What Was Modernism?
Author(s): Harry Levin
Published by: The Massachusetts Review, Inc.
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/25086557
Accessed: 15-08-2014 18:15 UTC

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.
What was Modernism?

A new apartment building in New York City, according to a recent announcement, has been named The Picasso. Though I have not had the pleasure of seeing it, I would suggest that it ought to be hailed as a landmark, indicating that we Americans have smoothly rounded some sort of cultural corner. Heretofore it has been more customary to christen our apartments after the landed estates or the rural counties of England, as if by verbal association to compensate for the rootless transience of metropolitan living. A few years ago the name of Picasso, as household god, would have conjured up notions of a jerrybuilt structure and a Bohemian ambience. Prospective tenants, in their perennial quest for comfort and security, would have been put off by a vision of collapsible stairways, rooms without floors, trapezoidal kitchenettes, or neighbors with double faces and blue-green complexions. But in the meanwhile the signature has brought untold wealth and unquestioned prestige to its signer, and now it becomes a warrant of domestic respectability. If this is not an arrival, no painter can ever be said to have arrived. But where? At the latest and strangest phase of a restless career, where previous arrivals have always been points of departure.

We must admit that our eponymous hero has met with more appropriate recognitions, notably the retrospective gathering of Picasso's works, exhibited in several cities on the occasion of his
seventy-fifth birthday. That was indeed a retrospect: not only of the productivity wherewith a single man could fill a museum, but of the versatility that enabled him to master such varied styles and numerous media. To follow his progression from room to room and period to period—from drawing and painting to sculpture and ceramics, or from romanticism and impressionism to cubism and primitivism—was to recapitulate the history of art. Above the labels of the catalogue loomed the dynamic personality of the artist, not merely a school in himself but a whole succession of schools, seeking to outrival his own work at every subsequent stage as well as the work of so many earlier artists. If there was any text he was born to illustrate, it was Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. The conceiving eye that could turn a broken mechanical toy into a monstrous ape or a sacrificial goat, the shaping hand that could transform a terra-cotta pitcher into an archaic goddess of love, such are the faculties that Marcel Proust must have had in mind when he described the impact of great painters as "*une métamorphose des choses*." Emerson, a favorite writer of Proust's, had described the poetic process as "a metamorphosis of things."

Pablo Picasso, who will be eighty next year, is unique in his field, but not in his artistic eminence. In the sister art of music, we think at once of the protean achievement of Igor Stravinsky, his junior by one year. There, with due allowance for technical differences, we seem to note a similar tendency, which some bewildered cataloguers might have labelled Ultraism. This is the will to change, in other words, that metamorphic impetus, that systematic deformation, that reshaping spirit which must continually transpose its material and outdistance itself in a dazzling sequence of newer and newest manners. Picasso was asked by a conventional person who admired his classical illustrations, "Since you can draw so beautifully, why do you spend your time making those queer things?" He answered succinctly, "That's why." He might have countered with another question: why retrace familiar lines? Similarly Stravinsky might have replied, to hearers aware that his departures were firmly grounded upon past mastery of his craft: why go on repeating the recognized

610
What was Modernism?

chords? There are other possible modalities, though they may sound discordant the first time you hear them. The original composer is he who must try them, in the interests of further discovery.

Since more and more combinations have been tried, more and more possibilities have been exhausted, and the problems of experimentation have become harder and harder. The public, of course, is shocked; it prefers the accustomed harmonies to the neoteric experiments, and it finds cubist projections unrecognizable. However, the development of the arts is registered through a series of shocks to the public—which, after all, in buying cars or clothes, accepts the principle of planned obsolescence. At its own pace, it too is animated by "the need for a constant refreshment," as has been pointed out by James Johnson Sweeney, the Director of the Guggenheim Museum who has done so much to supply that need. The shift of taste fits in with a dialectical pattern of revolution and alternating reaction, as the breaking of outmoded images gives way to the making of fresh ones. Hence the successful iconoclast frequently ends as an image-maker. Witness T. S. Eliot, whose career has been a literary parallel to Stravinsky’s or Picasso’s. Since his conversion to the Anglican Church and his naturalization as a British subject, we have come to view him as a living embodiment of tradition. Yet he emerged as an experimentalist, whose problematic endeavors startled and puzzled his early readers.

This realignment corresponds with the usual transition from the enfant terrible, who is naturally radical, to the elder statesman, who is normally conservative. But it does not explain why such grand old men as Bernard Shaw and André Gide, several years after their respective deaths, still seem so alive and so much younger than their survivors. It does not account for the patricidal attacks, launched against Modernism in general and Mr. Eliot in particular, by angry middle-aged men such as Karl Shapiro, whose rallying cry is In Defence of Ignorance. It throws no light on the charlatanical fame that has accrued to Picasso’s younger compatriot, Salvador Dali, for turning back his limp and dripping watches. Yet one of the spokesmen for a
resurgent conservatism, Peter Viereck, throws out a meaningful hint, when he speaks of “the revolt against revolt.” And the Institute of Modern Art at Boston has officially marked the mid-century transition by changing its name to the Institute of Contemporary Art. Now, we are all contemporaries; about that we have no option, so long as we stay alive. But we may choose whether or not we wish to be modern, and the present drift seems to be toward the negative choice and away from the hazards of controversial involvement.

“An intellectual deliverance is the peculiar demand of those ages which are called modern.” So Matthew Arnold had declared in his inaugural lecture “On the Modern Element in Literature.” But though that lecture was delivered at Oxford in 1857—the year that inaugurated French modernism by dragging both Madame Bovary and Les Fleurs du Mal through the lawcourts—it was not much more than another of Arnold’s pleas for classicism. By recourse to his criteria, which were those of high civilization, Sophocles and Lucretius could be ranked among the moderns. It remained for the late Edwin Muir to work out the implications of this relativistic conception, applying it also to the Renaissance and to such nineteenth-century prophets as Nietzsche. Muir’s sharply pointed paragraphs in The New Age, collected under a pseudonym as We Moderns in 1918, were republished in the United States two years later with a polemical introduction by H. L. Mencken. Modernity, they argued, does not necessarily mean the very latest thing; rather it is a program of cultural emancipation, “a principle of life itself” which can only be maintained by “constantly struggling.” The struggle of the moment was against such reactionaries as Chesterton and such derivatives as Galsworthy. The long-range conflict would meet those forces which, recognizing the challenge of modernism, damn it as heresy in every sphere.

Today we live in what has been categorized—by whom but Arnold Toynbee?—as the Post-Modern Period. Looking back toward the Moderns, we may feel as Dryden did when he looked back from the Restoration to the Elizabethans, contrasting earlier strength with later refinement. “Their was the
What was Modernism?

giant race before the Flood. . . . The Second Temple was not like the First.” But, we may console ourselves by reflecting, there are times of change and times that seek stability; a time for exploring and innovating may well lead into a time for assimilating and consolidating. We may well count ourselves fortunate, in that we can so effortlessly enjoy those gains secured by the pangs of our forerunners. Lacking the courage of their convictions, much in our arts and letters simply exploits and diffuses, on a large scale and at a popular level, the results of their experimentalism. F. Scott Fitzgerald, because he managed to catch some of the glamour that finally caught him, has himself been sentimentalized as a hero of biography, fiction, and drama. Compare his own reckless hero of the Twenties, the great and flamboyant Gatsby, with a typical protagonist of the Fifties—the decent, judicious, respectable Arthur Winner in James Gould Cozzens’ By Love Possessed—and you can measure how far we have advanced into the middle age of the Twentieth Century.

Compare a militant novel of the Thirties—let us say John Steinbeck’s Grapes of Wrath—with a penitent novel of the Forties, Lionel Trilling’s Middle of the Journey, and you can locate the turn that came nel mezzo del cammin. World War II was the Flood; but the Temple had been crumbling and the giant race disappearing through what W. H. Auden, retrospectively and rather too severely, called “a low dishonest decade.” Some of the talents were prematurely sacrificed: Guillaume Apollinaire, García Lorca. Others survived without honor in their own countries, as Ezra Pound and Boris Pasternak did for such different reasons. Many of their amiable juniors were led astray by those “enemies of promise” which Cyril Conolly demurred at but did little to resist. The query “Who killed Dylan Thomas?” has prompted some maudlin accusations. The poignant fact about James Agee’s writing, much of it published posthumously, is his uneasiness about not living up to his genuine promise. The gifted J. P. Salinger, who writes so movingly of adolescent confusions, has yet to free himself from them. Our colleges are full of writers in residence, who offer courses in
“creative” writing, and publish embittered novels whose principal source of interest is the non-coincidental resemblance between their colleagues and their characters.

Though our Miltons may not be glorious, they are both vocal and pampered. Poetry has become a caucus-race, where there are prizes for all the participants and where there are virtually no spectators. The little magazines that “died to make verse free,” as people used to say, have been resurrected on the campuses, where they specialize in the stricter Provençal forms. Joyce’s books, which were burned and censored during his lifetime, have become a happy hunting ground for doctoral candidates; while his dishevelled disciple, Samuel Beckett, is the subject of an article in a current issue of PMLA. One of my intermittent nightmares is based on two tons of Thomas Wolfe’s manuscripts now reposing in a vault of the Houghton Library, and the thought that future scholars will gain reputations by putting back what the editors cut out. It is significant that Lawrence Durrell’s tetralogy, one of the very few ambitious novels to appear in Britain latterly, takes place in the self-consciously decadent city of Alexandria. “Art,” as Thomas Mann announced and illustrated in Doktor Faustus, “is becoming criticism.” In the same vein John Crowe Ransom, who turned from poet to critic some thirty years ago, lately announced that literature has been moving from an age of creation into an age of criticism.

Mr. Ransom, interviewed on his retirement from his influential chair as teacher and editor at Kenyon College, stressed the happier aspects of the prevailing situation: the necessity for thoughtful rereading, the opportunities for self-cultivation and renewed understanding of the existent classics. An instance might be the revival of Henry James, far more dominant now than he ever was in his day. These are valid and absorbing pursuits, and I am too ingrained an academic myself to deplore the amenities of the Academy. Then too, it must be conceded, there are positive advantages to living in an epoch which technology has enriched with esthetic appliances, so that our acquaintance with music and with the fine arts is vastly augmented.
What was Modernism?

by long-playing records and photographic reproductions. But this is reproduction, not production; we are mainly consumers rather than producers of art. We are readers of reprints and connoisseurs of High Fidelity, even as we are gourmets by virtue of the expense account and the credit card. For our wide diffusion of culture is geared to the standardizations of our economy, and is peculiarly susceptible to inflationary trends. The independence of our practitioners, when they are not domesticated by institutions of learning, is compromised more insidiously by the circumstances that make art a business.

The prosperous and the established, The Just and the Unjust, find their mirror in the novels of Mr. Cozzens, as opposed to that concern for the underprivileged which novelists used to profess. Genius, more understanding than misunderstood, rises to worldly success in the shrewd fiction of C. P. Snow, where science and scholarships provide the means for “the new men” to enter “the corridors of power.” From England we hear of young men who are angry, presumably at the various conformities which they sum up in their conception of an Establishment. It is not quite so clear what is beating our so-called “beat generation”; they seem to be rebels without a cause, born too late in a world too old. Jack Kerouac, in On the Road, has produced a document which fills some of us with the wistful feeling that experience must somehow have passed us by. Yet his friends, for all their violent whims, do not seem to be having nearly so good a time as Hemingway’s playboys in The Sun Also Rises. The school associated with San Francisco, for whatever a personal impression may or may not be worth, looks very much like Greenwich Village transported across the continent long after its heyday. It exemplifies the cultural lag rather than the advance-guard.

As it happens, I have been somewhat associated with the publishing firm known as New Directions, which was founded in the late Nineteen-Thirties by my college friend, James Laughlin. In spite of its vanguard title, it has been primarily engaged in fighting a rear-guard action. The leading innovators on its list have been Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams, both
of whom are advanced septuagenarians nowadays. The other day I noticed a reference to the annual miscellany, *New Directions*, which was characterized as “the accepted place for off-beat publication.” Here is an interesting contradiction in terms, which reveals a deeper contradiction in our standards. Whether it expresses the nonconformist’s yearning for conformity or the conformist’s urge toward nonconformity, it gives with one hand what it takes away with the other. It weighs the notion of acceptance against the compound, “off-beat,” which is so characteristic an expression of the mid-century. The noun “beat” accords with the terminology of jazz; as an ungrammatical participle, the same word carries certain sado-masochistic overtones, e.g. “beat-up.” Rounded off by a Slavic diminutive, which may be either affectionate or contemptuous, and which must have been reinforced by the Sputnik, it has become an epithet for the fashion of being flagrantly unfashionable, “beatnik.”

However, its underlying connotation seems to derive from the cop who is off his beat, the man in uniform who has gone off duty and strayed into unfamiliar territory. Thus it subserves the ambivalent curiosity of the denizens of a well-grooved society about whatever may lie beyond its beaten paths. It represents an ineffectual effort to vary the cliché, and probably owes its currency to those whose own beat is Madison Avenue. A cognate phrase, “off-Broadway,” is more concrete in specifying the relationship between that main thoroughfare, the precinct of uniformity, and its bypaths, where novelty may perchance be encountered. Legitimate drama, all but superseded on Broadway by musical comedy, has had to improvise its theaters in devious lofts and makeshift basements. Shaw’s *Pygmalion*, in its Broadwayized version of Covent Garden, *My Fair Lady*, is the soaring index of this trend. Like those bland composites to which Hollywood reduces imported ideas, it is an entrepreneurial accomplishment, another by-product of the middle-man’s pragmatic philosophy as stated by Pope:

> Be not the first by whom the new are tried,  
> Nor yet the last to lay the old aside.
**What was Modernism?**

That sentiment is reversed paradoxically when an advertisement for *Esquire*, the haberdashery magazine, salutes its *clientèle* as “the aware moderns who are the first to embrace a new idea and speed it upon its way to becoming the popular fashion.” Well, we Post-Moderns like to eat our cake and keep it, to take a chance on a sure thing. We tipsters want to call the long shot while hogging the inside track, to take credit for originality without risking unpopularity. Hence we congratulate ourselves upon our broadmindedness because *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* is now a best-seller after thirty years of suppression.

Thirty years constitute nature’s round number for the span from infancy through maturity, and consequently a kind of basic rhythm for reckoning the progresses and regressions of mankind. Thirty years is just about the age-difference between a playboy and an academician: consider the case history of Jean Cocteau. What is generally regarded as the Irish Renascence began in 1892 with Yeats’s *Countess Cathleen* and terminated in 1922 with Joyce’s *Ulysses*. Broader movements, succeeding one another, are comparable in their periodicity. Thus, if we start with Wordsworth’s manifesto of 1800, we observe that the continental triumph of Romanticism dates from 1830. Shortly before the end of another cycle, this gives way to the countertendencies toward Positivism, Realism, and Naturalism; whereas, when we move from the Sixties to the Nineties, the latest watchwords are Symbolism, Estheticism, and Decadence. It will be seen that a revolutionary generation tends to be succeeded by a reactionary one; to put it less politically and more psychologically, there seems to be a cyclic oscillation between tough and tender minds. That would help to explain the phenomenon of the hard-boiled Nineteen-Twenties, recoiling as it were from the softness of the *fin du siècle*. It might also set the acknowledged weaknesses of the Fifties into clarifying perspective.

But nostalgia for the vigorous youth of our century is a weakness in which we need not indulge ourselves; nor would it serve any purpose to draw invidious comparisons between our im-
mediate contemporaries and our elders. The average life is privileged to span two generations, and we live at least in the afterglow of the Moderns. Insofar as they were ahead of their time, we can even claim to be nearer to them. Furthermore, each generation has three decades, in which either to gather momentum after a wavering start, or else to subside from a powerful beginning. Accordingly, the manic Twenties declined into the depressive Thirties, which yielded in turn to the war-interrupted Forties. If the countermovement of the Fifties seems to have begun unpromisingly, we may take comfort in expecting the Sixties to proceed on a rising plane, looking toward the next watershed in the Nineteen-Eighties. There George Orwell's object-lesson gives us pause, and we shift with relief to a backward glance and a less complex set of variables. We can examine the material factors, chart the framing conditions, and project the hypothetical curves of artistic activity. Yet we have no means of predicting how the human sensibilities, in their most individualized manifestations, will respond.

The best we can do is to recognize when those responses have occurred with a special resonance. But that point cannot be established by generalizations; let me particularize instead, with a handful of titles and names and dates. Among the latter, 1922 stands out as the year of Proust's death, of the publication of his central volume, Sodome et Gomorrhe, and the first appearance of his work in England. English letters had likewise to absorb the twofold shock of Ulysses and The Waste Land. And if this was not enough for the reviewers, D. H. Lawrence offered them Aaron's Rod, Virginia Woolf Jacob's Room, and Katherine Mansfield The Garden Party. Readers of poetry faced not merely the Georgian anthology but Hardy's Late Lyrics and Earlier, Yeats's Later Poems, and Housman's Last Poems—it sounded rather autumnal, but the harvest grew with reaping. Lytton Strachey's Books and Characters was more narrowly de l'époque, while Max Beerbohm's Rossetti and his Circle was an antiquarian curio. Among the highlights of the season in France were Les Caves du Vatican by Gide and
What was Modernism?

Charmes, Valéry’s collection of verse. Germany saw Bertolt Brecht’s first play, Baal, and Die Sonette an Orpheus by Rainer Maria Rilke. Americans were reading Sinclair Lewis’ Babbitt and being scandalized by Eugene O’Neill’s Anna Christie.

Though I have been highly selective, the list is sufficient to justify an annus mirabilis—or would be, if there were not others comparably brilliant. Let us therefore sample another year, jumping arbitrarily to 1924, when Franz Kafka died, scarcely known, since his novels would only be published during the next three years. The greatest event for the critics was Thomas Mann’s masterwork, Der Zauberberg. The noisiest, perhaps, was the Surrealist Manifesto, which proved to be something of an anticlimax; but Valéry counterbalanced it with his first collection of critical prose, Variété. America witnessed Sherwood Anderson’s autobiography, A Story-Teller’s Story, Marianne Moore’s salient volume of poetic Observations, and William Faulkner’s first book, also in verse, The Marble Faun. In Britain, George Moore waxed more reminiscent than ever with Conversations in Ebury Street; T. E. Hulme’s posthumous Speculations were to have continuing influence on criticism and poetry; each of the three Sitwells contributed to the ebullition by bringing out a book; and Bernard Shaw was inspired to touch his heights by the theme of Saint Joan. E. M. Forster’s Passage to India may have been an omen as well as a milestone; for it was his most important novel to date, and it is the last that Mr. Forster has given us.

Everyone can multiply for himself these modern instances; while students of Russian or Spanish literature can point to additional flowerings which were either transplanted or nipped in the bud. Futurism, as Joyce foresaw, had no future; Marinetti fell in line behind Mussolini; and Hitler was to proscribe Modernism as degenerate art or Kulturbolschewismus. We hardly need to underline the pressures or constraints that limited the epoch so poignantly, entre deux guerres, to Mr. Forster’s “long week-end,” 1918-1939. Nor could we blame the generation confronted with the task of continuing to write, if they found it hard to forgive such knowledge. Yet at this distance we can
The Massachusetts Review

perceive, with increasing clarity, that the modernistic movement comprises one of the most remarkable constellations of genius in the history of the West. And while some of its lights are still among us, before they have all been extinguished, we should ask ourselves why they have burned with such pyrotechnic distinction. What, if anything, have such figures in common, each of them vowed to idiosyncracy, practising a divergent medium, formed in a disparate background? Above all, the elementary circumstance that they happen to be coeval, more or less; that they are all, or would have been, in their eighth decade today. But what, if we are not to beg the question, was the Zeitgeist they shared? What was there in the air they breathed that differed from the intellectual climate of their successors or predecessors?

All of them grew up in the late Nineteenth Century and matured in the early Twentieth, reaching their prime in the period between the wars. The Nineteenth was not so well organized as the Eighteenth, nor so deeply speculative as the Seventeenth, nor so richly magniloquent as the Renaissance. But, as the apogee of middle-class liberalism, it permitted a maximum of leeway for the emergence of individuality; it educated individuals thoroughly; it collected art and fostered science; it cultivated human relationships; it developed temperament and talent. Into its world the Modernists were born, and yet they were not quite shaped by it. To it they often hark back, with that acute sensibility which they have reserved for their own impressions of adolescence. Had they been born any earlier, they might have felt—with Henry Adams—that they had missed a still earlier boat. Had they been Mid-Victorians, they might have poured their creative energies into causes that they now could take for granted. If they had reached maturity in the Nineties, their views would have inevitably been colored by the outlook of the Decadents. But they took the fin du siècle in youthful stride; for them, it was not so much the end of one century as it was the beginning of another.

One of the determining characteristics of modern man, which influences the role he plays and relates him to pre-existing phe-
What was Modernism?

nomina, is his awareness of chronology. We who are children of the Twentieth Century never experienced the excitement of welcoming it. Our casual habit of predating centuries makes us insensitive to the West's first realization that its second millennium was now in sight. The bliss that Wordsworth inhaled at the dawning of the French Revolution had been a disillusioning adumbration. "Years of the modern! years of the unperform'd!" Such had been Whitman's prologue to a performance which he anticipated all the more keenly because, as he chanted, "No one knows what will happen next." At all events, things would be happening; and those whose existence falls within the limits of a single century may well envy those who cross temporal boundaries and have a chance to inscribe their names on history's blank pages. How terribly much it must have meant to James Joyce, as an eighteen-year-old university student, to have set his ambitions down on paper and dated them "1900!" Here was the brave new world that had been heralded by his mentor Ibsen, by Nietzsche whose death came that very year, by Tolstoy and those other Proto-Moderns who had been breaking the images that had stood in its way.

One of the assumptions about World War I was that it had settled history. Its sequel was to teach T. S. Eliot that "History is now and in England." But the interval thought of itself in the present tense, separating modernity from history. The past was over; the present was happily more comfortable—though unhappily less colorful, as Miniver Cheevy and other time-snobs lamented. Ernest Hemingway's first book of stories was aptly entitled In Our Time, and its grasp of immediacy was heightened by its reminiscences of battle. His intensive concentration on the instant, which imparts a film-like quality to his fiction, is pinpointed in "The Snows of Kilimanjaro," when a polyglot series of synonyms runs through the mind of a dying writer: "Now, ahora, maintenant, heute...." Whatever the language, the meaning is imminence; and that "nowness" is a precondition of the search for newness, for what Whitman had termed "the unperform'd." To perform the unperformed! La nouvelle revue française! "The Great English Vortex!"
The Massachusetts Review

sense of novelty, of potentialities being opened up, does not seem any less eager because it is juxtaposed to the inherited sense of the past and the pleasures of retrospection. Everyman, in his more thoughtful moods, is conscious of his overwhelming patrimony as heir of all the ages; and his relation to them takes the guise of an endless stroll among the masterpieces of their invisible museum.

Time was of the essence, not only for the metaphysician Bergson, but for the innumerable poets, novelists, painters, and scientists who worked in the dimension he formulated. Vainly did Wyndham Lewis assail the time-consciousness of his contemporaries. As the Gracehoper retorted to the Ondt, in Joyce’s fable, “Why can’t you beat time?” The lifework of Proust was precisely such an attempt, the attempt of an aging dilettante to make up for lost time by recapturing the past, repudiating its ephemeral concerns and crystallizing its highest moments through an appeal to the timelessness of art. Yeats pursued the same objective symbolically, when he pictured himself abandoning the earthbound sphere of nature and setting sail for the timeless art-city, Byzantium. His poet, Michael Robartes, had desired to remember forgotten beauty. The feeling of belatedness has the habitual effect of stimulating the act of memory, along with the stylistic consequence of sounding echoes, evoking reverberations, and playing with pastiche. When Pound advised disciples to “make it new,” he was repeating a maxim as old as Confucius, and was well aware of the irony; for his studies in the Renaissance had won him insights into the processes of cultural renewal, and shown him how renovation could be innovation.

What I have ventured to call the metamorphic impetus seems to have resulted from this paradoxical state of feeling belated and up-to-date simultaneously, and of working experimental transformations into traditional continuities. But there are other preconditions of Modernism, geographical as well as historical. Joyce and Picasso, Eliot and Stravinsky have another trait in common—alas, too common among the uncommon artists of our time. How few of them have lived out their
What was Modernism?

careers in the lands of their origin! To be sure, migration is a civilizing force, and sojourn abroad has been a classic step in the artistic curriculum vitae. Unfortunately we have had to learn, through dint of wars, revolutions, and political persecutions, the distinction between expatriation and exile. The hyphenated German-Jewish-Czech, Kafka, though he did not live to share it, clairvoyantly sketched the plight of the Displaced Person. Mann, who was destined to become a Transatlantic nomad, had situated his magic mountain in neutral Switzerland. There, in the International Sanitorium Berghof, his Teutonic hero undergoes successive exposure to a Swiss physician, an Italian poet, a Polish priest, a Dutch businessman, and a Russian mistress. Then, having gained an education while regaining his health, he is lost in combat with the Allies.

The catchphrase employed by continental architects, “The International Style,” might be very appropriately extended to other works of the Twenties. Many of them were composed in Paris, the capital of between-the-wars cosmopolitanism. “The School of Paris”—a topographical designation for unacademic painting—was presided over by our expatriate Spaniard, Picasso, who now has his monument in New York. Paris was the inevitable headquarters for those Russian dancers, designers, and choreographers who created Stravinsky’s ballets. It was where a famous generation of Americans got temporarily lost, under the Sybillean tutelage of Gertrude Stein. Meanwhile, in an apartment near the Etoile, the self-exiled Irishman Joyce was carefully elaborating the most minute and comprehensive account that any city has ever received from literature—his account of his native Dublin. Ulysses is of its time, in endeavoring to arrest the eighteen hours of time it exhaustively chronicles. Nineteenth-century novelists, especially Balzac, had set forth the complexities of the metropolis, but through a sequence of loosely connected novels where more or less conventional narrative was filled in with sharply detailed observation. Joyce’s unexampled contribution was a gigantic yet rigorously experimental design, which controlled the accumulating details as they fell into place.

623
The Massachusetts Review

It is the metamorphic impetus that provides this controlling device: the transmutation of Dublin citizens into mythical archetypes out of the Odyssey. In the novel, as Naturalism had left it, the environment came dangerously close to swamping the personages. That was not the fault of the Naturalists, but of the situations with which they dealt. The dehumanization of art, if I may build upon a useful phrase from Ortega y Gasset, mirrors the dehumanization of life. Joyce, by resorting to metamorphosis and even to mock-apotheosis, was trying to rehumanize his characters; and he succeeded in giving them contour, if not stature. Journalistic novelists like John Dos Passos and Jean-Paul Sartre, seeking a panoramic or kaleidoscopic approach to the urban scene, have imitated Joyce’s structural methods. But the problem, to which the French Unanimistes and the German proponents of the Gesamtkunstwerk have also addressed themselves, goes beyond—or else within—the matter of structure. If the object is unity, that must bear an organic connection to the multiplicity; its collective pattern must be revealed and confirmed through individual lives; its outward view of social interaction must be combined with an inner focus on psychological motivation.

Hence the old-fashioned type of rounded fictional character, standing between the narrator and the reader, seems to dissolve in the stream of consciousness, which directly and transparently conveys a flow of impression and sensation from the external world. Though the novelist need not utilize the internal monologue, increasingly he approximates to the voice and the viewpoint of his protagonist. The very completeness of the ensuing intimacy forces him to fall back upon the raw materials of his own autobiography, refining them into self-portraiture of the artist. The intensity of Proust’s introspection pushed him to the point where he disclosed an abyss between the moi and everything else. Gide, by writing his novel about a novelist writing a novel, Les Faux-monnayeurs, including his novelist’s journal, and then publishing the journal he kept while writing that novel, Le Journal des Faux-monnayeurs, demonstrated that first-person narrative may become a double mirror reflect-
What was Modernism?

ing infinity. Fiction was spurred to such feats of self-consciousness by the revelations of psychoanalysis: the Freudian probing for unconscious motives, the Jungian search for universal patterns. It may be an exaggeration to argue that human nature changed in 1910, but Virginia Woolf was bold enough to do so, though probably unaware that the International Psychoanalytical Association had been founded in that year.

That argument was a measured overstatement, put forward in defending the new Georgian novelists against such Edwardians as Arnold Bennett. Mrs. Woolf knew that it would have just about as much validity as the assertion that sunsets have changed since Monet and the Impressionists undertook to paint them. It was true, in the sense that characterization had changed, that people too were being visualized through the eyes of other people, and that another metamorphosis was thereby being effected. The author of Orlando understood that permutations so subtle and subjective might have a circumscribing effect on the novel. Most flexible of genres, it readily focuses either upon the recesses of the self or the expanses of society; and the Twenties took it to both extremes, sometimes at once, with their mental analyses and their monumental constructs. Here is where Ultraism may have attained its ne plus ultra. Joyce himself could go no farther than Finnegans Wake; few others could get that far; and later novelists have understandably made no attempt to press beyond Ulysses. This has stirred some critics to announce that the novel is an obsolete or dying form. One cannot deny that it seems to be regressing toward the plane of documentary realism, where at best it may be indistinguishable from reportage or good journalism.

But fiction is doomed to failure in its competition with fact. What it possesses that non-fiction lacks is fantasy—that is to say, the projective power of the imagination, which confers value and significance on the stuff of our everyday apprehension by rearranging and transmuting it. Thus the apparent sordidness and purposelessness of our day with Leopold Bloom in Dublin are transmuted into a symbolic reënactment of Homer’s epic. Some of those cross-references seem far-fetched, and
others grimly ironic; yet, as a whole, they interpret for us data which would otherwise be meaningless. Joyce’s use of myth makes the past a key to the present. More than that, wrote T. S. Eliot in his review of *Ulysses*, “It has the importance of a scientific discovery.” Future writers would take advantage of it, as he predicted; and even then he had just finished his *Waste Land*, which abounded in flashbacks and parallels. In that least heroic and most fragmentary of epics, he exorcized the blight of contemporaneous London by tracing through it the outline of a quest for the Holy Grail. A timeless ritual, a timely critique, I. A. Richards commented that it completed the severance between poetry and belief. But, in the long run, it proved to be a station on Mr. Eliot’s pilgrimage toward faith.

It is not surprising that Modernism, the product of cities, should be so impelled to recreate the image of cities. One of the greatest Modernists, in this respect, is Charlie Chaplin, who has so brilliantly rendered the metropolis in all its frustrations and incongruities. For T. S. Eliot, London is “unreal”; but its apparition is that of Vienna, Athens, Jerusalem, or Alexandria; and his elegiac vision becomes prophetic when he imagines “falling Towers.” The prophecy was apocalyptically fulfilled by the bombings of the next war, which Mr. Eliot—combining his own observation as air-raid warden with a reminiscence from Dante’s *Inferno*—has powerfully invoked in the last of his *Four Quartets*. That he should proceed by musical analogy, finding his inspiration in the austere but imposing string quartets of the later Beethoven, is still another trait of his generation. Poets’ poets and novelists’ novelists, painters’ painters and musicians’ musicians, they were profoundly versed in their own particular crafts, and so wholeheartedly devoted to craftsmanship that they attempted to transfer it from one art to another. Writers borrowed thematic techniques from Wagner, who himself had aimed at a synesthesia, to be induced by music in conjunction with other arts. Poetry encompassed painting and music, when Wallace Stevens presented—after Picasso—his *Man with a Blue Guitar*.

The thought that a man of letters should consider himself a
What was Modernism?

practitioner of the fine arts, or that he should be designated professionally as an artist, is a legacy from Flaubert’s generation which is not likely to outlast Joyce’s by long. The cult of intransigent artistry, which both men practised as devoutly as if it were their religious vocation, is embodied in and elucidated by the latter’s Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, where the archetypal figure is Daedalus, the fabulous Greek artificer, and the epigraph is a line about him from Ovid’s Metamorphoses: “Et ignotas animum dimittit in artes.” Joyce was clearly inviting the application to himself: “And so he turned his mind to unknown arts.” Paul Valéry discerned a historical prototype in the artist-engineer of the Italian Renaissance, and paid his homage in two essays upon the method of Leonardo da Vinci. He made his own apologia through the personage of M. Teste (M. Tête, Mr. Head), whose cerebral soliloquies begin with the unabashed admission: “La bêtise n’est pas mon fort.” Stupidity has decidedly not been the forte of the Modernists; they have left that virtue to their Post-Modern attackers, who can now write in defence of ignorance. If M. Teste seems arrogant, let them make the most of that last infirmity. He was just as firm, in refusing to suffer fools, as they are weak in appealing to philistines.

Though recent literature prides itself upon its outspokenness, there remains one organ of the body which it is almost taboo to mention, and that is the brain. What may seem a sin, on the part of the Moderns, is that they were preoccupied with the minds of their characters, and—what is worse—that they make serious demands upon the minds of their readers. This cannot be lightly forgiven by an era whose culture-heroes are persistently mindless—whether they be the good-hearted goons of John Steinbeck, the epicene slobs of Tennessee Williams, or the analphabetic gladiators of the later Hemingway. But popularity was excluded, by definition, from the aims of the writers I have been discussing; their names did not figure upon the best-seller list of their day; many others did, which are now forgotten. The aura of obscurity or unintelligibility which may still occasionally tinge these intellectuals, in some degree, emanates from
their refusal to advertise themselves or to talk down to their audience in the hope of enlarging it. That, for them, would indeed have been a treason of the clerks. Their ultimate quality, which pervades their work to the very marrow, is its uncom­promising intellectuality. Like the intelligentsia of old Russia or the class of Mandarins in China, they looked upon letters as a way of life.

But this may have presupposed, along with their own dedica­tion, other conditions which may no longer be possible. The extraordinary spread of higher learning has lowered it, and introduced a large amount of dilution. The highbrows and the lowbrows have intermarried, and their children are—exactly what Virginia Woolf dreaded most—all middlebrows. Instead of a tension between the uncomprehending majority and the saving remnant—or, if you will, between sensible citizens and long-haired coteries—there has been a détente, a relaxation, and a collaboration for mutual profit between the formerly intractable artist and the no longer hostile bourgeoisie. Out of it there seems to be emerging a middlebrow synthesis, the moderated expression of our mid-century. But that is a subject notoriously better appreciated by professors of sociology and experts on mass communication than it is by old-fashioned scholars or modernist critics. Nor do I wish to imply that all of our talents, responding to technological pressure and economic attraction, have become mere purveyors of entertainment. On the contrary, many of them profess an engagement of the sincerest kind to the responsibilities of common welfare. The Modernists did not have to make such commitments, because they were not threatened by such urgencies. Hence they could strive for artistic perfection in single-minded detachment.

Alfred North Whitehead was strongly convinced that the early Twentieth Century was one of the greatest epochs in the march of intellect. Though he was thinking basically of mathematics and physics, he held a lively belief in the interplay between the sciences and the humanities. He concurred with the opinion that Wordsworth, writing from the opposite vantage-point, had expressed in the opening year of the Nineteenth Cen­tury:
What was Modernism?

If the labours of Men of science should ever create any material revolution, direct or indirect, in our condition, and in the impressions which we habitually receive, the Poet will sleep then no more than at present; he will be ready to follow the steps of the Man of science, not only in those general indirect effects, but he will be at his side, carrying sensation into the midst of the objects of the science itself.

Certainly such a material revolution has taken place; the arts have struggled to adapt themselves to it; and we gain a fuller comprehension of the modern artist, if we envision him—in Wordsworth’s terms—at the side of the scientist. The partnership, however uneasy, has intensified his curiosity and sharpened his preoccupation with his own technique. He has been encouraged to experiment, not by blindly accepting hypotheses as Zola did in his roman expérimental, but rather as Valéry did in transferring to poetry the lessons he had learned from geometry, or in taking for his motto ars non stagnat. Successful experiment involves trial and error and incidental waste, as scientists know. This is a necessary function performed, upon the fringes of the arts, by that continued ferment of willed eccentricity whose products we can usually dismiss. But “the two cultures,” as Sir Charles Snow has lately reminded us, are still too far apart. What should draw them together, more than anything else, is the shared recognition that conjointly they cover an area which man has set aside for the free play of pains-taking intelligence.

Science no longer underprops our world view with rationalistic or positivistic reassurances. It has undergone a modernist phase of its own, and seen its solid premises subverted by such concepts as relativity and indeterminacy. Where, then, can we turn for illumination? Can we come to no more helpful conclusion than the message that E. M. Forster discerned in the Marabar Caves of India? “Everything exists; nothing has value.” Critics of the Moderns have accused them of being deficient in a sense of values, of believing in nothing beyond that negativistic credo. However, to reread Eliot’s “Fire Sermon,” or Kafka’s “Parable of the Law,” or Mann’s farewell to his
soldier-hero, or Proust's commemoration of a great writer's death, or Joyce's hallucinating encounter between a sonless father and a fatherless son, is to feel the glow of ethical insight. A younger and more plain-spoken writer whom we have lost much too soon, Albert Camus, received the Nobel Prize three years ago for having "illuminated the problems of the human conscience in our time." That citation recalls the warning of an earlier French moralist, Rabelais, at the very dawn of modernity, that "science sans conscience" would bring ruin to the soul. Joyce's young artist, Stephen Dedalus, pledged himself to create the "uncreated conscience" of his people. Has it not been the endeavor of his generation to have created a conscience for a scientific age?