it often involves an unhappy view of history – so that the Modernist writer is not simply the artist set free, but the artist under specific, apparently historical strain. If Modernism is the imaginative power in the chamber of consciousness that, as James puts it, 'converts the very pulses of the air into revelations', it is also often an awareness of contingency as a disaster in the world of time: Yeats's 'Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold.' If it is an art of metamorphosis, a Daedalus voyage into unknown arts,[14] it is also a sense of disorientation and nightmare, feeling the dangerous, deathly magic in the creative impulse explored by Thomas Mann. If it takes the modern as a release from old dependencies, it also sees the 'immense panorama of futility and anarchy' that Eliot saw in *Ulysses*.[15] And if an aesthetic

devotion runs deep in it, it is capable of dispensing with that abruptly and outrageously, as in the auto-destructive dimension of Dada or Surrealism.

This leads us toward another kind of account as to why Modernism is our art; it is the one art that responds to the scenario of our chaos. It is the art consequent on Heisenberg's 'Uncertainty principle', of the destruction of civilization and reason in the First World War, of the world changed and reinterpreted by Marx, Freud and Darwin, of capitalism and constant industrial acceleration, of existential exposure to meaninglessness or absurdity. It is the literature of technology. It is the art consequent on the dis-establishing of communal reality and conventional notions of causality, on the destruction of traditional notions of the wholeness of individual character, on the linguistic chaos that ensues when public notions of language have been discredited and when all realities have become subjective fictions. Modernism is then the art of modernization – however stark the separation of the artist from society may have been, however oblique the artistic gesture he has made. Thus, to the Expressionist or the Surrealist for instance, it is the anti-art which decomposes old frames of reference and carries the anarchy of men's evolving desire, the expressive form of human evolution in energetic release. By this view, Modernism is not art's freedom, but art's necessity. The communal universe of reality and culture on which nineteenth-century art had depended was over; and the explosively lyrical, or else the ironic and fictive modes, modes which included large elements not only of creation but of de-creation, were inevitable. The assumption that the age demands a certain kind of art, and that Modernism is the art that it demands, has been fervently held by those who see in the modern human condition a crisis of reality, an apocalypse of cultural community. What, though, is clear is that not all artists have believed this to be so – that, indeed, ours has been a century not only of de-realization but of realism, not only of ironic but of expansive modes.

The paradox of Modernism lies in the relationship between these two very different explanations of and justifications for it; indeed one can distinguish, in the difference between (say) Symbolism and Surrealism, *two* Modernisms. On the one hand, modernism has been an arcane and a private art: as Ortega y Gasset says in *The Dehumanization of Art*, it tends to divide its audience aristocratically into two

groups – those who understand it and those who do not, those trained in and acquiescent to its techniques and premises, and those who find it not only incomprehensible but hostile. Thus its main qualities – which Ortega sees as a view of art as 'play' or 'delightful fraud'; an aversion to the traditional; a tendency towards self-hate or irony; a self-diminishing quality, or belief that art has few consequences other than that of being itself – are not simply *avant-garde* but represent a privation and a hoarding of the artistic powers against the populace and the claims of time and history. On the other hand, specialism and experimentalism can be held to have great social meaning; the arts are *avant-garde* because they are revolutionary probes into future human consciousness. Then we could indeed say that the Modernist tendency is that which saw most deeply and truthfully into the situation of the arts and of man in our time, securing us a worthy art in an age which seemed not to grant us one; that most of our important writers have been of its tendency, and that its implications are inescapable for all other artists. By this view, Modernism, while not our total style, becomes the movement which has expressed our modern consciousness, created in its works the nature of modern experience at its fullest. It may not be the only stream, but it is the *main* stream. Like Romanticism, it originated with historical neatness about the beginning of a century, in a period of deep intellectual reappraisal and social and intellectual change, and has come increasingly to dominate the sensibility, aesthetics and mind of the hard core of our greatest writers, and to become the essential and appropriate vision to our most sensitive readers. Like Romanticism, it is a revolutionary movement, capitalizing on a vast intellectual readjustment and radical dissatisfaction with the artistic past – a movement that is international in character and marked by a flow of major ideas, forms and values that spread from country to country and developed into the main line of the western tradition.

Today it must surely seem to us that the truth lies somewhere between the view that Modernism is the supreme modern expression and the view that it is of marginal importance. Modernism is, clearly, more than an aesthetic event, and some of the conditions that lie behind it are discernible and clear. Yet it contains a highly aesthetic response, one which turns on the assumption that the registering of modern consciousness or experience was not a problem in representa-

tion but a profound cultural and aesthetic crux . . . a problem in the making of structures, the employment of language, the uniting of form, finally in the social meaning of the artist himself. The search for a style and a typology becomes a self-conscious element in the Modernist's literary production; he is perpetually engaged in a profound and ceaseless journey through the means and integrity of art. In this sense, Modernism is less a style than a search for a style in a highly individualistic sense; and indeed the style of one work is no guarantee for the next. This, perhaps, is what Irving Howe means when he remarks that 'modernism does not establish a prevalent style of its own; or if it does, it denies itself, thereby ceasing to be modern'.[16] The qualities which we associate with painters like Matisse, Picasso and Braque, with musicians like Stravinsky and Schoenberg, novelists like Henry James, Mann, Conrad, Proust, Svevo, Joyce, Gide, Kafka, Musil, Hesse and Faulkner, poets like Mallarmé, Valéry, Eliot, Pound, Rilke, Lorca, Apollinaire, Breton and Stevens, with dramatists like Strindberg, Pirandello and Wedekind, are indeed their remarkably high degree of self-signature, their quality of sustaining each work with a structure appropriate only to that work. The condition for the style of the work is a presumed absence of style for the age; and each work is a once-and-for-all creation, subsisting less for its referential than its autotelic constituents, the order and rhythm made for itself and submerged by itself. Modernism in this sense is indeed an international tendency, and we can predicate origins and causes for it and reflect on its significance. But it is hard to convert it into a universal style or tradition, despite the fact that its environment is not simply the work of individuals but of broader movements and tendencies. It is indeed a *part* of our modern art, not all of it. Yet there seems to be a discernible centre to it: a certain loose but distinguishable group of assumptions, founded on a broadly symbolist aesthetic, an *avant-garde* view of the artist, and a notion of a relationship of crisis between art and history. To this extent, one would also want to argue that there is an historical 'peak', where impulses from many varied sources begin to coalesce, and come through in a particular core of moments, out from which run many variant and diverse versions of the primary impulse.