

Heart of Darkness: Modernism and Its Historians

Author(s): Robert Wohl

Source: *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 74, No. 3 (September 2002), pp. 573-621

Published by: The University of Chicago Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/345112>

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.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



The University of Chicago Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Journal of Modern History*

JSTOR

Review Article

Heart of Darkness: Modernism and Its Historians*

Robert Wohl

University of California, Los Angeles

Think now
History has many cunning passages,
contrived corridors
And issues

(T. S. ELIOT, 1922)

Twenty years ago, historians could happily ignore the concept of modernism. I offer myself as an example. When asked in 1982 to participate in a conference on modernism being held at the Claremont Colleges in California, I cavalierly declared in my paper, and then went on to repeat later in the essay that was published in the resulting volume: “Modernism is not a word that the historian ordinarily uses. Glancing through the books in my library that deal with the cultural history of Europe during the last century, I seldom find it on a title page, in the text, or even in an index. One may feel that this is testimony to the intellectual bulkheads that separate the academic disciplines; but I suspect that it is also an indication that historians have found the term difficult to apply, irrelevant to their interests, or contrary to their intuitions.”¹

* The books reviewed in this essay are Christopher Butler, *Early Modernism: Literature, Music, and Painting in Europe, 1900–1916* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), pp. xviii + 318, \$72.50; William R. Everdell, *The First Moderns: Profiles in the Origins of Twentieth-Century Thought* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1997), pp. xi + 501, \$29.95; Peter Nicholls, *Modernisms* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), pp. xiii + 368, \$16.95; Bernard Smith, *Modernism's History: A Study in Twentieth-Century Thought and Ideas* (New Haven, Conn., and London: Yale University Press, 1998), pp. vi + 376, \$40.00; T. J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (New Haven, Conn., and London: Yale University Press, 1999), pp. vii + 451, \$45.00.

¹ Robert Wohl, “The Generation of 1914 and Modernism,” in Monique Chefdor, Ricardo Quinones, and Albert Wachtel, eds., *Modernism: Challenges and Perspectives* (Urbana, Ill., 1986), pp. 66–67. The term “modernism” does not appear in H. Stuart Hughes, *Consciousness and Society: The Reconstruction of European Social Thought* (New York, 1958) or in Willson H. Coates and Hayden V. White, *The Ordeal of Liberal Humanism: An Intellectual History of Western Europe* (New York, 1970), vol. 2. Nor is it mentioned in Eugen Weber’s collection of readings, *The Western Tradition* (Lexington, Mass., 1995, originally published in 1956). Carl Schorske contrasts modernism to traditionalism in his introduction to *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna* (New York, 1980), p. xxvii, but his emphasis is on the “modern” and “modern man.” In *Weimar Culture* (New York, 1968), Peter Gay refers to “the modern movement” (p. 3). Later, in *Freud, Jews, and Other*

[*The Journal of Modern History* 74 (September 2002): 573–621]
© 2002 by The University of Chicago. 0022-2801/2002/7403-0004\$10.00
All rights reserved.

I could certainly not make the same statement today, as is testified to by the titles of the books I will be discussing in this article and many, many others that I will not have occasion to mention. Yet the term “modernism” remains maddeningly elusive and unstable, perhaps even more so than it was 1982. To what exactly does it refer? Is it, for example, a concept that can be used to designate a period? Should we make room in our textbooks for chapters on the “Modernist Era”? Or should we rather think of modernism as a style? And if so, was modernism simply one style among many, or was it the dominant, epochal style of a period? If the latter is the case, how do we locate this period in time? Or should we take another tack and approach modernism as a movement?—which might prompt us to inquire about the relationship between the “modernist movement” and the avant-garde, two terms that are often, even generally, used interchangeably. And then, as if the waters weren’t muddy enough already, what is the relationship among that triad of concepts, modernization, modernity, and modernism, to which has now been added (as if to confuse us yet further) postmodernism? Does modernism represent the culture of modernity, a condition brought about by modernization, and is post-modernism a reaction against modernism—its dialectical negation—or its continuation by other means? These are just some of the mind-bending questions that most intellectual and cultural historians understandably avoid.

Small wonder, then, that Perry Anderson, in the course of a review of Marshall Berman’s *All That Is Solid Melts into Air*,² concluded that “modernism as a notion is the emptiest of all cultural categories. Unlike the terms Gothic, Renaissance, Baroque, Mannerist, Romantic or Neo-Classical, it designates no describable object in its own right at all; it is completely lacking in positive content . . . what is concealed beneath the label is a wide variety of very diverse—indeed incompatible—aesthetic practices: symbolism, constructivism, expressionism, surrealism. These, which do spell out specific programmes, were unified *post hoc* in a portmanteau concept whose only referent is the blank passage of time itself. There is no other aesthetic marker so vacant or vitiated.”³

Anderson’s accusations are serious, and many intellectual and cultural historians working in the fields of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries may find themselves agreeing with him; but his hesitations about the term have in no way halted the flood of books that are dependent on the concept, even when they take issue with it or attempt to reformulate it. It is the purpose of this essay to discuss some of the more recent of these books and to see in which ways they resolve or clarify the issues that I have raised in these first paragraphs.⁴ What I seek to offer here is a tentative and imperfect map through the “cunning passages” and “contrived corridors” of modernism. I realize that what follows will not resolve all the con-

Germans (New York, 1978), and especially in *Pleasure Wars*, vol. 5 of *The Bourgeois Experience* (New York, 1998), he turns to an explicit analysis of modernist culture.

² Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air* (New York, 1982; new ed., 1988).

³ Perry Anderson, “Modernity and Revolution,” *New Left Review*, no. 144 (March–April 1984), pp. 96–113, quotation on pp. 112–13.

⁴ I apologize in advance for not being able to mention or do justice to many of the books that have shaped my own approach to the topic.

cerns that historians have about this concept—nor is this my intention—but I hope to clear away some of the areas of confusion, put the issue in a broader and slightly different context, and lay out those avenues of investigation where work is most urgently needed and where it is likely to produce the most promising results. I do so believing that modernism as a concept, whether one likes it or not, is here to stay.

* * *

For those seeking an understanding of modernism, the best place to begin is with Christopher Butler's *Early Modernism: Literature, Music, and Painting in Europe, 1900–1916*, an engaging and accessible book that is blessedly jargon-free, demonstrating that depth of analysis is not incompatible with economy of expression.

Butler approaches modernism not through an overarching definition that would stake out a position on the questions I raise at the beginning of my essay but, rather, by means of extended and thoughtful discussions of individual works that he identifies as being modernist. Though Butler is scrupulously careful to acknowledge his intellectual debts to other scholars, one has the impression that he has strongly felt and personal views of the poems, novels, paintings, and musical compositions he is analyzing. This is no mere collage constructed with the aid of insights culled from other people's work. Not hesitant to throw in a wide-gauged generalization when the occasion presents itself, Butler nonetheless seems to be more at ease when emphasizing the variety of modernist culture and the different temperaments, agendas, and national backgrounds of the individual artists whom he considers. To recall Isaiah Berlin's famous distinction, Butler is, by inclination, less a hedgehog than a fox, someone who wants to share with us the many things he knows rather than impress us with the large generalizations he claims to have constructed.⁵

Butler occasionally refers to modernism as a period and a movement, but he never pauses to define either the one or the other, leading me to believe that these terms are not meant to be taken by the reader in any but a very general way. He also identifies the early modernists as a "generation" whose heroic figures were Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, Igor Stravinsky, Arnold Schoenberg, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, and Guillaume Apollinaire, all born (with the exception of Matisse) around the pivotal date of 1880. Alas, this promising idea, which could have provided a structure for his book, is never developed systematically; instead, it is dropped in favor of another organizing principle, the emergence of a modernist "aesthetic" or "style."

Butler sees the new aesthetic as coming into existence as a response to a "broadly philosophical matrix of ideas, which is fundamental to the enabling of the innovatory impulse."⁶ Central to this matrix of ideas that inspired modernist

⁵ Isaiah Berlin, "The Hedgehog and the Fox," reprinted in his *The Proper Study of Mankind* (New York, 1998), pp. 436–98.

⁶ Christopher Butler, *Early Modernism: Literature, Music and Painting in Europe, 1900–1916* (Oxford, 1994), p. 249.

artistic innovations was a questioning of the artistic modes of discourse and social practices of the nineteenth century, as voiced by critics like Friedrich Nietzsche, Henrik Ibsen, and August Strindberg. Early modernist innovators, Butler claims, responded to what they perceived to be a cultural crisis by reacting against the artistic practices of the previous generation. They developed aesthetic conventions that were independent of, or contrary to, public norms, and they adopted the conviction that art should be subjective, intuitive, and inward looking rather than mimetic. Nietzsche, in particular, turned many young intellectuals and artists toward subjectivism in a world abandoned by God. His influence was reinforced by the intuitionism of Henri Bergson during the years immediately preceding the Great War and later by the psychoanalysis of Sigmund Freud, whose *Interpretation of Dreams* Butler views, quite rightly, to be the most influential symptom (rather than the cause) of a growing interest in the divided personality, a topic to which he devotes an enlightening chapter.

Like other students of modernism, Butler stresses the importance of Stéphane Mallarmé's innovations in poetry in shaping the new aesthetic. The French symbolist (born three or four decades before the figures Butler identifies as the generation of the early modernists) believed that poetry should devise a language that would go beyond the conventions of everyday speech, and in *L'Après-midi d'un faune* (1876) he attempted to explore the divided and sexually conflicted consciousness of his protagonist through indirect means. To name an object, Mallarmé believed, was to suppress three-fourths of the enjoyment of a poem. Objects had to be suggested rather than specified: this was the ideal, the "dream," toward which he aspired. In the aftermath of Mallarmé and other symbolist poets, according to Butler, the language of modernists became more elliptical, more inclined toward juxtaposition, the alogical, the simultaneous, and the collaged. Butler sees new aesthetic languages of the same type appearing in the music of Claude Debussy, who abandons classical principles of thematic and melodic development in favor of the sensual evocation of a mood, and the painting of Paul Cézanne, who distorted visual details, flattened out the surface of the image, and left the disconcerting and disorienting impression that the artist had painted objects within the canvas from different points of view. Cézanne sometimes painted several versions of the same topic, thus subverting the idea that an object can be represented in a single way that is superior to or somehow truer than others.

For Butler, then, modernism represents a new aesthetic language, but he is eager to distance himself from those critics, like Clement Greenberg, who have sought to reduce it to mere formal innovation. Butler instead emphasizes how changes in style were inspired by changes in ideas about the world. And here, I think, he makes an important contribution to the literature on modernism. He insists on the important role played by critics as mediators between avant-garde artists and their audience. Artists painted not just for the market but also for the critics who wrote about their work. And this led in turn to the desire of artists to situate their work within a theoretical framework. "The Modernist artist," Butler says, "begins to take advantage of the idea that the perception of art should be accompanied by an awareness of the right kind of theory, and the avant-gardist critic becomes more and more hungry for technical innovations which he can explain. The growing

emphasis on innovation in the first two decades of the century becomes a prime means for the disruption of the very idea that the arts should have a socially agreed reflective content.”⁷ To this I would add the observation that cultural consumers became more dependent than ever before on critics to explain to them the meaning of what they are reading, seeing, or hearing. Seen in this perspective, a critic like Apollinaire becomes not just a commentator on, but also a co-creator of, cubism. (For that matter, the same could be said with regard to Clement Greenberg’s role in the creation of abstract expressionism, as we shall see later in this essay.)

But let us return to the idea of modernism as a new aesthetic language. Through a discussion of the painting of Matisse, Vassily Kandinsky, Georges Braque, and Picasso and the music of Schoenberg, Butler argues that the early modernists, often driven by a distaste for what they took to be modernity and a desire to escape from it, broke with the syntax of perspective and harmony and moved toward an art that relied on juxtaposition and “the volatile expression of deep-lying emotions.”⁸ Schoenberg, like Kandinsky, believed that “art belongs to the *unconscious!* One must express oneself! Express oneself *directly!* Not one’s taste or one’s upbringing, or one’s intelligence, knowledge or skill. Not all these *acquired* characteristics, but that which is *inborn, instinctive.*”⁹ There was a risk in such a move inward, of course, but it was one that modernists were willing to take. What mattered in early modernism, Butler submits, was not so much the communication of an *external* reality that could be perceived by the public as a distinctive style that expressed the personal and *internal* vision of the artist. Once freed from the representation of external reality, modernist art could become an abstract language of signs and its content could become, increasingly, the psychology of the artist.

Butler’s preference for the early modernists over the avant-garde culture that was to come later after the Great War becomes increasingly clear as the book progresses. From its early pages he stresses the respect with which the early modernists viewed inherited tradition. “None of them began their careers as confrontational or avant-garde. This innate conservatism, which only arrives at a technical breakthrough after an exploration of the past, is one of the extraordinary strengths of early Modernism. The break with previous assumptions did not depend upon sudden conversion (of a kind which was later to be the aim of the typical avant-garde manifesto), but evolved by making art which shows a startlingly detailed appreciation of previous tradition, in masterpieces which often epitomize the very forms of taste that their makers were later to subvert.”¹⁰

Butler is not uncritical of the art of the early modernists, which he concedes was often incapable of eliciting from its potential consumers the states of mind it sought to convey. Early cubist paintings, he says, failed to present any coherent view of life, in the way that impressionism and fauvism had captured city life, landscapes, and bourgeois pleasure. But he is much more dismissive of the avant-

⁷ Ibid., pp. 19–20.

⁸ Ibid., p. 53.

⁹ Ibid., p. 25.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 25.

gardes that followed the Great War and suggests that we should distinguish between the “tradition-haunted” modernism of figures like Matisse, Kandinsky, Schoenberg, Stravinsky, Pound, and Eliot and a futurist and dada avant-gardism that sought to destroy the past and aimed at various types of political liberation.¹¹ Perhaps Butler’s most interesting, and provocative, claim, insinuated within a polemic against authors who deserve less space than he gives them, is that most early modernists thought of themselves as realists, whether they probed the unconscious or attempted by means of new techniques to capture the nature of the modern metropolis. Their attack on nineteenth-century realism, he says, did not entail a retreat to the world of art for art’s sake, as some Marxist critics have charged, but “an experimental search for new kinds of realism, most particularly concerning the subjective realm.”¹² This search called into question “the very nature of the self” and led to an exploration of the differences between male and female experience of the world. For Butler, then, “expressionism” is the term that best captures the nature of early modernism and is as applicable to Picasso’s cubist paintings and D. H. Lawrence’s novels as it is to Schoenberg’s music or F. T. Marinetti’s poetry.¹³

* * *

Butler limits his account of modernism to literature, music, and painting, though he acknowledges in his introduction that the intellectual and cultural change with which he is concerned can only be understood in relation to *all* the arts. He thus leaves open questions that intellectual and cultural historians will feel obliged to ask: Did the modernist aesthetic manifest itself in all the arts at the same time? Indeed, was modernism confined to the arts, or can we find it in other forms of cultural activity, such as philosophy, science, and mathematics? If so, would we not be justified in viewing modernism as the dominant sensibility of a period whose chronological limits would still remain to be defined?

In *The First Moderns*, William R. Everdell confronts these questions directly, and whatever one thinks about the methods he employs and the answers he supplies one can only be impressed by the ambition and sheer sweep of his project and the brio with which he attempts to impose on us his vision of late nineteenth- and

¹¹ Butler takes the term “tradition haunted” from Hilton Kramer’s *The Age of the Avant-Garde* (New York, 1973), p. 7. Kramer includes among the tradition-haunted artists Picasso and Yeats, but not Pound, perhaps because of Pound’s later enthusiasm for fascism.

¹² Butler, p. 278. Fredric Jameson seems to agree. Writing in 1990 about the relationship of modernism to imperialism, he observes: “One of the more commonly held stereotypes about the modern has of course in general been that of its apolitical character, its turn inward and away from the social materials associated with realism, its increased subjectification and introspective psychologization, and not least, its aestheticism and its ideological commitment to the supreme value of a now autonomous Art as such. None of these characterizations strike me as adequate or persuasive any longer; they are part of the baggage of an older modernist ideology which any contemporary theory of the modern will wish to scrutinize and to dismantle”; in Terry Eagleton, Fredric Jameson, and Edward W. Said, *Nationalism, Colonialism, and Literature* (Minneapolis, 1990), p. 45.

¹³ Butler, pp. 278–79.

twentieth-century thought. He begins forthrightly by telling us what modernism is not. It is not, he submits, to be confused with industrialism, capitalism, Marxism, or the Enlightenment. Nor is it modernization (the movement for reform in the Catholic Church that was condemned by Pope Pius X in 1907), the Modernismo associated with Rubén Darío, the Modernisme of Catalonia that flourished between 1890 and 1910, the Modernismus of Strindberg, Gerhart Hauptmann, and Franz Wedekind, or the modern architecture of Louis Sullivan and Mies van der Rohe.¹⁴ Indeed, Everdell believes that modernism was born out of the collapse of the worldview that gave rise to “modernity”—the principle of “ontological continuity”—and that it has more to do with mathematics and physics than it does with novels and buildings. The failure of the paradigm of continuity, which dominated nineteenth-century thought, has, in turn, led to the “nonlogical, nonobjective, and essentially causeless mental universe in which (with the exception of a few historians) we all now live.”¹⁵

Most students of modernism find ways of avoiding the question of where and when it began. Everdell, by contrast, relishes this challenge and provocatively places the birth of modernism in Brunswick, Germany, where in 1872 the mathematician Richard Dedekind reconceptualized the nature of numerical continuity, thus opening up a series of mathematical discoveries that led to the formulation by Georg Cantor and Gottlob Frege of set theory and a new understanding of the logical foundations of arithmetic. “The beautiful continuities of the old calculus had been banished. . . . The digital had been born.”¹⁶ It is no accident that Everdell begins with Dedekind, Cantor, and Frege: central to his argument, and one of the most original aspects of his book, is the claim that mathematically sophisticated logicians preceded writers and artists in discovering many—if not most—of the basic insights of modernism and exploring their implications.

Once on the track of ontological discontinuity, Everdell finds it in an extraordinary variety of places, some predictable, others less so. Part of the pleasure of his book lies in trying to anticipate the next destination of his intellectual odyssey, as we move from one to another “profile of twentieth-century thought.” Given his theme of discontinuity, one is not surprised to see him dwell on the pointillism of Georges Seurat’s 1885 painting, *Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*, or on the fragmentary quality and illogicality of Jules Laforgue’s poetry. But the inclusion in a history of modernism of Ludwig Boltzmann’s 1872 H-Theorem, postulating the impossibility of predicting with certainty the behavior of atoms, and Santiago Ramón y Cajal’s 1889 discovery of the neuron may produce a slight raising of the cultural historian’s eyebrows, as might the chapter devoted to the Spanish Captain-General of Cuba’s invention of the concentration camp in 1896. Everdell is clearly serving notice that he intends to shake up our concept of what modernism is all about.

Freud is always a revealing test case for students of modernism. Freud’s con-

¹⁴ “From an aesthetic (as opposed to a historical) point of view, modern architecture may have just begun”; William R. Everdell, *The First Moderns* (Chicago, 1997), p. 9.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

tribution to the modernist concept of the fragmented and divided self is certain, but can he himself be confidently placed in the modernist camp? Though Everdell acknowledges Freud's genius and deems the idea of repression one of the great ideas of the twentieth century, he is far from an unqualified admirer, and he keeps careful count of Freud's early failures and the ruthless ambition with which he cast off his friends and erased them from his intellectual autobiography. Seen from Everdell's perspective, Freud is a Columbus who never fully understood the radical nature of the New World of the mind he had discovered. Dedicated to the goal of a science of the psyche, he failed to realize that he had created a psychology "that divided the mind against itself and made 'objectivity' into a wish that could be realized only in dreams."¹⁷ Real modernists, by contrast, like Ramón y Cajal, realized that it was impossible to analyze nature without analyzing the means we use to become aware of it, whether it was language, symbols, or mind.

The year 1900, for Everdell, is more than the end of one century or the beginning of another. It is the year in which Hugo de Vries announced his "rediscovery" of the Mendelian explanation for heredity operating through the transmission of genes and in which Max Planck was led to formulate the concept of the quantum, two spectacular breaks with the notion of continuity that would have long-lasting effects. The following year the Cambridge philosopher Bertrand Russell realized that a contradiction at the heart of his theory of sets doomed his attempt to found mathematics on an unambiguous and thoroughly consistent symbolic logic. Out of his failure would be born analytical philosophy. At about the same time in Halle, Germany, Edmund Husserl was about to publish his *Logische Untersuchungen* in which he would lay the foundation for a new way of doing philosophy, called phenomenology, which would privilege the self in favor of objects outside of it, thus undermining, if not annihilating, the possibility of anything resembling objectivity. From his work would spring the continental philosophy of Martin Heidegger, Emmanuel Lévinas, Jürgen Habermas, and Jacques Derrida. Both schools, Everdell claims, had begun by asking what a number and a set were, and both had ended in uncertainty and the affirmation of discontinuity.

Everdell does not restrict himself to the lofty realms of higher culture. The cinema—introduced through the life and early films of Edwin S. Porter, maker of *The Great Train Robbery* of 1903—is also given a privileged place in his scheme. To be sure, motion pictures are an almost perfect example of discontinuity, since they are made up of separate frames. The problem, which to Everdell's credit he acknowledges, is that their appeal to the public that went to see them rested on the illusion of continuity, an illusion that was being perfected with every year.

By 1905 new discoveries had called every basic principle of science into question. Albert Einstein, a young German physicist living in Berne, Switzerland, had shown that only the speed of light was absolute, and that all other measurements had to be related to it. Everdell believes that in 1907, with *Les Femmes d'Alger*, Picasso went on to do for painting what Einstein had done for physics. Henceforth no observer had a privileged point of view; there no longer existed an objective reality to represent.¹⁸

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 141.

¹⁸ For an inquiry into the connections between Einstein and Picasso's early twentieth-century

Looking at August Strindberg's *Dream Play*, Arnold Schoenberg's music, James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and the abstract paintings of Vassily Kandinsky, Robert Delaunay, Piet Mondrian, and Kasimir Malevich, Everdell finds similar modernist themes. They would converge to make 1913 the apogee of early modernism, the *annus mirabilis*. That year the Armory Show introduced Americans to cubism, Stravinsky shocked Parisians with the throbbing rhythms of the *Rite of Spring*, Einstein published his general theory of relativity, Niels Bohr redefined the structure of the atom, D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* and the first volume of Proust's *A la Recherche du temps perdu* appeared, Husserl put the finishing touches on his treatise on "pure phenomenology," and Ludwig Wittgenstein persuaded Bertrand Russell that his treatise on epistemology was fatally flawed and that all truth was divisible into irreducible "atomic propositions." It was in 1913, Everdell concludes, that the modernists "found their audience, their age, and each other."¹⁹

Reading Everdell, I sometimes have the feeling that his canvas is so crowded with overlapping figures, who turn out to be in the same cities at more or less the same time, that they seem uncannily to reflect the world of randomly moving atomic particles that he sees as the paradigm for modernist culture. Perhaps that strategy is deliberate, for in the introduction (quoting the French critic Remy de Gourmont) he defines his method as one in which "ideas, like the atoms of Epicurus, hook up to each other as best they can, whatever the risk of confrontations, shocks and accidents."²⁰ In the end, aware of the problematic explanatory power of the *Zeitgeist*, a concept toward which he is drawn and with which he sometimes flirts, Everdell takes refuge in the bedrock reality of his stories "because the stories of Modernist creation and invention may in the end be the whole content and nothing but the content of the historical object called Modernism."²¹ This is a strangely defensive ending to a book that begins by confidently claiming that it is the first full history of modernism to include all the arts and sciences and to have established, without "serious anachronism," the set of ideas that lie at its center.²²

* * *

To turn to Peter Nicholls's *Modernisms* after *The First Moderns* is to be reminded of Perry Anderson's remark that what is concealed beneath the label of modernism is "a wide variety of very diverse—indeed incompatible—aesthetic practices."²³ Designed as a survey of literary "modernisms," yet with no claim to

innovations in physics and painting, see Arthur I. Miller, *Einstein, Picasso: Space, Time, and the Beauty that Causes Havoc* (New York, 2001). Miller is careful to explain in a footnote on p. 270 that he is "not claiming any cause-and-effect relation between what Einstein did in 1905 and Picasso in 1907 with the *Demoiselles*," but this may not be the impression that casual readers take away from his book. Though well intentioned and highly readable, *Einstein, Picasso* is flawed by factual errors and undocumented conjectures. For Everdell's appreciation of Miller's attempt at a parallel history of science and painting and his reservations about Miller's conclusions, see his review, "Space-Time Cubism," in the *New York Times Book Review* (May 6, 2001), p. 14.

¹⁹ Everdell, *The First Moderns*, p. 324.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 360.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 8.

²³ For the quotation from Anderson, see n. 3 above.

all-inclusiveness, Nicholls's book is divided into a series of twelve interlocked chapters that stand nicely on their own and undoubtedly will be read as such by specialists curious to see how Nicholls treats their topic (and by students to whom instructors will assign sections of the volume).

Unlike Everdell, who sees modernism as appearing in 1872, Nicholls sees the beginnings of literary modernism as "indeterminate, a matter of traces rather than of clearly defined historical moments."²⁴ His early chapters nonetheless provide a "pre-history of the various modernisms" and discuss intelligently and in detail the inevitable protagonists of such a narrative (Charles Baudelaire, Arthur Rimbaud, Stéphane Mallarmé, Jules Laforgue, Joris-Karl Huysmans, Gabriele D'Annunzio) and the movements they represented (symbolism, decadence). Nicholls never confronts directly the question of what modernism is or what its relationship might be to the avant-garde, treating the two terms (after the appearance of the futurist movement in 1909) as virtually synonymous.²⁵ Still, I suspect that readers who have the patience to make their way through Nicholls's book from start to finish will find it difficult to avoid the conclusion that modernism cannot be understood as *a* style or *a* movement, since—(however conceived)—modernism gave rise to a multiplicity of styles and a variety of movements that (in Nicholls's interpretation) are not easily reconciled with one another. What we are left with by default, then, is modernism as a *Zeitgeist* (a term Nicholls never uses), a multifaceted aesthetic, or, better yet, a sensibility, not limited to literature, that was capable of giving rise to literary styles and movements whose legacy Nicholls examines during the century that stretches from the 1840s to the 1940s.

Never wholeheartedly a *livre à thèse*, *Modernisms* nonetheless introduces themes that are pursued fitfully, like Wagnerian leitmotifs, throughout the book. One is a persisting misogyny among modernists, which Nicholls ascribes to the identification already made by Baudelaire in the 1840s (and continued by a stream of later modernist writers) of women with the emasculating effects of modernity. Nicholls is convinced that decadent writers were chiefly responsible for the negative view of femininity that had become such a deeply entrenched theme in twentieth-century European culture. In support of this claim he quotes the decadent Remy de Gourmont, who in 1902 sought to distinguish between the ways in which men and women used language. "All mimetic art," he concluded disdainfully, "is the work of women." "Such habits of thought," Nicholls claimed, "would provide a sort of deep structure for the subsequent waves of modernism."²⁶ In Nicholls's account, these habits resurface notably in the writings of the Italian futurists, the theater of the German expressionists, and the poetry and novels of the Anglo-American "Men of 1914." Pound, Eliot, and Wyndham Lewis, in particular, see a

²⁴ Peter Nicholls, *Modernisms* (Berkeley, Calif., 1995), p. 1.

²⁵ Indeed, at one point Nicholls identifies German expressionism as "an extreme statement of one of the main principles of early European avant-gardism" (p. 165). For an illuminating if sometimes torturous effort to explain why, though different from modernism, the concept of the avant-garde cannot be divorced from it, see Astradur Eysteinnsson's *The Concept of Modernism* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1990), pp. 143–78.

²⁶ Nicholls, p. 62.

modernist style, characterized by precision, the refusal of rhetoric and sentimentality, and visual imagery, as a form of “armor” against the female “drift of desire” and sensual indulgence. By doing so, Nicholls says, they put a politics of gender at the very heart of their developing preoccupation with declining forms of authority.

A second theme is the shift from the symbolist and decadent tactic of fleeing modernity to the futurist approach of embracing it and seeking total immersion in it. Nicholls sees Italian futurism as “the first definitively modernist movement.”²⁷ Its leader, F. T. Marinetti, reverses the earlier course that Baudelaire had set for modernism by setting out to collapse the tension between aesthetic and bourgeois modernity, which the French poet had made the “founding condition of avant-garde activity.”²⁸ In Nicholls’s view, the Italian futurists celebrate and seek to perpetuate the bourgeois consumer society that modernization was in the process of creating. The implication for artistic production, which the futurists were quick to understand, was that they had to oppose to the concept of the eternal and immortal what was ephemeral and fleeting. The past must be scuttled in favor of a mythic future. Nicholls argues that the futurists’ belief in an effortless Nietzschean transcendence achieved through the mechanization of human beings offered them an alternative to the masochism of the decadents. Such an aesthetic exorcised the fear of death—central to the decadent sensibility—through its exaltation of the death of others and led politically toward the affirmation of war as a form of “hygiene” and eventual alliance with fascism.

I recapitulate Nicholls’s view of Italian futurism with some discomfort because it seems to me to oversimplify Marinetti’s movement to the point of caricature.²⁹ Yet this characterization of one variant of modernist aesthetics as protofascist is so central to Nicholls’s argument that I cannot leave it without comment. It surfaces at various points in his book—most notably in the brief coda, where, in the context of a discussion of Thomas Mann’s 1947 novel *Dr. Faustus*, Nicholls comments on the increasing difficulty in the post–Second World War period of distinguishing between the “cruel aesthetics” of futurism and its progeny and a merely “negative” aesthetics, such as that embodied in Breton’s 1937 surrealist novel *L’Amour fou*, which continued to hold out the “dialectical spark of hope.”³⁰ Nicholls is attempting

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

²⁹ “While the Futurist exaltation of war was hardly unique in its time, it did exceed the forms which this took in the work of other avant-gardists. The pre-war passion for violence generally tended to result either from purely nationalist loyalties or from a more confused desire to destroy a conservative and academic culture. Futurism contained both of these elements, but the deeper rationale of its apparently irrational metaphysic was quite simply that of the market. A cruel aesthetic now sought its own reflection in the bourgeois society which it celebrated” (*ibid.*, p. 99). For a very different interpretation of futurism, which warns against reducing it to protofascism, see Walter Adamson, “Futurism, Mass Culture, and Women: The Reshaping of the Artistic Vocation,” *Modernism/Modernity* 4, no. 1 (January 1997): 89–114. Adamson takes issue with Nicholls’s claim that the deeper rationale of futurism’s metaphysic was the logic of the market and points out that, while it is true that the futurists sought to exploit various aspects of mass culture, they refused to accept the masses as “the arbiter of taste” (pp. 93–94).

³⁰ Nicholls, p. 301.

to distinguish here between two variants of modernism that Butler would be inclined to connect because of their common commitment to destruction.

Yet a third theme, and perhaps the one this book most persistently pursues, is the different ways in which twentieth-century literary modernism developed in different national contexts. Whereas Italian futurism had celebrated the new subjects offered by modernity, the Parisian cubists and the Russian futurists saw in modernity an occasion to break with figurative representation and create new forms. Shifting his focus to German-speaking Europe, Nicholls finds the expressionists indifferent to futurist “fantasies of technology and urbanism.”³¹ They were instead attracted toward a radical aesthetic because of its potential to liberate them from the political, social, and sexual repression of Wilhelmine Germany.

In a book written by a specialist in English and American literature, the Anglo-American modernists are bound to receive detailed treatment.³² Here they stand out sharply from both the Italian futurists and the German expressionists. By contrast with the futurists’ and expressionists’ determination to escape from an oppressive past, the Men of 1914³³ sought to restore the connection with a reconceptualized cultural tradition. They did so out of a sense of alienation from the flawed culture of the present and the disturbing specter of a mass culture that threatened to overwhelm them. In the writings of Pound and Eliot, we encounter a “call to order in the name of values which were explicitly anti-modern,” though they did so paradoxically “by developing literary forms which were overtly modernist.”³⁴ Whereas the expressionists had revolted against the figure of the father and the realistic aesthetics he represented, the Men of 1914 insisted on the importance of hierarchy and patriarchal respect. Rejecting the lure of the present, to which the futurists had fallen prey, art for Pound, Eliot, and Lewis became a means of giving shape to an otherwise formless and chaotic modernity that threatened the integrity of the self. Unlike the futurists and expressionists, they felt no need to dissolve the boundaries between art and life.

Nicholls contrasts the Men of 1914, who claimed superiority over a degraded and feminine culture, with a recently discovered (or rediscovered) American “feminist antimodernism” represented by Hilda Doolittle (H. D.) and Gertrude Stein. Their work, he thinks, has created a “disturbance” within our view of the canon of Anglo-American modernism.³⁵ Stein and H. D. both broke with “an object-based poetics [of the sort promoted by Pound, Eliot, and Lewis] which derives its force from a repudiation of the feminine” and sought to develop a form of writing that revealed continuities (rather than discontinuities) between the self and the world.³⁶ Stein is said to have invented another version of modernism by exploring the self-sufficiency of language and circumventing the image, thus abolishing pa-

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

³² But should it not be the “Anglo-Irish-American ‘Men of 1914’” since James Joyce is included, along with Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, and Wyndham Lewis?

³³ Nicholls here borrows a phrase first used by Wyndham Lewis, who figures prominently in this chapter.

³⁴ Nicholls, p. 167.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 197.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 202.

triarchal hierarchies and “opening the way to a continuous relation between self and other which does not depend upon Eliot’s ‘right’ word to bring a world into being.”³⁷ Yet Nicholls does not tell us what is peculiarly “modernist” about Stein’s literary experiments, more often talked about than read, leaving us to question whether “modernism,” in his view, is to be equated with the deliberately opaque and the sacrifice of communicable meaning to other ends, such as “texture,” a quality more easily captured in painting than in literature. One wonders also how, in a chapter devoted to Americans entitled “At a Tangent: Other Modernisms,” one can justify eight pages on Stein and not a word on Ernest Hemingway, John Dos Passos, and William Faulkner, novelists whose stylistic innovations left an enduring mark on twentieth-century narrative.

Nicholls shows only a passing interest in the reasons why these various modernisms diverged, an issue that is bound to attract the historian’s attention. He seems satisfied to mention futurism’s birth in the cities of Italy’s industrial north “where modernity was powerfully experienced as the everyday clash of tradition with the forces of industrial innovation”;³⁸ the interaction in prewar Paris between writers like Apollinaire and painters like Picasso and Delaunay; the relative absence of modern technology in Russia’s cities;³⁹ expressionism’s more overtly political revolt against “structures of patriarchal authority,” which were perceived as repressive and inhuman;⁴⁰ the Men of 1914’s experience of exile and cultural contrast and the lack of a powerful academic culture in America and Britain against which they would have felt the need to rebel;⁴¹ and Gertrude Stein’s “world of lesbian desire.”⁴² I have no intention of calling these explanations into question; I simply wish to note that they cry out for more detailed treatment than Nicholls is willing to give them.

Yet Nicholls’s indifference to the causes of literary modernism’s varied practices in no way diminishes the value of his book. And it is only fair to add that his real interests lie elsewhere—in the sharply contrasting attitudes that the creators of these “modernisms” took toward time (the past, the present, the future), modernity (conceived in terms of bourgeois capitalism), and the self (often compared and contrasted with Freud’s contemporaneous psychoanalytic theories). These are the poles around which the argument of Nicholls’s book revolves, and here he has many insights—some his own, others borrowed—to share with his readers. Throughout, Nicholls avoids any temptation he may have felt to locate a modernist common denominator or minimum. And his pluralistic approach to his topic becomes even more pronounced when he comes to dadaism, which, in its rejection of cultural tradition, went far beyond futurism. Nicholls rejects Peter Bürger’s well-known claim that dadaism’s novelty resided in its rejection of art as an institution; instead, he finds its true radicalism in its hatred of a culture that provided the

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 210.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 166.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 210.

bourgeoisie with its legitimating “halo of metaphysical, quasi-religious meanings.”⁴³ This hatred was all the greater and its expressions all the more extreme, he claims, because the dadaists were forced to acknowledge that the culture they hated lay within themselves. The war had revealed the official culture they had been taught to be not only worthless but also self-destructive. If the bourgeois ego was the enemy, then it must become the ultimate object of dadaist violence. Here we return to the theme, emphasized by Nicholls as well as Butler, of the divided and unstable self as the privileged topic of modernist literature.

Many readers of Nicholls’s book may find themselves a bit disoriented when they arrive at the penultimate chapter, “The Narratives of High Modernism,” where Thomas Mann’s *Der Zauberberg* (1924) is a strange omission, and Marcel Proust’s *A la recherche du temps perdu* (1913–27) is discussed en passant in the context of Virginia Woolf’s novels of the 1920s. I doubt, also, that the final chapter, “Death and Desire: The Surrealist Adventure,” will leave most readers with a sense of closure, though Nicholls argues (I think, rather unconvincingly) that surrealism represents the end of the story he set out to tell. This, he says, is because surrealism recapitulates and dramatizes the tensions running throughout the history of modernism, which Nicholls characterizes as “the flamboyant gestures of an ‘heroic’ avant-garde framed by intermittent but insistent suspicion that art’s real value lay precisely in the *failure* of its metaphysical ambitions.”⁴⁴ The word “failure” is no doubt appropriate here, when discussing the surrealist episode, but one wonders whether surrealism deserves the pride of place Nicholls gives it here as the culmination of the “modernist adventure.” One cannot help but notice that the surrealist works Nicholls discusses are today more analyzed than read. One finishes Nicholls’s book longing for a conclusion that would bring the disparate themes of his argument together and project the history of literary modernism beyond what appears to be the dead ends of Antonin Artaud’s “Theater of Cruelty” and André Breton’s *L’Amour fou*.

* * *

Nicholls avoids a definition or description of the modernist aesthetic, preferring to dwell (in keeping with his title) on the different forms literary modernism took during the century between 1840 and 1940. This is definitely not the case with the distinguished Australian art historian Bernard Smith, who, in *Modernism’s History*, sets out to chart the development of a “period style” in the visual arts of architecture, sculpture, and painting that he christens the “Formalesque.” Smith argues that we can consider *all* the arts produced during the period 1890–1960 as modes of the Formalesque, “in the same broad way that we may classify all art produced during the supremacy of the Baroque styles as modes of Baroque.”⁴⁵

Smith divides the history of modernism into three phases: an early avant-garde Formalesque (1890–1915); a mid-Formalesque (1916–45); and a late or high For-

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 227. For Bürger’s argument, see Peter Bürger, *Theorie der Avant-Garde* (Frankfurt, 1974), English translation by Michael Shaw, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis, 1984).

⁴⁴ Nicholls, p. 300.

⁴⁵ Bernard Smith, *Modernism’s History: A Study in Twentieth-Century Thought and Ideas* (New Haven, Conn., 1998), p. 9.

malesque (1945–60). Few students of modernism would find such a periodization surprising, but they might feel a moment of hesitation when Smith broadens the concept of the avant-garde, as it is usually employed, to encompass the modern era in general. Europe's first avant-garde, he claims, is to be found in the fifteenth-century artists who pursued their new artistic practices in the face of conservative opposition grounded in the traditions of crafts. The avant-garde, he thinks, can best be understood not as a small group of individuals battling for artistic reform against a philistine majority during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries but as a "metaphor" for generational change in fine art.

Though Smith is deliberately taking issue here with Peter Bürger's conception of the avant-garde as a post-World War I revolt against the institution of art, he agrees with him that the art of late nineteenth-century modernists, such as Cézanne and Gauguin, is fundamentally different from the post-1916 modernism of dada and surrealism. Pre-1916 modernism, he thinks, represents the culmination of a nineteenth-century formalist aesthetic whose theoretical roots can be traced back to Johann Winkelmann, Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Schelling, Alois Riegl, and Heinrich Wölfflin. And indeed one of Smith's most original and provocative chapters traces the emergence of the Formalesque to Kant's late eighteenth-century distinction between an autonomous and free fine art, on the one hand, and handicrafts—which were conceived by him as bound to convention and thus less creative—on the other. Kant's aesthetic, Smith says, unwittingly set in place the justification for a "European imperial project." Once reduced to crafts, the arts of non-Western people could be dismissed as primitive and kitsch and their forms appropriated, at the "behest of European desire," to be transformed (by Europeans) into fine art for the markets and museums of Europe and its colonies.

By viewing modernism from the viewpoint of its former colonies rather than from within Europe, Smith is striving to achieve a non-Eurocentric perspective on its history. He proposes seeing cubism, for example, less as a radical break with Western perspective than as a return to ways of making art that were common in Europe (and elsewhere) before the Renaissance. After centuries of exploring problems of perception left over from the Renaissance revolution in representation, Western artists now turned their gaze outside of Europe and learned (once again) how to borrow from non-Western art. For the Australian Smith, then, Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* is a quintessentially nineteenth-century painting, full of continuities with Western artistic conventions, if one is willing to seek them. Seen in this light, the major contribution of *Les Femmes d'Alger* was to establish a nineteenth-century aesthetic, the Formalesque, as the "Eurocentred hegemonic style of the twentieth century."

Though it is not always easy to follow Smith as he meanders through the Formalesque architecture and sculpture of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the destination of his argument is clear enough. The common denominator he finds in the movements he discusses is their "desire to translate European art into a global art suited to the conditions of cultural imperialism."⁴⁶ In Smith's view, this goal had been accomplished by 1900; the Formalesque had coalesced as a period style that tended to suppress meaning in the interest of form.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 103.

The Formalesque would soon be challenged, giving rise to a second stage in its history that coincides with the years between 1916 and 1945. Smith sees a radical break between the Formalesque of Edouard Manet, Cézanne, Paul Gauguin, and the Picasso of *Les Femmes d'Alger* and post-World War I modernist movements, such as dada, *Neue Sachlichkeit*, and surrealism. These war and postwar movements began to assign importance to the meanings *in* art rather than to the formal ambitions of the artists who created it. Though he concedes that the break was foreshadowed in Picasso's pre-1914 collages, he ascribes the radicalism of the new movements and their dissatisfaction with the formalism of prewar modernism to emotional stress and trauma generated by the Great War, which thus becomes a watershed in modernism's history.

Smith follows Bürger in assigning great importance to dada, and he holds that it should be conceived not as a style but as an attitude or frame of mind. In abolishing the distinction between the practice of art and the practice of life, it contained the potential for a fundamentally different conception of culture than the one that had dominated the nineteenth century and shaped early modernism. The surrealists, "perhaps the only true avant-garde of twentieth-century art," continued the subversive work of dada against the Formalesque aesthetic. Their greatest achievement was to be found in "their profound interest in accidental conjunctures, the unpremeditated juxtapositions, and surprising and unpredictable coming together of things, people and ideas."⁴⁷ Smith ascribes a similar importance to the form of German realism known as *Neue Sachlichkeit* (the new objectivity), which he feels has been unfairly minimized or marginalized by "Eurocentric critics and historians" who fail to see its impact on colonial and postcolonial art.⁴⁸ The involvement of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* artists in the moral, social, and political realms "was prophetic of the profound sense of dissidence that was to dominate the best art of the twentieth century." These artists had absorbed the lessons that non-Western art had to teach while rejecting the ideological mantle of primitivism with which it had earlier been surrounded.⁴⁹

Having discerned the dialectic operating within the twentieth-century Formalesque and pointing toward the postmodernism of our own day, Smith shifts, somewhat disconcertingly, to the Formalesque's triumph and focuses on its institutionalization. This process began with the consecration of the art of Matisse, Picasso, and Braque at the 1925 Exposition des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes held in Paris, where an exhibition entitled "Fifty Years of French Painting" presented a variety of Formalesque artists. In Soviet Russia, constructivism consolidated and legitimated the art of Russian cubism and futurism before falling prey to the displeasure of Stalin's more conservative taste and his preference for realistic modes of representation. And in Germany the Bauhaus established Formalesque architecture as the dominant period style of the twentieth century by transforming what had begun as a critique of modernity into a celebration of it. The United States, too, did its part to consecrate and institutionalize the Formalesque, espe-

⁴⁷ Ibid., pp. 135–36.

⁴⁸ Ibid., pp. 143–44.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 143.

cially through the Museum of Modern Art, founded in 1928, which acquired many of the masterpieces of the Formalesque and transferred them to the New World. By 1930 the dominance of the Formalesque was such that not even the political and nationalist pressures of that decade—expressed most vigorously in Germany and the Soviet Union, where the avant-garde art of the 1920s was formally condemned—could seriously undermine its hegemony.

In the third phase of the Formalesque, beginning in 1945 and lasting until about 1960, Smith sees the center of cultural activity as shifting from Europe to the United States. There the late Formalesque flourished in the form of abstract expressionism and evolved into an imperial culture with global pretensions that Smith, following Serge Guilbaut, identifies with the NATO alliance, American imperialism, and the politics of the cold war.⁵⁰ Contrary to the influential views of the American art critic Clement Greenberg, Smith sees abstract expressionism not as a continuation of French modernism but as an attempt to escape from the dead end of the Formalesque by integrating the insights of dada, the *Neue Sachlichkeit*, surrealism, and the Mexican muralists Diego Rivera, José Orozco, and David Siqueiros. But Smith acknowledges that it was Greenberg's apolitical and formalistic interpretation of abstract expressionism as a creative extension of cubism that prevailed in the conditions of the late 1940s and on into the 1950s, as the cold war began to shape cultural politics throughout the West. Though Smith acknowledges that it would be naive to suggest a causal connection between Churchill's "Iron Curtain" speech in March 1946 and Greenberg's promotion of Jackson Pollock's paintings as an abstract alternative to Soviet realism, he finds that it would be even more naive to ignore the "homology."⁵¹ Greenberg's interpretation of abstract expressionism, he claims, set the terms for the coming American cultural politics, just as clearly as Churchill's foreshadowed (and helped to bring into being) the polarization of the Cold War.

Smith has given us a history of modernism in the visual arts that confronts, with admirable straightforwardness, many of the issues I raise at the beginning of this essay and that seeks to view modernism from a worldwide (rather than Eurocentric) perspective. Modernism (in the guise of the Formalesque) is identified as a "period style" and a critique of modernity, a stage of civilization condemned by modernists as "banal" or "life-threatening."⁵² Modernism's theoretical foundations are located in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, above all in Kant's distinction between the fine and practical arts. Smith locates modernism's "dynamic" in its "drive towards a universalising abstraction, which was immanent within the Formalesque style." This style was the result of an increasingly intense "interaction between Europe and the arts of the world over which it then exercised a global

⁵⁰ Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War*, trans. A. Goldhammer (Chicago, 1983).

⁵¹ Smith compares the relationship between abstract art and the cold war to the one that prevailed between the Counter Reformation and the Baroque (Smith, p. 252).

⁵² "Modernism does not feel at home in Modernity. Its creative drive is constructed from components drawn from an idealised past or a utopianised future, not from Modernity's present, which it finds banal or life-threatening" (ibid., p. 12).

suzerainty.”⁵³ The period of modernism’s dominance is specified as the years between 1890 and 1960. The avant-garde is identified as the product of generational change operating within the history of modern art that can be traced back as far as the Renaissance. Successive avant-gardes represent waves of modernism, working out the immanent logic of its aesthetic and artistic forms.⁵⁴

Smith’s book also has the merit of trying to clarify the vexed issue of the relationship between modernism and postmodernism. Central to Smith’s vision of modernism is the contention that it must be understood, after its creation during the years between 1890 and 1914 and its institutionalization in the 1920s, as a “universalist” and “imperializing” project that transformed itself after 1945 into a “syncretic Eurusan” process. Resisting the triumph of the Formalesque after 1916, in his vision, were three movements that could trace their origins to the trauma of the Great War: dada, surrealism, and *Neue Sachlichkeit*. Out of the engagement and interaction of these four modes of modernism has “emerged the hybridized, fragmented art of the so-called postmodern world.” But for Smith, postmodernism is “nothing but the mask which twentieth-century modernism adopted in its struggle with the institutionalised Formalesque. It is high time that it was recognized for what it is: a twentieth-century modernism galvanised into action by the new face of Modernity revealed during the Great War of 1914–18.”⁵⁵

* * *

Lamenting the failure of every modernist critique of modernity, which he claims ends inevitably in its celebration, Smith allows himself to imagine that “a renewed avant-garde may appear again, perhaps as the strange child of cultural imperialism, and in another part of the globe.”⁵⁶ In his *Farewell to an Idea*, T. J. Clark offers no such hope.⁵⁷ Indeed, the picture he paints of our present cultural situation is infinitely bleaker. If we find the history of modernism so difficult to understand, he says, it is because the “modernist past is a ruin, the logic of whose architecture we do not remotely grasp.” This is not because we have entered a new age, but because the condition of modernity that modernism prophesied and deplored has finally arrived. Postmodernism, Clark says, mistakes the ruins of modernism for the ruins of modernity, not seeing that we are living in the period of modernity’s triumph. Modernism is thus “our antiquity; the only one we have.”⁵⁸

Clark’s book takes up in an intensely personal way an issue that remains implicit or peripheral in the other books I have considered here: the relationship of modernism to politics and, more specifically, the relationship of modernism to social-

⁵³ Ibid., p. 11.

⁵⁴ “Generational change cannot fully explain a true period style. Such a style would seem to be controlled rather in its duration by the time it takes . . . for the immanent potentials within the new style to work themselves through to exhaustion” (ibid., p. 264).

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 345.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 12.

⁵⁷ Except perhaps in its final two sentences: “The myth [of social revolution?] will survive its historic defeat. The present is purgatory, not a permanent travesty of heaven”; T. J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (New Haven, Conn., 1999), p. 408.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 3.

ism. Indeed, the openly autobiographical quality of this work accounts for its indisputable power—and its sometimes irritating limitations. Clark is painfully aware that he is writing in the direct aftermath of the collapse of the Berlin Wall. Given the fact that modernism disappeared approximately at the same time as socialism,⁵⁹ he wonders whether there might not be some relationship between these two movements. To be sure, Clark is well aware that the modernists were often sharply critical of the working-class movement's materialism, its reverence for the masses, and its belief in progress. But could not this have been because the modernists were themselves engaged in a struggle to imagine a form of modernity radically different from the one that capitalism had given us? Was not modernism "the shadow" of socialism? And if this were true, perhaps modernism could not exist without the expectation of capitalism's disappearance. The possibility of revolution would therefore become a precondition for the existence of modernism.⁶⁰

The history of socialism and its failures, then, might contain clues to an understanding of the history of modernism. Clark believes that it was the working-class movement's conservatism—its moderation, its compromises with the system that it professed to hate, and its inability to provide a real alternative to capitalism, expressed in its disdain for anarchism—that drove the modernists toward extremism, a lack of connection to the realities of the world in which they lived, and what Clark calls their "weightlessness."⁶¹ I am not altogether sure what Clark means by "weightlessness," but he clearly feels that the shortcomings and concessions of socialism faced the modernists with a series of false choices between idealism and materialism, elitism and democracy, the pursuit of esoteric cults and populism, and that this in turn led toward increasingly desperate attempts to escape from the "disenchantment of the world."⁶² Clark makes no bones about his sympathy for the efforts of the avant-gardes to imagine a world different from the one that capitalism had created, but he is equally honest in confessing that these efforts lacked the social and epistemological foundation necessary for their success. "The counterfeit nature of [modernism's] dream of freedom is written into the dream's realization."⁶³ One can understand why some of Clark's friends, who read parts of

⁵⁹ Clark appears to mean by "socialism" revolutionary (or Marxist) socialism.

⁶⁰ Fifteen years earlier, Anderson (n. 3 above) made a similar argument in his critique of Marshall Berman's *All That Is Solid Melts into Air*: Anderson went on to observe that it was only when early twentieth-century modernism lost its vitality that the ideology and cult of modernism were born. "The conception [of modernism] itself is scarcely older than the 1950s, as a widespread currency" (p. 108).

⁶¹ Clark, *Farewell to an Idea*, p. 9.

⁶² "Modernity' means contingency. It points to a social order which has turned from the worship of ancestors and past authorities to the pursuit of a projected future—of goods, pleasures, freedoms, forms of control over nature, or infinities of information. This process goes along with a great emptying and sanitizing of the imagination. Without ancestor-worship, meaning is in short supply—'meaning' here meaning agreed-on and instituted forms of value and understanding, implicit orders, stories and images in which a culture crystallizes its sense of the struggle with the realm of necessity and the reality of pain and death. The phrase Max Weber borrowed from Schiller, 'the disenchantment of the world,' still seems to me to sum up this side of modernity best" (*ibid.*, p. 7).

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

his manuscript before its publication, found its tone “melancholic.”⁶⁴ There is a sense here, in Clark’s introduction, of a utopia gone sour and of dreams destroyed. One feels that what follows will be tortured and torturous.

Clark begins his history of modernist painting with Jacques-Louis David’s 1793 *Death of Marat*. Given the usual periodization of modernism, this may seem idiosyncratic, or even deliberately provocative, but it follows quite logically from Clark’s conviction that the fate of modernism was inextricably linked to the fate of revolution. Clark makes a strong, and heavily documented, case for the political meaning of David’s painting and its relationship to the Jacobin Terror and the mobilization of the sansculottes. Yet, contrary to what one might assume, he is not arguing—or not *only* arguing—that the events of September 1793 provided an occasion for the completion and exhibition of Marat’s painting. As he well understands, such a view would not differentiate David from early painters like Peter Paul Rubens or Diego Velázquez. No, Clark is after something different; he claims that David felt the need to create form out of politics and, further, that the traces of politics are there waiting to be discovered in the form he made. Contrary to the art of his predecessors, David’s *Marat* could not transcend the political circumstances that gave rise to it; David was incapable of purging those circumstances of the “dross of contingency” and raising them to the level of allegory. This failure, according to Clark, is what makes David a modernist.

For Clark, David’s painting is about the political struggle over Marat’s legacy. David understood that the representation of Marat was highly political and that at stake in his work was the ability of the Jacobins to appropriate Marat for their own revolutionary purposes. He sensed in the cult of Marat a liturgy and ritual in which the truths of the revolution could become flesh. His task, as he conceived it, was to “freeze” the Revolution by transforming it into an image that the people could grasp. Clark never calls into question David’s sincerity; he presents him sympathetically as a dedicated (if perplexed) Jacobin. But from his perspective, writing as a disillusioned Marxist at the end of the twentieth century, Clark naturally sees the cult of Marat more darkly and complexly as a point of intersection between a short-term phenomenon—the manipulation of the masses by the Jacobin elite—and a longer-term process: dechristianization. He is even prepared to view the cult of Marat as “a rear-guard action against the loss of the sacred,” though he quickly concedes that here too its forms were “unstable and ambivalent.”⁶⁵

When Clark is looking at a painting and explaining what he sees, reading him is pure pleasure.⁶⁶ But Clark is not satisfied to describe; he is always in search of the political. And here he finds it in David’s inability to represent the Revolution

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 13.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 31.

⁶⁶ Clark’s perceptive eyes alight upon many aspects of David’s painting that a casual viewer might miss: the fragility and insubstantiality of Marat’s body; the abstractness of his wound; the blood coming out of it, “as impalpable as thread”; the face placed at a ninety-degree angle where it is incapable of returning our gaze; the estranging effect of the turban; the wisps of hair on Marat’s forehead; the heaviness of his eyelids; the delicateness of his mouth; the five-livre *assignat* (note of Jacobin currency) balanced delicately on Marat’s barely legible letter, which was interpreted by one contemporary viewer as a sign of Marat’s poverty, hence incorruptibility.

in the man Marat and his reliance on writing instead of figuration to convey the work's messages. These characteristics suggest to Clark that modernity in the form of contingency has entered David's image and that painting is now being forced to include the "tendentiousness of politics in its picture of the world."⁶⁷ Clark is struck by the emptiness of the upper half of David's canvas; where a representation of the people should be, there is nothing. He sees this as "putting paid to the viewer's last vestige of certainty as to the picture's representation logic";⁶⁸ but he also extracts from this void an important characteristic of modernism that will persistently recur: the "shame" of technique asserts itself when the picture instead needs truth and seems on the verge of achieving it.⁶⁹

Clark's second episode from a history of modernism catapults us a century, from September 1793 to January 1892, when Camille Pissarro's painting, *Two Young Peasant Women*, was first exhibited. Clark realizes that this "ominous leap" in his history of a century is likely to surprise, and perhaps to disorient, his readers. He explains it by reminding them of his previous books on those aspects of the story of the French nineteenth-century painting that he is telling here: Courbet's turn toward politics in 1850 and the "pattern of risk and inevitability in paintings of Haussmann's Paris."⁷⁰ But he is not about to leave the matter with the "accident" of these earlier publications and his unwillingness to return to previously treated themes. "I want Pissarro and anarchism to stand for the nineteenth century's best thoughts on such topics. I believe they do stand for them. The true representativeness of 1891 and Pissarro is one of my book's major claims."⁷¹

One therefore approaches Clark's discussion of Pissarro's painting with a sense of anticipation, and some surprise. The picture itself, on first viewing at the beginning of the chapter, does not seem capable of supporting such a formidable claim. Clark himself admits that it is in some respects a failure and hard to appreciate fully, except under exceptional circumstances—which the ordinary visitor to the Metropolitan Museum, where it hangs, is unlikely to encounter.⁷² Why then is

⁶⁷ Clark, *Farewell to an Idea*, p. 38.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

⁶⁹ "The point I am making, ultimately, is that technique in modernism is a kind of shame: something that asserts itself as the truth of picturing, but always against picturing's best and most desperate efforts. It asserts itself when the picture most wants truth, and thinks truth can finally be materialized—imaged as part of a world. Modernists in the early twentieth century sometimes spoke of what they were doing as attempting 'truth to materials.' Perfect misrecognition. For 'materials' in modernism are always the site of untruth, or the site where questions of truth and lie disappear into the black hole of practice" (*ibid.*, p. 48).

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 12. For Clark's earlier books on these topics, see *The Absolute Bourgeois: Artists and Politics in France, 1848–51* (London, 1973), *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution* (London, 1985), and *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* (New York, 1985).

⁷¹ Clark, *Farewell to an Idea*, p. 12.

⁷² "If I chose there [in the second chapter] to focus on one of Pissarro's many 'failures,' that was because I believe that precisely in failing his modernism attained its highest aesthetic dignity. . . . The courting of failure and indescribability is one main key to what that [modernist] culture was. Taking indescribability as an invitation not to look, or not to look closely, is truly to get modernism wrong" (*ibid.*, p. 164). For a discussion of the conditions under which *Two Young Peasant Women* needs to be viewed, see p. 66.

it worthy of eighty-two densely packed pages? One reason could be that Clark is seeking a way of discussing the transition from impressionism to symbolism, a process in which the materialist Pissarro felt himself on the defensive, as the Symbolists reimagined the relationship of the pictorial sign to the material world and moved toward an aesthetic that Pissarro perceived as “mystical.” Or perhaps Clark is drawn to Pissarro because it allows him to talk about the development of the Parisian art market and the artist’s surrender to the imperatives of pictorial profit making in late 1891. Yet another reason might be that Clark is fascinated by the dilemma Pissarro faced in the composition of this painting. Aware that he was drawing near the end of his career, the sixty-two-year-old artist intended to revisit the peasant setting of his earlier work yet was determined at all costs to avoid the impression of sentimentality, prettiness, and portentousness, qualities he abhorred. Clark discusses all these aspects of the painting, but what clearly matters to him most is the sympathy with which Pissarro was able to capture the pastoral world in which these girls lived. Modernism, he thinks, had something invested in peasant life because it offered a last-ditch stand against the disenchantment of the world. Thus, capturing that world, even if it involved some degree of idealization or sentimentalism, was a way of “keeping a dream of humanity alive.”⁷³

We are thus back once again to politics, and in this case to what Clark understands as Pissarro’s anarchism. He believes that *Two Young Peasant Women* was shaped by the political moment when it was painted—a moment, just before the anarchist Ravachol hurled his first bomb, when armed struggle between the French state and its left-wing enemies had become a real possibility. He thinks, furthermore—based on what appears to me to be inconclusive evidence—that Pissarro was sympathetic to the idea of an armed struggle against the bourgeoisie. Whatever Pissarro’s views at the time and later, it is clear that Clark admires the consistency of the anarchists in their opposition to capitalism. In contrast to the Social Democrats and Marxists, they alone “had the measure of the bourgeois beast in the late nineteenth century.” The anarchists’ “rhetoric of horror and denunciation was the only one adequate to the new color of events.” In rejecting the insights of anarchism, Clark believes, socialism deprived itself of the imagination needed to confront the “horror” it faced and “the worse to come.”⁷⁴

Yet what does all this have to do with *Two Young Peasant Women*? What is anarchist, and at the same time modernist, about this painting? Clark’s answer to this question is ingenious, if elusive. Anarchism, he submits, is a theory of the compatibility of freedom and order. An anarchist painter would therefore seek the reconciliation of freedom and order in his pictures. For a painter, sensation is that moment of contact between the subject and its surroundings; it is through the representation of sensation that freedom and order can be shown to coexist. Yet Clark hastens to add that when he says “sensation” he does want it to be understood in a simple empirical way; sensation is always shaped by a preexisting pattern of figuration. The anarchist painter’s task, then, is to salvage the notion of uniqueness

⁷³ Ibid., p. 71.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 103.

and anarchist freedom while recognizing that individuals can only be understood in relationship to a community—just as iron filings in a magnetic field are unique and yet at the same time respond to the movement of the others. Individualism thus stands reconciled with reciprocity. Taking his departure from a comment by Clement Greenberg, Clark puts his point like this: “For an anarchist, contrast and harmony, or salience and equality, are qualities deeply intertwined. They will only be discovered as faces of one other.”⁷⁵

Entrusted with these generalizations, we are left to imagine for ourselves concrete ways in which the politics of anarchism might have affected the painting of *Two Young Peasant Women*. Meanwhile, Clark glides smoothly off into a stimulating discussion of the impact of Seurat’s *anarchisant* influence on Pissarro (“the encounter with Seurat taught him, if he needed to know, the power of the negative in modernism”);⁷⁶ Pissarro’s problems with the art dealer Charles Durant-Ruel and his surrender to the pressures of the market (was not *Two Young Peasant Women* an attempt to speak a language that the market would not be able to convert into its own preferred individualistic terms?); Pissarro’s relationship to the pastoralism of Claude Monet and Jean-François Millet (Pissarro’s grudging acceptance of his affinity with Monet and his dependence on Millet); an intriguing suggestion (but how could it be more than this?) that Pissarro’s representation of two peasant girls talking tête-à-tête rather than gossiping in a group of women or working constitutes a notable break with the nineteenth-century stereotype of agricultural labor promoted by Millet and others; and a splendid finale in which Clark attempts, I think successfully, to elucidate *Two Young Peasant Women* through the lens of a lecture the young socialist and symbolist Henry van de Velde gave in Brussels in February 1891 on the topic of peasants in painting. Never neglecting his central theme for long, Clark ends this long and richly embroidered chapter by telling us that what he admires most deeply in Pissarro’s painting is the “careful negotiation [the painter makes] between the qualities of a modernist past and those of a possible modernist future.”⁷⁷ To the untrained eye, even after Clark’s prolonged tutorial, the qualities of the former are more obvious in this painting than those of the latter.

From Pissarro’s *Two Young Peasant Women* of 1891, Clark passes to Cézanne’s series of *Bathers* on which the artist worked between 1895 and 1904. He sees these paintings as reflecting a positivist vision of the world that parallels in interesting ways Freud’s contemporary efforts to create a scientific psychology—not the twentieth-century Freud, but the “Freud before Freud,” the Freud of the mid- and late 1890s, “still struggling to think of the unconscious in a [positivist] language borrowed from [Hermann von] Helmholtz and [Gustav] Fechner.”⁷⁸ “Modernism and materialism go together,” Clark tells us, introducing a theme that was implicit in the previous chapter and that runs throughout his book.⁷⁹ This, I assume, is meant to remind us of the deep, and often neglected, roots that modernism had in

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 107.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 110.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 132.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 142.

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 139.

the nineteenth and perhaps even in the eighteenth century. Clark finds in these *Bather* paintings evidence of Cézanne's (unconscious?) desire to transform erotic fantasy into material images of bodies, bodies merging into and erasing the boundaries between one another.

But Clark goes on to argue that what makes these pictures great—what justifies their inclusion in the modernist canon, a canon about which he clearly feels uneasy from a political point of view—is that Cézanne pushes to the limit and probes the limits of the very system of representation he is employing. This is what makes these paintings so disturbing. There is something cold, inhuman, or nonhuman about the bodies they portray. And Clark connects this quality to another nineteenth-century tradition, the fantasy of mechanized life as embodied in the marionette (or, one might add, the robot). Modernism, he concludes, “would not anger its opponents in the way it seems to if it did not so flagrantly assert the beautiful as its ultimate commitment. And if it did not repeatedly discover the beautiful as nothing but mechanism, nothing but matter dictating (dead) form.”⁸⁰

Moving forward in time, Clark expresses his agreement with the widely accepted view that French cubism constituted a critical moment for an understanding of the development of modernism in the visual arts. It was then, between 1907 and 1912, and above all in Picasso's work of that period, that modernism “focused on its means and purposes with a special vengeance. The idiom that resulted became *the* idiom of visual art in the twentieth century; Picasso's and Braque's way of organizing a picture was borrowed, adapted, or fought against by almost all subsequent art, and very often taken as the still point of modernism—the set of works in which modernity found itself a style.”⁸¹

But what was cubism about? What was at stake in the paintings Picasso did during this period? Clark rejects the story of continuity in modern art told by what he calls the “modernist critics” (Herbert Read, Clement Greenberg, Michael Fried, William Rubin): the passing of the modernist flame from Manet to Monet to Seurat, to Matisse, to the Picasso of *Les Femmes d'Alger* (1907), to the cubist Picasso of *Ma Jolie* (1911). Nor will he have any truck with the notion that the novelty of cubism lies in its abandonment of one-point perspective (avant-garde painting had already been doing that for two or three generations) or the view of semioticians that cubism should be thought of as a new language. Clark thinks that we can best understand the “overweening ambition” of Picasso's cubist paintings of 1911–12 if we see them in terms of their *failure*: that is, their inability to achieve the remaking of representation that was their goal.

Cubism, then, is about painting “at the end of its tether.”⁸² It is about the failure of an experiment in representation. It did not present a new description of the world that corresponded to the new physics or philosophy.⁸³ “It was a counterfeit

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 167. Here Clark seems to be returning to an argument about modernism first made by the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset in his 1925 essay, “The Dehumanization of Art,” available in English translation in José Ortega y Gasset, *The Dehumanization of Art and Other Essays on Art, Culture, and Literature* (Princeton, N.J., 1968), pp. 1–54.

⁸¹ Clark, *Farewell to an Idea*, p. 175.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 187.

⁸³ “Painting rarely dines well on the leavings of science. Here [in Cubism] what it feeds on is mainly itself” (*ibid.*, p. 215).

of such a description—an imagining of what kinds of things might happen in the means of Western painting if such a new description arose.” The attempt to create artistic illusion, then, is the concept around which Clark’s interpretation revolves. Cubism expresses “an immense, unstoppable relish at putting the means of illusionism through their paces, making them generate impossible objects, pressing them on to further and further feats of intimation and nuance—all for the purpose of showing the ways they might form a different constellation, the ways they could possibly be recast, in some overall recasting of social practice.”⁸⁴ Yet the means of illusionism—the devices available to the painter—are not up to the task Picasso set himself.

For Clark, then, high cubism—the cubism of 1911–12—represents an exploration into what likeness and illusion would look like in a situation where all versions of such a pursuit have proven impossible to sustain. And when he says that there is something counterfeit about these paintings, I think that he is arguing that these “classical” cubist works are unable to deliver the revolutionary description of the physical world of objects they promise. How else to interpret the final lines of his Picasso chapter, where he says that the practices of cubism “are not thrown up by any particular descriptive task”? “They do not reach out beyond themselves to a world where facility is no longer the issue, and pure endless inventiveness . . . is subject to the tests of practice. They are not sharable. Anyone can acquire the habits [of cubism]—the history of twentieth-century painting is largely made up of people acquiring them—nobody will ever discover what the habits are for.”⁸⁵ Again, unable to determine modernist meaning, we are left to admire modernist technique.

If cubism failed, it was at least in part, Clark thinks, because there had been no “overall recasting of social practice” in the France of the Third Republic.⁸⁶ This was clearly not the case in the setting of Clark’s next chapter on Kasimir Malevich and his disciple El Lissitzky: revolutionary Russia in the throes of the Civil War. Here a party of left-wing revolutionaries had seized power in the name of Marxism and were determined to recast social practices at any cost. This situation offers a rare opportunity for Clark to explore the relationship between modernism and socialism; at the same time, it presents daunting challenges. For, as anyone who has studied Malevich will attest, his ideas and his art are maddeningly elusive and his writings obscure to the point of opacity. They vanish like his black squares into infinite space. Clark himself refers to Malevich’s madness on more than one occasion.⁸⁷

Clark appears to be simultaneously appalled and exhilarated by the policies of War Communism. He sees it as a combination of “apocalypse and utopia” and argues that it was this state of “indecidability”—by which I understand he means that it was neither fully one nor the other—that gave rise to early Soviet modern-

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 215.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 223.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 215.

⁸⁷ On other occasions, Clark refers to Malevich as a nihilist. I am not sure that he was either. For my own interpretation of Malevich’s art, see Robert Wohl, *A Passion for Wings: Aviation and the Western Imagination, 1908–1918* (New Haven, Conn., 1994), pp. 158–78.

ism.⁸⁸ While in no way neglecting the horrors of the Civil War and the crimes of the Bolsheviks, Clark writes with sympathy of the way in which the Bolsheviks' "fantasy of dictatorship" coincided for a fleeting historical moment with the Soviet avant-garde's conception of its own historical mission. His analysis of a 1920 propaganda poster by Malevich's disciple El Lissitzky, which dominates the chapter, leads him to the conclusion that the artist sincerely believed at the time that Malevich's modernist language had the makings of a new kind of signification. El Lissitzky's task, as he saw it, was to say something in this new artistic language that was unsettling and "weird," yet at the same time "graspable in an instant" to the man in the street.⁸⁹ The challenge was to make the viewer sense the contradiction between the signifiers in his poster without thrusting him or her into an abyss of noncomprehension. Clark sees El Lissitzky's dilemma as one that all modernists had to face: how to strike a balance between novelty of expression and incomprehensibility.

The difference, though, was that Soviet avant-garde artists could briefly believe that they might have some role in transforming the social world within which culture was being interpreted. In the early 1920s they could view themselves as interpreters of the Bolshevik Revolution to the masses. Yet such a project was based on a deep misunderstanding of Bolshevik objectives and was doomed from the outset to failure. Malevich himself is a good example. His quirky modernism, no matter how one defines it, was in stark contrast with the more practical goals of the leaders of the new Soviet state. Writing in 1920, during the most extreme phase of War Communism, Malevich distanced himself from the Bolsheviks: "If [Marxist] materialism were content to build scaffolding on which to ascend to the nebulae and transform itself into so much mist in the turning of the great cosmic vortex—well, that would be a point in its favor, in my view; but as long as it presents itself simply as a 'fight for survival' or a struggle with Nature, all its victories strike me as meaningless."⁹⁰ This was not a sentiment likely to find much favor with Marxist revolutionaries whose immediate objectives were much more down-to-earth than an ascension to the nebulae.

When Clark reaches Jackson Pollock and the end of the 1940s, one senses that he has finally reached the heart of his topic. His chapter, entitled "The Unhappy Consciousness," revolves around two photographs by Cecile Beaton, both published in *Vogue* in 1951, that show models in evening dresses posing in front of paintings by Pollock—*Number 1, 1950* and *Autumn Rhythm*. Clark is fully aware of the danger of interpreting a work of art in terms of the use that people later made of it. He nonetheless believes that what happens to a painting once it enters

⁸⁸ Clark, *Farewell to an Idea*, p. 242.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 250.

⁹⁰ Quoted by Clark in *Farewell to an Idea*, pp. 278–79. I might add here that I am unconvinced by Clark's argument that "where it matters" Malevich was a materialist (p. 278). "The earth," Clark claims, "has not been and never will be abandoned in a Malevich, because painting, whether it likes it or not, *is* earth" (p. 278). I am more persuaded by Clark's earlier comment that "abstract art was late-Romantic. It thought that painting, of all the artforms, was best equipped to move signification from the realm of the discursive into that of the symbol—where symbols would simply make or be meaning, with meaning inhering in them, as substance or essence" (p. 253).

public life is far from being irrelevant to its meaning.⁹¹ Drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin's essay "Discourse in the Novel," Clark argues that context *is* text. Works of art always anticipate answers. In modern circumstances, they often anticipate readings and misreadings. They may also attempt to undermine the ground of any possible misreading. Clark suggests that Pollock was engaged in exactly such a subversive operation in the abstract paintings he did between 1947 and 1950.

Why do these *Vogue* photographs matter? Because they lead Clark to a larger point that goes far beyond Pollock yet at the same time throws light on the reception of Pollock's abstract paintings. He tells us that modernism was doomed from the beginning because to contest bourgeois hegemony meant appropriating representational codes that already existed in bourgeois culture and had earlier been dismissed as primitive, childish, deviant, demented, and chaotic—in short, marginal. These topics provided modernism with rich artistic material, but none could seriously challenge the cultural domination of the bourgeoisie, who possessed images and practices far more powerful and varied—and more relevant to everyday life—than anything the modernists could imagine. Moreover, bourgeois culture—as shown in the *Vogue* photographs—proved that it was capable of assimilating marginal themes and the irrational. Clark believes that the "organizing powers" of bourgeois culture embraced and celebrated Pollock because it sensed the need for "a more convincing account of the bodily, the sensual, the liberated, in order to extend—perhaps to perfect—their colonization of everyday life." Hence the realization of the modernist nightmare: no matter how urgent the impulse had been to revolutionize aesthetic practice and move art into uncharted areas of experience, all that resulted from a century's experimentation was a "stiffening of the old aesthetic mix."⁹² Clark thinks that Pollock suspected this about his own work and incorporated this depressing insight into his painting.

Yet, while consigning Pollock to his mounting list of modernist failures, Clark expresses a great admiration for the American painter's work, especially the abstract paintings done between 1947 and 1950. What he appreciates about these pictures is their contradictory quality. These contradictions "are the ones that any abstract painting will encounter as long as it is done within bourgeois society, in a culture that cannot grasp—for all its wish to do so—the social reality of the sign." Abstract painting sets out to eliminate nature and end art's relationship to the world of things. It places its faith in the sign, in the medium. But it soon discovers that its goal is impossible, that nature refuses to go away. Thus it inevitably returns to the body, as Pollock did in his post-1950 paintings. The dream of a truly abstract art—an art without recognizable objects—turns out to be a chimaera. This observation leads Clark to one of the central themes of his book: "For the grounds are lacking on which the great contraries of bourgeois art—its claim to Nature and its wish for the free play of the signifier—could be dialectically reconciled." Capitalism will always prove capable of assimilating nonfigurative painting and will find means of incorporating it as decoration into "a new order

⁹¹ "One main hypothesis of this book has been that painting's public life is very far from being extrinsic to it, *ex post facto*" (ibid., p. 305).

⁹² Ibid., p. 308.

of pleasures.” Ironically, the art that grew out of resistance to the capitalist system will become a sign of its tolerance and richness and a demonstration of the “room it has made for more of the edges and underneath of everyday life.”⁹³ Abstract paintings like Pollock’s, Clark remarks, with more than a touch of bitterness, have become the favored backdrop for receptions, balls, and fund-raising.

Still, determined to salvage the meaning of abstract expressionism as an ending to modernism’s history, Clark offers a defense of its practices, though not one likely to appeal to many of its admirers (not to mention its purchasers). “To what extent,” he asks, “does Abstract Expressionism really belong, at the deepest level—the level of language, of procedure, of presuppositions about world-making—to the [American] bourgeoisie who paid for it and took it on their travels?”⁹⁴

One way it belongs, he submits, is by its vulgarity. Clark claims that what sets abstract expressionism off, among other modernisms, is its engagement with the vulgar as opposed to the “popular” or “low.” By “vulgarity,” he means a betrayal by those who ought to be in the vanguard of good taste. Nineteenth-century modernism had sought—by a recourse to simplicity, to directness, to naiveté, to sentiment and sentimentality—to avoid the pathos of bourgeois taste; abstract expressionism reveled in it. “It seems in search of the false underlying the vehement: where the point is that cheap vehemence, or easy delectation, are what painting now is—the only values, the only forms of individuality, that it can stage without faking.”⁹⁵

What appears a promising observation is quickly given a Marxist twist. Abstract expressionism is “the style of a certain [American] petty bourgeoisie’s aspiration to aristocracy, to totalizing cultural power. It is the art of that moment [following the Second World War] when the petty bourgeoisie thinks it can speak (and its masters allow it to speak) the aristocrat’s claim to individuality. Vulgarity is the form of that aspiration.”⁹⁶ For Clark, Hans Hoffmann is the epitome of this vulgarity: “A good Hoffmann is tasteless to the core—tasteless in its invocations of Europe, tasteless in its mock religiosity, tasteless in its Color-by-Technicolor, its winks and nudges toward landscape format, its Irving Stone title, and the cloying demonstrativeness of its handling.” As if this invective were not sufficient, Clark takes us even deeper into the “dirty secret” of the American middle class. Hoffmann’s paintings show the vulgar world his clients inhabit in their heart of hearts. They give us a picture of the interiors in which they live, “the visceral-cum-spiritual upholstery of the rich.”⁹⁷

At this point, with the pages left in the book rapidly dwindling, it would be understandable if the reader surmised that Clark was about to dismiss abstract expressionism as a form of worthless kitsch created for a dying class, a depressing coda to his history of modernism that plays itself out in the citadel of capitalism. We sense that modernism is about to end with a whimper rather than a bang. But

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 365.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 374.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 382.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 389.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 397.

how then to account for the title of this chapter: “In Defense of Abstract Expressionism”? Is the apparent irony implicit in this title intended to be at the reader’s expense, or is it some kind of bitter comment on the cultural situation in which we find ourselves as the century turns? We have no choice here but to take Clark at face value when he tells us that his title is not meant to be taken in either of these senses. Abstract expressionism, he thinks, was best when it was most vulgar, because it was then, between 1947 and 1962, that it conveyed most honestly and fully the American petty bourgeoisie’s absurd obsession with individualism.⁹⁸ “Absurd,” presumably, because individualism was an aristocratic value that was banished from the disenchanting world of the late twentieth-century petty bourgeoisie. What we are given, then, is a strange “defense” of abstract expressionism, but one that meshes smoothly with one of Clark’s central themes: the fraught relationship between modernism and the bourgeoisie.⁹⁹

* * *

I am aware that I am being unfair in juxtaposing books that were written for very different audiences with different points of reference and different historiographical questions in mind. I have approached these works ruthlessly, like a strip miner, looking for ore that I can quickly cart away. I run the risk, of course, of distorting complex arguments without necessarily achieving my more focused goals. Nonetheless, I think that my survey of these five books has put me in a position to provide some answers to the questions that I posed at the beginning of this essay.

What is modernism? To what does the term refer? Butler uses it to denote a new aesthetic language that first appeared clearly in the late nineteenth century and that is characterized by a shift from communication of some external reality to one that lies inside the artist. He thus sees all forms of early modernism as essentially “expressionist.”¹⁰⁰ For Everdell, modernism denotes a long-term change in the *Zeitgeist* which he feels confident in tracing to 1872, when Richard Dedekind rethought the nature of mathematical continuity and launched the revolution in thought that would give rise to our digital age. “We cannot help seeing the objects of our knowledge as discrete and discontinuous . . . Everything from the gene and the quantum to the image and the phenomenological *epoché* defies the insistence on evolution, fields, seamlessness, and *Entwicklung* to be found everywhere in nineteenth-century thought.”¹⁰¹ Nicholls appears to see modernism as a multifaceted aesthetic that was capable of giving rise to many different types of literary movements. He claims to find traces of the modernist aesthetic in the mid-nineteenth century, but the first literary movement he identifies as “truly modernist”—futurism—was founded in 1909. The art historian Bernard Smith sees modernism as characterized by an immanent drive toward abstraction; he bids us to consider

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 403.

⁹⁹ For a very different, and much more positive, view of this relationship, see Peter Gay, “Modernism,” in *Pleasure Wars* (n. 1 above), pp. 192–229.

¹⁰⁰ Butler (n. 6 above), p. 279.

¹⁰¹ Everdell, *The First Moderns* (n. 14 above), p. 351.

it as a “period style,” not unlike the Romanesque or the Baroque; and he further claims that all art produced between 1890 and 1960 should be regarded as modes of the modernist aesthetic he calls “Formalesque.” Clark eschews the task of definition;¹⁰² nonetheless, he lets us understand that he intends to equate modernism with “modern art” and suggests that he wants modernism to emerge “as a distinctive patterning of mental and technical possibilities.”¹⁰³

All these approaches shed important light on one or another aspect of modernism, and I have learned much from them. But what I find lacking throughout these books is any consistent attempt to situate modernism in terms of other forms of culture and to present a clear picture of the dialectical process of reaction and counterreaction through which modernism unfolded over time. Modernism is all too often presented as a unified entity and its protagonists conflated in a collective voice.¹⁰⁴ Though we all understand that modernism is not a thing but a concept, it is all too easy to forget that we are dealing here with a heuristic tool that we are applying to a messy past that resists unambiguous categories. To escape this temptation—and its twin, the equally misleading flight into a multitude of modernisms that lack a unifying center of gravity—let us take, as a point of reference, Europe in 1900. How was culture perceived at that time?

It was perceived not monolithically, certainly, but in terms of competing cultural spheres, all of which were capable of exercising a strong magnetic power on younger people. The first of these spheres consisted of the official culture that was consecrated in academies, taught in schools and universities, propagated in newspapers and magazines favored by the ruling elite, and performed in fashionable theaters, concert halls, and opera houses. This consisted of elements taken from the Greek and Roman classics; selected fragments of Christianity, often presented in secularized forms; and those literary and artistic works that had been certified over the centuries as “great” and “representative” of the national spirit—for example, Racine’s *Phèdre* in France, Dante’s *Divina Commedia* in Italy, Goethe’s *Faust* in Germany, and Shakespeare’s plays in England. By 1900, official culture had integrated many elements of late nineteenth-century science: above all, the conviction that society, like nature, could be understood in terms of the metaphor of “law,” that its development was predictable, and that its tendency was toward “progress.” Although it was a synthesis of aristocratic and middle-class values that varied in its blend from one country to another, late nineteenth-century official culture was often referred to (or dismissed) as “bourgeois” culture because it was oriented toward the needs and aspirations of those social groups that were identified most closely with the growth of cities, the spread of capitalism, and the onset of industrialism, with all the social dislocation that large-scale mechanization and centralization involved.

¹⁰² “No one expects books on Romanticism, Dada, or the Scientific Revolution to come up with capsule definitions of their subjects” (Clark, *Farewell to an Idea*, p. 7).

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ See, e.g., Clark, who writes without any apparent evidence of discomfort: “Modernism was regularly outspoken about the barrenness of the working-class movement. . . . But this may have been because it sensed socialism was its shadow” (*ibid.*, p. 9).

Coexisting with official culture, though normally presented as inferior to it, was popular culture; and it is useful here to distinguish between rural and urban popular culture. Rural popular culture derived from the traditional culture of peasants and artisans who, in 1900, were often identified as the nucleus of the people, *peuple*, or *Volk*. These residues of a distant past, some recently rediscovered or reinterpreted, consisted of melodies, songs, dances, dress, furniture, architectural forms, festivals, games, superstitions, and tales passed on from one generation to the next, often through an oral tradition. This type of culture flourished in the countryside, but it also held a special charm for middle-class city dwellers who feared that social change was destroying regional and national cultural identities.

In 1900, Europe's cities were full of first- and second-generation immigrants from the countryside. They brought with them their provincial dialects, cuisines, and practices deriving from their local rural cultures, but once in the city they were attracted by the new amusements the urban environment offered: urban festivals, often connected with particular quarters of the city; parades, especially religious and military ones; cabarets, theaters, music halls, vaudeville, circuses, amusement parks, sporting events, and great public expositions, of which the world fair in Paris in 1900 was the most spectacular example.

During the last decades of the nineteenth century, technological innovations made it possible to diffuse cultural products to larger and larger groups of people. Rotary presses and new means of reproducing images on paper transformed newspapers and magazines, making them accessible and attractive to the less educated. Techniques were developed for projecting moving images on screens, giving birth to a new art, the cinema.¹⁰⁵ Cities were filled with posters advertising fashionable products, department stores, and popular entertainments designed to distract viewers and stimulate their desires. In retrospect, we can see that these developments represented the appearance of a new type of consumption-oriented culture, aimed primarily at the urban masses. Despite desperate efforts to contain it, the new mass culture would demonstrate its ability to attract members of all social classes, including the sons and daughters of the elite.

Modernism, then, should be thought of not as a *Zeitgeist* or a dominant style, but as one type of cultural activity among many that developed in a crowded field.¹⁰⁶ It appeared first in an embryonic form toward the middle of the nineteenth

¹⁰⁵ For an inquiry into the many-faceted cultural matrix from which cinema emerged, see Leo Chaney and Vanessa R. Schwartz, eds., *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life* (Berkeley, Calif., 1995). Chaney and Schwartz argue that the invention of cinema was inevitable because it was the art whose characteristics both reflected and corresponded to modern urban life. "It was a commercial product that was also a technique of mobility and ephemerality. It was an outgrowth and a vital part of city culture that addressed its spectators as members of a collective and potentially undifferentiated mass public. It was a representational form that went beyond Impressionism and photography by staging actual movement; yet that movement could never be (to this day is not) more than the serial progression of still frames through the camera" (p. 10).

¹⁰⁶ It has now been over twenty years since Carl Schorske warned against the "positing in advance of an abstract categorical common denominator" in confronting the problem of modernity. Where Hegel's *Zeitgeist* or John Stuart Mill's "characteristic of the age" once served, we now had to be ready to "undertake the empirical pursuit of pluralities as a precondition to finding

century as an expression of the ambiguous feelings that some influential intellectuals and artists harbored toward the dismaying convergence of social, economic, political, and cultural changes that we call “modernization.” Clark is right to insist that modernism arose as a form of resistance to official, bourgeois culture; it was this culture that intellectuals and artists held responsible for everything they disliked in the society in which they lived and the one they believed they could see looming on their immediate horizon.

Thus perhaps the best way to approach modernism is through its project of negation, which brought together intellectuals and artists with very different agendas.¹⁰⁷ However, before it could become something as elaborate as an aesthetic—which required the creation of new cultural codes and modes of representation—modernism was an *attitude*, which broadened with time into a collective *sensibility*. Because this sensibility gave rise to a sense of shared affinities and common adversaries among people across a wide geographical area, I see no problem in calling late nineteenth-century modernism a *movement*, so long as we do not allow ourselves to understand by this term an organization, an officially constituted group, or even a loosely affiliated and ephemeral cluster of individuals that can be located in a defined spatial-temporal setting.¹⁰⁸ The modernist movement, then, in my view, needs to be distinguished from the highly self-conscious and sometimes politically driven groups we associate with the early twentieth-century avant-garde. The second is a subset of the first, which is to say that all avant-gardists were modernists but not all modernists belonged to avant-garde groups, nor did they all sympathize with the widely varying goals and methods of the avant-gardes.¹⁰⁹

unitary patterns in culture”; Schorske, *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna* (n. 1 above), p. xxii. Modernism should be thought of as one of those “pluralities.”

¹⁰⁷ This attitude of negation is nicely captured by Ernst Blass in his reconstruction of the feelings he and intellectuals and artists like him had in Berlin toward the end of the nineteenth century. “What I was engaged in . . . was . . . a war on the gigantic philistine of those days. . . . Yes it was a spirited battle against the soullessness, the deadness, laziness, and meanness of the philistine world. . . . Soul was still worth something. . . . Even the timid and the silent learned how to talk and express themselves, learned to recognize what it was they really felt deeply about”; quoted by Steven E. Aschheim, *The Nietzschean Legacy in Germany, 1890–1990* (Berkeley, Calif., 1992), p. 54.

¹⁰⁸ For an evocation of the modernist sensibility around the turn of the century, see Robert Musil, *The Man without Qualities*, trans. Eithne Wilkins and Ernst Kaiser (London, 1979), 1:58–60. “Out of the oil-smooth spirit of the two last decades of the nineteenth century, suddenly, throughout Europe, there rose a kindling fever. . . . Something at that time passed through the thicket of beliefs, as when many trees bend before one wind—a sectarian and reformist spirit, the blissful better self arising and setting forth, a little renaissance and reformation such as only the best epochs know; and entering into the world in those days, even in coming round the very first corner one felt the breath of the spirit on one’s cheeks” (pp. 59–60).

¹⁰⁹ Robert Jensen argues that in the visual arts the use of the term “avant-gardism” arose out of a historical moment when competing modernisms—postimpressionism, fauvism, cubism, expressionism, and futurism—divided modernism into factions (*Marketing Modernism in Fin-de-Siècle Europe* [Princeton, N.J., 1994], p. 15). I see the avant-garde groupings of the early twentieth century as a new development within the modernist movement. Using the example of the Parisian cubists, David Cottington has shown what an unstable and complex phenomenon “Avant-Gardism” could be (*Cubism in the Shadow of War: The Avant-Garde and Politics in Paris, 1905–1914* [New Haven, Conn., 1998]).

To search for the intellectual origins of modernism, which Smith and others convincingly locate deep in the nineteenth century, or for the first moment at which a recognizably modernist work appears, which Clark identifies in 1793, seems to me less useful than to establish the period when the modernist sensibility began to have a determining impact on the development of European culture. And here I think it is helpful to introduce the concept of generation—an organizing idea that is alluded to by Butler and Smith but that needs to be more systematically developed.

Some time ago, I distinguished between three generations of modernists: a generation of precursors born between 1840 and 1855 (Paul Cézanne, Stéphane Mallarmé, Friedrich Nietzsche, Paul Verlaine, Paul Gauguin, Joris-Karl Huysmans, August Strindberg, Vincent Van Gogh, Arthur Rimbaud, Oscar Wilde) and that came to the fore in the 1870s and 1880s; a generation of founders born between 1856 and 1870 (Sigmund Freud, George Bernard Shaw, Joseph Conrad, Anton Chekhov, Edmund Husserl, Jules Laforgue, Henri Bergson, Maurice Materlinck, Claude Debussy, Gabriele D'Annunzio, Richard Strauss, Miguel de Unamuno, Frank Wedekind, Max Weber, W. B. Yeats, Vassily Kandinsky, Emil Nolde, Luigi Pirandello, Stefan George, Maxim Gorky, Paul Claudel, Henri Matisse, André Gide) and who made their first impression on public life in the 1890s; and a generation of realizers born between 1871 and 1885 (Marcel Proust, Bertrand Russell, Gertrude Stein, Arnold Schoenberg, Thomas Mann, Maurice Ravel, Rainer Maria Rilke, F. T. Marinetti, Kasimir Malevich, Gaston Apollinaire, Robert Musil, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Aleksandr Bloc, Andrei Bely, Fernand Léger, Pablo Picasso, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, Igor Stravinsky, Umberto Boccioni, Walter Gropius, Franz Kafka, José Ortega y Gasset, Wyndham Lewis, Ezra Pound, Alban Berg, D. H. Lawrence, Robert Delaunay), whose creative lives began in earnest during the decade preceding the First World War.¹¹⁰ I realize now that the terms I used—"precursors," "founders," "realizers"—suggest a process of cultural change more continuous than it was in reality. Clark has every reason to warn against a history of modernism that presents it in the form of a passing of the avant-garde flame from one age group of artists to another.¹¹¹ Yet a generational approach to

¹¹⁰ In Monique Chefdor, Richardo Quinones, and Albert Wachtel, eds., *Modernism: Challenges and Perspectives* (Urbana, Ill., 1986), pp. 69–71. Jacques Barzun arrives at a similar view of the development of modernist culture in *From Dawn to Decadence: 500 Years of Western Culture Life* (New York, 2000). Barzun sees the "gestation" of modernism going through three phases: "a preparatory period, roughly from 1870 to 1885, during which old modes are questioned or tentatively flouted; the Nineties (1885 to 1905) when the 19thC ethos and its limitations on art are turned upside down, while the common world is shunned by a growing brood of aesthetes; third and last, the Cubist Decade (1905–14), when the young generation, stimulated by the inventions that transform visible reality and working in parallel with the scientific notions that negate common sense, gives the arts fundamentally altered goals and forms" (p. 679).

¹¹¹ But we also need to bear in mind Robert Jensen's important point about the development of the canon in modernist painting. Referring to Norma Broude's attempt (in *World Impressionism* [New York, 1990], p. 10) to destroy "the falsely linear and chronological view of the development of modern art," he warns: "Modern art was not 'falsely linear'; modernism was self-constructed in a progressive, linear fashion, which is what gave it its force. Breaking the canon (by expanding it) without understanding either its origins or what the canon represented in the *Kunstpolitik* of

modernism has much to recommend it because it encourages us to break down what otherwise might appear to be a monolithic entity and directs our attention toward breaks, disruptions, and dialectical reactions to the innovations of preceding generations. It also alerts us to those common experiences that create the sensation of belonging to a discrete generation and lay their mark on both the form and content of cultural innovation.¹¹²

The generation of modernist precursors born between 1840 and 1855 revolted against official bourgeois culture and its values and sought to develop new cultural codes and systems of representation. Their revolt and their challenge to existing values was carried to its most extreme point by Nietzsche. The following generation, the generation of modernist founders born between 1856 and 1870, discovered the precursors, interpreted and diffused their work, and created movements, of which the most important were symbolism and decadence.¹¹³ They probed the limits of analytical reason, took delight in shocking their bourgeois audiences, and experimented with new aesthetic languages. Some felt the need to explore avenues of escape from a society that they increasingly loathed and devoted themselves to cultivating an autonomous sphere, safe from the intrusion of philistines, where culture could be safely and privately nourished out of reach of the “rabble” or “herd.”¹¹⁴ The third generation, the generation of realizers, was born between 1871 and 1885. Though deeply influenced by the symbolist aesthetic, they felt the necessity to transcend it. Unable to flee modernity, they explored means of coming to terms with it and launched the avant-garde movements of the decade that preceded the outbreak of the First World War: futurism, cubism, expressionism.¹¹⁵ The

fin-de-siècle Europe merely reconstitutes in a different form the mythologies of the past” (Jensen, p. 12).

¹¹² For a discussion of generational theories and an example of how the concept of generation can be used to illuminate a complex of historical problems, see Robert Wohl, *The Generation of 1914* (Cambridge, Mass., 1979).

¹¹³ For an analysis of literary decadence as a transition between romanticism and modernism, see David Weir, *Decadence and the Making of Modernism* (Amherst, Mass., 1995), especially his chapter on James Joyce and André Gide, pp. 119–50. Typical of the role played by the generation born between 1856 and 1870 in the process of interpretation and diffusion of works by the precursors of modernism was the article by the symbolist poet Albert Aurier (born 1865) that appeared in the *Mercure de France* in 1891. Aurier saluted Gauguin as the leader of symbolist painting, praised his visionary qualities and the “inner eye” with which he was able to reveal spiritual values inaccessible to naturalist painters, and emphasized the immense distance that separated him from “the popular herd.” For this example, I am indebted to Debora Silverman, *Van Gogh and Gauguin: The Search for Sacred Art* (New York, 2000), pp. 379–80. Silverman shows how Gauguin was transformed by symbolist critics into the quintessential symbolist painter.

¹¹⁴ For an early and highly influential study of the flight from modernity into symbolism, see Edmund Wilson, *Axel's Castle* (New York, 1954, 1st ed., 1931). Schorske presents an Austrian variation on this theme in *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna* (n. 1 above), pp. 302–19.

¹¹⁵ Commenting on Picasso's *papiers-collés*, Cottington emphasizes the difference between the aestheticism of the Spanish artist and that of Mallarmé. “Between the fin-de-siècle and 1912–13, the coordinates of aestheticism had changed: where, for Mallarmé, popular culture, epitomized by the newspaper, was part of the dominant culture of the secular republic—the banalities of the collectivism of both threatening the individualism of the aesthetic—by 1912 dominant and popular culture were more distinct, separated by the ramifications of mass production and inter-class hostility—the popular challenging the hegemony of the dominant with its energy, ubiquity and novelty” (pp. 140–42).

question that any general interpretation of modernism has to confront is whether, aside from their rejection of official culture, these avant-garde movements created by the third generation of modernists can be convincingly connected with a common sensibility or attitude toward the world that extended beyond their members to the modernist movement as a whole. I think they can.¹¹⁶

A good place to begin is with the enthusiasm that so many European intellectuals felt for Nietzsche during the years before 1914. Speaking of *Zarathustra*, Nietzsche himself had warned that no one could find in a book what was not already inscribed in the reader's soul.¹¹⁷ Nietzsche's prewar disciples discovered in his writings revelations to which their experience had prepared them to respond.¹¹⁸ One was that the world was not an absolute, a stable reality waiting to be discovered and seized in scientific concepts, but instead a construction ruled by chance and contingency—something created by “your reason, your image, your will, your love.”¹¹⁹ The “Dionysian world” evoked by Nietzsche was “eternally self-creating” and “self-destroying,” “beyond good and evil,” and “without goal, unless the joy of the circle is itself a goal.”¹²⁰

Perhaps the most important consequence of Nietzsche's vision of a world in constant flux—a never ending “river of becoming”—was his radical rethinking of the notion of “truth.” Within the world imagined by Nietzsche, there was no overriding rationally discernible purpose, only interpretations or perspectives. It

¹¹⁶ In saying this I realize that I place myself at odds with many cultural historians whose views I respect. Gay has written recently (in *Pleasure Wars* [n. 1 above], p. 192) that “modernism almost defies definition”; and even Lawrence Rainey and Robert von Hallberg, the editors of *Modernism/Modernity*, after observing that modernism produced the most radical and comprehensive changes in western culture since romanticism, go on to state: “Here would be the place to list those changes, if only they were all nameable and known, like characters in a chapter of yesterday's reading” (*Modernism/Modernity*, 1, no. 1:1). I appreciate the attractiveness of this position. It is tempting, and even necessary, to approach modernism descriptively, as Nicholls has done for literature. But doing so makes it difficult to capture the generational dynamics of modernism's development, and hence its history.

¹¹⁷ “Ultimately, nobody can get more out of things, including books, than he already knows. From what one lacks access to from experience one will have no ear”; quoted from Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo* by Allan Megill, *Prophets of Extremity: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida* (Berkeley, Calif., 1985), p. 98.

¹¹⁸ Disputing the notion that Nietzsche had influenced his 1902 novel *L'immoraliste*, André Gide insisted in a diary entry of November 4, 1927, that the book was “already composed in my head and I had begun to write when I encountered Nietzsche” (*Journal, 1889–1939* [Paris, 1951], pp. 858–59). Many other “Nietzscheans” of the period would no doubt have said the same, but this only confirms Nietzsche's observation that his readers would be unable to find in *Zarathustra* what did not already exist in a latent form in their minds. Writing in 1910 of Nietzsche's influence, Thomas Mann distinguished between men of his own generation born around 1870 and twenty-year-olds born around 1890. “For them he [Nietzsche] is a prophet one doesn't know very precisely, whom one hardly needs to have read, and yet whose purified results one has instinctively in one's self. They have from him the affirmation of the earth, the affirmation of the body, the anti-Christian and anti-intellectual [*antispirituellen*] conception of nobility, which includes health, serenity, beauty”; quoted in German and translated into English by T. J. Reed in *Thomas Mann: The Uses of Tradition* (Oxford, 1974), pp. 137–38. I have slightly altered Reed's translation.

¹¹⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York, 1959), p. 198.

¹²⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, ed. Walter Kaufmann and trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York, 1967), p. 550.

was not our search for truth but biological and psychological needs that drove us to interpret the world. Hence there was no truth, only truths in conflict with one another, all engendered ultimately by the will to power and validated (insofar as they were validated) by their ability to enhance life.¹²¹

Nietzsche's vision of a world with no meaning other than the one human beings succeeded in giving it through the exercise of their will was all the more powerful because it was perceived as being the expression of an artist rather than the product of a philosophical system that could be engaged in rational debate. Indeed, it was the elusiveness of Nietzsche's message that accounted for the extraordinary variety of personalities to whom it could appeal. As André Gide dourly commented in a note made in 1911, Nietzscheanism was "like a road that appears all the more beautiful to us because we don't know where it's going."¹²²

Still, no matter how uncertain the ultimate destination of Nietzsche's thought, his writings appeared to provide a philosophical justification for aesthetic practices that writers and artists were already beginning to explore and toward which they felt a strong attraction. Applied to literature, perspectivism meant that stories could be narrated in a variety of voices, with none being given the privilege of omniscience. Readers might finish a story or a novel no more enlightened about the "truth" of what had really happened than they had been when they began it. Nor could one be sure what the narrators had actually seen or experienced and what they had imagined. The boundary between dream and reality was blurred to the point that it sometimes disappeared, a device which Nietzsche himself had used to great effect in *Zarathustra*. In painting, perspectivism implied that there need be no single point around which the space represented by a canvas could be organized. Though, as Clark reminds us, this idea was by no means discovered during the decade before 1914, if it was pushed far enough—and there was clearly an impulse to do that during the second decade of the twentieth century—it meant that the viewer of a picture might no longer be able to identify its contents with the world of everyday perception. And applied in one's own life, to the realm that late nineteenth-century middle-class Europeans would have called "morality," Nietzsche's perspectivism suggested that everyone was free—indeed, condemned—to improvise his or her own values. Regardless of how one sought to apply it, the discovery that the world was not a single reality that could be grasped, but instead a multiplicity of points of view, was both liberating and profoundly disturbing.

Nietzsche also taught that the deepest truths were obscure, paradoxical, accessible only to the chosen few, and to be grasped through insight and intuition rather than through analysis or scientific reasoning. "His ever-growing echo signified the eruption of *Mystik* into a rationalized and mechanized time. . . . Through him we were transported out of this ice age, reenchanting and enraptured."¹²³ This prophetic

¹²¹ Ibid., p. 272.

¹²² Gide, p. 346. In the same note, Gide comments astutely: "C'est précisément parce qu'il est très difficile (sinon impossible) de réduire le nietzschéisme en système—qu'on ne s'en débarrassera pas facilement."

¹²³ Count Harry Kessler, quoted by Aschheim (n. 107 above), p. 23.

message of deliverance from the shackles of scientific reason, conveyed most eloquently by Nietzsche through his alter ego Zarathustra, coincided with one important aspect of the modernist sensibility whose origins appear to reach deep into the nineteenth century: difficulty in a work of art was increasingly taken to be a gauge of its authenticity.¹²⁴ “Every profound thinker,” Nietzsche had written in *Beyond Good and Evil*, “is more afraid of being understood than of being misunderstood.”¹²⁵

I am not certain that even today we grasp all the implications of this apparently innocent idea: the pursuit of difficulty for its own sake opened up a slippery path. In the new aesthetic languages they devised, modernists would be tempted to flirt with the boundary that separated the demanding from the incomprehensible. At the same time, precedence in breaking with existing cultural codes became a modernist badge of honor, not unlike the patents that contemporary inventors sought.¹²⁶ The price paid for experimentation would sometimes be high, but it carried with it rewards that mattered to the avant-garde: the presumption of honesty, incorruptibility, and a principled rejection of the standards by which the bourgeoisie lived and judged art. In this way, novelty became an end in itself, a practice justified by the Nietzschean conviction that the ability to create culture depended on the willingness to liberate oneself from the crippling burden of the past.

If modernists were willing—even eager—to run the risk of losing their public, it was because they believed, like Nietzsche, that the official culture was decadent and thus condemned to disappear, along with its exhausted modes of representation.¹²⁷ More seductive than any of Nietzsche’s ideas was the rhetorical appeal he made to the disciples he was seeking: those “brothers,” “preparatory men,” “lovers of knowledge,” “searchers,” “free spirits,” and “procreators and cultivators and sowers of the future.” He reached out to all those who had the courage to “build

¹²⁴ “There is a line of art stretching back to David and Shelley that makes no sense—that would not have existed—without its practitioners believing what they did was resist or exceed the normal understandings of the culture, and that those understandings were their enemy. This is the line of art we call modernist. . . . In the visual arts since 1850, it seems as if no work of real concentration was possible without it being fired—superintended—by claims of this kind [of resistance to codes of representation]. The test of art was held to be some form of intransigence or difficulty in the object produced, some action against the codes and procedures by which the world was lent its usual likenesses”; Clark, *Farewell to an Idea* (n. 57 above), p. 364.

¹²⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York, 1966), p. 229. Oscar Wilde had expressed the same thought less pretentiously. “I live constantly in fear of not being misunderstood”; quoted by Barzun (n. 110 above), p. 616.

¹²⁶ For an example of avant-garde squabbling over priority in artistic innovation, see Wohl, *A Passion for Wings*, pp. 196–99. Jensen (n. 109 above) reminds us, p. 15, that the “isms” that developed in the visual arts during the early twentieth century should not be seen merely as “the great creative flow of a generation” but also as a “mentality, haunted by the need for originality, by the need to supersede one’s competitors, by the desire to get a piece of the market share.”

¹²⁷ We should always bear in mind, however, Peter Gay’s point, made with middle-class cultural consumers in mind, that at any given moment there were various gradations of modernist extremism. Middle-class art lovers “might admire Impressionists but not Cézanne; they might go as far as Cézanne but find the Fauves too unnatural; they might come to terms with the Fauves but not with Kandinsky—or accept the Kandinsky of 1905 but not the Kandinsky of 1910” (Gay, *Pleasure Wars* [n. 1 above], p. 198).

their cities under Vesuvius” and to embark “with cunning sails on unexplored seas.”¹²⁸ It was these men who would save Europe from the crisis it now faced. Running through all of Nietzsche’s writings, like a Wagnerian leitmotiv, was the assumption, made explicit in a fragment later published in *The Will to Power*, that “For some time now, our whole European culture has been moving toward a catastrophe, with a tortured tension that is growing from decade to decade: restlessly, violently headlong, like a river that wants to reach the end.”¹²⁹

The danger European civilization faced, then, was great: skepticism, pessimism, nihilism, decadence, failure of will. But so was the opportunity for those who felt like “storms,” “pregnant with new lightnings.”¹³⁰ What heady wine for young intellectuals and artists who felt themselves among that “new nobility” evoked by Nietzsche in *Zarathustra* and his other writings: men capable of sacrifice, hardness, risk, and valor; men prepared to live at war with their peers and themselves.

Take, for example, the future founder of fascism, then a young journalist with socialist convictions who was inspired enough by the rhetoric of *Zarathustra* and the notion of the *Übermensch* to make the effort to explain to his readers what this elusive, if alluring, concept might mean to them. Nietzsche’s superman, Mussolini wrote in 1908, was a symbol, “an index of this anguished and tragic period of crisis passing over the European consciousness in its search for new sources of pleasure, beauty, and ideals.” He was the “recognition of our weakness,” which is to say that he reminded us that we were only a shadow of the men we could become; but he was also at the same time “the hope for our redemption.” “He is the sunset—and the dawn.”¹³¹

The “dawn” to which Mussolini refers is that of a new culture, and the belief in its coming would no doubt have remained a form of utopianism, destined to gradual extinction, had it not been nourished and confirmed by contemporary developments. One was an apparently unending series of scientific discoveries, popular interpretations of which were diffused in vulgarized form to the general public, giving people the impression that they were on the verge of being given a new concept of the world in which they lived. A second was spectacular technological innovation that, in some cases, translated itself into changes in everyday life. A third was the transformation of the urban environment in which most intellectuals and artists lived. A fourth was the apparently inexorable advance of the lower classes toward equality with their social superiors—a development difficult to read but often encapsulated under the highly charged term of “social revolution.” There was no need to understand (or even know about) Dedekind’s mathematical discoveries, Planck’s revolution in physics, or Einstein’s theory of relativity in order to realize that the world in which Europeans had been living was in the process of radical transformation. Evidence for this was inescapable in every urban

¹²⁸ From *The Gay Science* and *Zarathustra*, pt. 3, in Kaufmann, *The Portable Nietzsche*, pp. 97, 271.

¹²⁹ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, p. 3.

¹³⁰ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, p. 230.

¹³¹ Mussolini, “La filosofia della forza” (December 13, 1908), quoted by Walter Adamson in *Avant-Garde Florence: From Modernism to Fascism* (Cambridge, Mass., 1993), p. 140.

dweller's immediate surroundings. Charles Péguy, not known for the depth of his scientific knowledge, believed that the world in 1913 had changed more in the previous thirty years than it had in all the centuries following the birth of Jesus Christ.¹³²

I agree with Butler that the modernist sensibility cannot be reduced to formal innovations. Interior monologue, stream of consciousness, the break with syntax, futurist *parole in libertà*, collage, juxtaposition, abstraction, atonality, dissonance, the stripping of ornamentation from buildings were nothing but means toward an end. Beyond their break with existing modes of representation, what made the works of the pre-1914 modernists revolutionary, disquieting, and exhilarating were the ideas that lay behind them: they called into question the very function of culture as it had been conceived by the dominant elites in the late nineteenth century. The new literature, music, and art had given up the attempt to represent an external reality that could be assumed to be common to all cultivated people. It had turned inward to plumb the uncharted depths of a self that Nietzsche had proclaimed to be multiple and hidden beneath a variety of masks. Modernist artists and writers gravitated toward the exploration of those energies, drives, and passions that nineteenth-century civilization had hidden and repressed, taking a mischievous and sometimes perverse delight in the rediscovery of the body—yet another Nietzschean theme. They shifted the emphasis from the objects being represented to the act of representation, and they made no effort to conceal that their creations were cultural inventions, fictions, and illusions rather than realistic representations of nature. Picasso put the point provocatively, but in such a way that the initiates he wanted to reach would understand: “Art is a lie that makes us realize truth, at least the truth that is given to us to understand. The artist must know how to convince others of the truthfulness of his lies.”¹³³ Picasso was no theorist, but as a practitioner of modernism he had grasped one essential aspect of the sensibility that underlay it: its break with realism and its preoccupation with the means by which artistic illusions were created.

To be sure, modernist practices varied widely among the members of the pre-1914 avant-gardes. National context understandably played an important role in determining the form that modernism took. Nonetheless, there existed across national borders a common core of beliefs, antagonisms, and expectations that bound prewar artists and intellectuals together and justifies their inclusion in the modernist movement.¹³⁴ To deny this is to condemn ourselves to a nominalist survey of

¹³² Quoted by Roger Shattuck in *The Banquet Years: The Origins of the Avant-Garde in France 1885 to World War I*, rev. ed. (New York, 1968), p. xv.

¹³³ Quoted by Edward R. Tannenbaum in *1900: The Generation before the Great War* (Garden City, N.Y., 1976), pp. 390–91.

¹³⁴ For a different approach to the modernist mentality that at the same time overlaps in important ways with the one given by me, see Thomas Vargish and Delo E. Mook, *Inside Modernism: Relativity Theory, Cubism, Narrative* (New Haven, Conn., 1999). Through a comparative study of Einstein's theory of relativity, cubism, and various modernist narratives, the authors claim to have discovered the six “values” underlying the modernist mentality. Rendered in simpler English, these values bear a striking resemblance to some of the features of the new culture that Ortega singled out for analysis in his remarkable 1925 essay, “The Dehumanization of Art.” The creation

modernism's varieties: in doing so, we would lose sight of the modernist forest in our preoccupation with its ever changing trees.

What complicates the picture and confuses our task as historians is that the boundaries between the various types of culture I have described were permeable and shifting. The forms of adversary aesthetics that we identify as modernist during the years before 1914 developed not only against but also within official culture and often represented a logical, if disorienting, continuation of cultural forms. Indeed as Schoenberg pointed out, "a hand that dares to renounce so much of the achievements of our forefathers has to be exercised thoroughly in the techniques that are to be replaced by new methods. . . . no new technique in the arts is created that has not had its roots in the past."¹³⁵ This reminds us that there was an immanent process driving (and at the same time limiting) change within the separate arts that we must not ignore in our search for generalizations that apply to Western culture as a whole.

It was also true that in their revolt against the codes and values of official culture, modernists often drew upon both folk and mass culture for inspiration.¹³⁶ Indeed, after 1900 the boundaries between modernist and mass culture became increasingly blurred.¹³⁷ Thomas Crow has argued persuasively that in the visual arts the appro-

of difficulty ("epistemic trauma"), the distortion of existing frames of reference ("contextualization"), the shift from focusing on reality to an emphasis on the way in which we represent realities ("observation"), the creation of self-contained fields of cultural meaning, the move toward abstraction, and self-referentiality ("reflexivity") are all clearly things that some (if not all) modernist artists and writers do. Yet I must confess that though I find *Inside Modernism* a stimulating book and will happily recommend it to all students of the topic, I am troubled by its assumption that modernism needs to be understood as a "period" or "climate of opinion" that comes between realism and postmodernism (once more modernism as monolith); and I am unconvinced by the impressionistic method it employs. Sentences such as this one—and I could give many other examples—impress me as unsatisfactory substitutes for the establishment of concrete historical connections: "Picasso's choice of a studio and of painter and model as subjects reminds us of Einstein's use of the sealed laboratory to illustrate the principle of equivalence in the General Theory [of relativity]" (p. 146). I find myself more in sympathy with the approach of Thomas Harrison in *1910: The Emancipation of Dissonance* (Berkeley, Calif., 1966). While acknowledging the difficulty of defining the "trunk" of modernism from which the "blossoms" of its manifestations emerge, Harrison strikes an admirable balance between generalization and the careful reconstruction of the contexts, both private and social, in which pre-1914 Central European expressionists' works of art were produced.

¹³⁵ From "A Self-Analysis" (1948), in *Style and Idea: Selected Writings of Arnold Schoenberg*, ed. Leonard Stein (Berkeley, Calif., 1975), p. 76.

¹³⁶ The fascination of early twentieth-century artists with folk art is well known. Among composers, one of the most heavily documented cases is Igor Stravinsky. For an enlightening discussion of Stravinsky's use of motifs from Russian folk literature, see Richard Taruskin, *Stravinsky and the Russian Traditions*, 2 vols. (Berkeley, Calif., 1966), esp. vol. 1, chaps. 9–12.

¹³⁷ Peter Fritzsche goes so far as to argue, in *Reading Berlin 1900* (Cambridge, Mass., 1996), that mass circulation newspapers in the pre-1914 period should be read as modernist texts. For the impact of urban popular culture on pre-1914 avant-garde art, see Jeffrey Weiss, *The Popular Culture of Modern Art: Picasso, Duchamp, and Avant-Gardism* (New Haven, Conn., 1994). Walter Adamson argues that Italian futurism should be understood as the first avant-grade that "sought to fuse mass culture with modernism in a challenge to sacralized bourgeois culture": "Futurism, Mass Culture, and Women: The Reshaping of the Artistic Vocation, 1909–1920" (n. 30 above),

priation of materials and topics from the “degraded materials of capitalist manufacture” by modernist painters like Manet, Seurat, Picasso, and Braque was not merely tactical or temporary but also integral to their situation as modernist artists. Modernism developed in a persistent state of tension between its negation of the bourgeois order and what Crow calls “an ultimately overwhelming tendency toward accommodation.”¹³⁸ The avant-garde could never escape from the contradiction that the elite audience for its works “endorsed, in every respect but its art, the [capitalist] social order responsible for the crisis of culture.”¹³⁹ The main outlines of the story of modernist ruptures with existing cultural codes and the consequent capitalist assimilation and marketing of these innovations is known, but it would undoubtedly repay more detailed investigation. Whether out of financial necessity, intellectual curiosity, or a combination of the two, many modernists lent their talents to the new mass culture industries, especially large-circulation newspapers, magazines, advertising, and the cinema. Biographies, such as Simon Callow’s *Orson Welles*, have much to teach us about the complex transactions that occurred between the world of modernism and the world of mass culture as artists attempted to translate the practices of the former into the products of the latter.¹⁴⁰

I find it difficult to see how any historian of modernism can avoid the issue of the impact of the First World War, yet Clark does so by jumping directly from Picasso’s prewar cubism to the postrevolutionary art of El Lissitzky and Malevich. Everdell is straightforward in stating that the war had little impact on the advance of modernist innovations. The intellectual casualties of the war, he says, were not twentieth-century modernist ideas but “lingering nineteenth-century notions, including the simple nationalism and imperialism that had started the war, and the naïve faith in speed, horsepower, and material progress that had multiplied its effects.”¹⁴¹

Butler, Nicholls, and Smith, by contrast, all see the war as a moment of rupture in modernism’s history. Butler chooses to end his account of early modernism in 1916, explaining that after the First World War a “traditionalist, allusive conservatism” is countered by “the irrationalist pretensions of Surrealism.”¹⁴² He dismisses the dadaist notion of the avant-garde as a “disaster.” “It is parasitic upon the institutions it attacks, its thought is shallow, and its failure to develop its own artistic tradition condemns it to the purely *ad hoc* gesture.”¹⁴³ Nicholls concedes that dada began as a “storm in a teacup” and a “purely bohemian extravagance,” but he thinks that its implications were far reaching because it deprived art of its traditional power to redeem and legitimate the social order by providing it with a

p. 91. One looks forward eagerly to the publication of Adamson’s study of modernism in Paris, Berlin, Vienna, London, and Milan during the years between 1905 and 1924, precisely because of his intention to focus on the relationship between modernist and mass culture.

¹³⁸ Thomas Crow, “Modernism and Mass Culture in the Visual Arts,” in his *Modern Art in the Common Culture* (New Haven, Conn., 1996), p. 37.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

¹⁴⁰ Simon Callow, *Orson Welles: The Road to Xanadu* (New York, 1995).

¹⁴¹ Everdell, *The First Moderns* (n. 14 above), pp. 346–47.

¹⁴² Butler (n. 6 above), p. xvii.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 276.

“halo of metaphysical, quasi-religious meanings.”¹⁴⁴ Smith goes even further and claims that the new movements that appear in the visual arts during and after the war turn against the formalism of pre-1914 modernism and presage its decline and replacement by postmodernism.

The variety of these views suggests the complexity of the problem posed by the impact of the war on European culture. In the short term, certainly, the war dealt a serious blow to the official bourgeois culture that was already coming under heavy attack during the years before 1914. The institutional bulwarks of that culture—the academies, the scientific institutes, the universities, the schools, the churches—were discredited by the role they played in justifying a conflict that resulted in the slaughter of millions of men. The reaction against official culture was bound to strengthen those groups that identified themselves by their resistance to it. Dadaism was the first beneficiary of this reaction. The dadaist movements of 1917–21 rose in rebellion against official culture and called into question every feature that culture said a work of art was supposed to have: its seriousness, its coherence, its accessibility, its relationship to the past, its decorum (decency), even its beauty. To be sure, futurism, cubism, and expressionism had already taken steps in this direction during the years before 1914 by creating complex and inaccessible works of art and by flaunting accepted standards of taste; but now the damage seemed potentially greater because it coincided with a wave of revolutionary violence, the collapse of political and social structures, and a loosening of moral standards that many people saw as a product of the war.

The war also buttressed modernist culture by confirming and validating its central idea of a cultural rupture or break. Pre-1914 modernism had been inspired by the intuition that the old culture was exhausted and that a new culture was coming into being to take its place. The new culture, modernists believed, would be perspectivist in its approach to truth; it would reform the rule of reason by revealing the power of subjectivity, imagination, emotion, and irrational drives; and it would replace the concept of a determined and lawfully governed universe with a vision that gave greater scope for the enjoyment of freedom and the manifestation of individual and collective will.

The war changed the circumstances in which modernists acted, vastly expanding the circle of their influence, though it by no means brought an end to the alienation they felt from the societies in which they lived. The tidal wave of cataclysmic change brought by the war swept over everyone, regardless of class, gender, or country. The tree of European Progress that had seemed so vital and sturdy during the years before 1914 appeared to have snapped and broken. The notion of a history that took the form of regular and lawful evolution could no longer convincingly be sustained. Discontinuity was no longer an idea buried away in obscure scientific or mathematical journals or an avant-garde utopian dream. The revolutionary principle of rupture whose origins Everdell locates in late nineteenth-century European mathematics and science had now become incarnated in an emotionally charged experience with which all Europeans had no choice but to come to grips. They were cut adrift from the world in which they had been born and cast into an unpredictable future.

¹⁴⁴ Nicholls (n. 25 above), p. 227.

The war thus created a climate within which modernist culture could flourish; and the twenties witnessed a rapid diffusion and vulgarization of some of the most radical ideas of the prewar period. The relativity of truth, the subjectivity of time and space, the blurring of the boundary between dreams and reality, the elevation of instinct and unconscious impulses over reason, the rejection of moral codes as repressive and unhealthy—all these conceptions, and many more, burst through the floodgates opened up by the earthquake of the war. None of these ideas was new; but they now possessed an urgency that they lacked before 1914. Sensing victory, modernist critics of art, music, literature, and architecture now began to assemble their own canons and establish their hierarchy of masterpieces. The poetry of Eliot, Pound, and Rilke, the novels of Proust, Joyce, Kafka, and Mann, the paintings of Picasso and Kandinsky, the music of Stravinsky and Berg found many champions, especially among members of the war and postwar generations. Critics, like Herbert Read (born 1893) in Britain and Edmund Wilson (born 1895), Alfred Barr (born 1902), and Clement Greenberg (born 1909) in the United States, established lineages and contexts for these modernist works that have shaped our understanding of them right up to the present day.¹⁴⁵

Surrealism, a creation of the war generation born between 1885 and 1899, made a particularly important contribution to the diffusion of modernist ideas in their post-1914 form. Its leader, André Breton (born 1894), assumed the role as modernist impresario that Marinetti (born 1876) had performed so brilliantly during the years before 1914. Under his direction, the extralogical worlds of desire and the unconscious were given a cultural status and prestige they had never possessed before, even penetrating Hollywood, the citadel of mass culture. Reality, Breton claimed, was a “miserable mental expedient.” The marvelous, his co-surrealist Louis Aragon agreed, needed to be reawakened.¹⁴⁶ The surrealists devoted themselves to achieving this Nietzschean reversal of values in a world that increasingly came, ironically, to resemble a surrealist nightmare. Breton himself made his way to New York during the Second World War, along with a retinue of surrealist painters, including Salvador Dalí, Max Ernst, André Masson, and Yves Tanguy, whose impact on American avant-garde art Smith thinks was “profound.”¹⁴⁷ Judging from the books under review, the time seems ripe for a fresh look at the surrealist movement and its multifaceted legacy in France and elsewhere. Thomas Crow, for example, offers surrealism as “the most notorious instance” of the process by which avant-garde innovation could be assimilated by consumer capitalism.¹⁴⁸

To mention surrealism brings up a topic that has attracted increasing attention

¹⁴⁵ We need a book on the development of the modernist canon that will show the interrelationships and interaction between various forms of culture. Jensen (n. 109 above) represents an important step in this direction, but it ends in 1905.

¹⁴⁶ Quoted by Peter Conrad in *Modern Times, Modern Places* (New York, 1999), pp. 301–2. Conrad’s book, as the title suggests, is not so much a history of modernism as it is an impressionistic evocation of twentieth-century modernity, as it was filtered through the minds and works of artists and intellectuals, and the cities in which modernity manifested itself most intensely. Reading it gives one the sense of vertigo that Aragon ascribed to the modern.

¹⁴⁷ Smith (n. 45 above), p. 225.

¹⁴⁸ Crow (n. 138 above), p. 36.

in recent years: the relationship of modernism to politics, especially during the years following the First World War. In the late 1920s, the surrealists, led by Breton, entered into an alliance with the French Communist Party that turned out to be ill fated and short lived.¹⁴⁹ They had come to believe that the prerequisite for the revolution of the spirit, which they sought, was a prior social revolution. The only political forces committed to such a revolution in the late 1920s were the Soviet Union and the Communist parties allied with it through the Comintern. The surrealists were not the only modernists to experience the attraction of Communism: many others, including several of the most important American abstract expressionists, went through a period of radical politics in the 1930s and early 1940s. In Europe, the appeal of Communism was felt well into the post-Second World War period, especially in France and Italy in the West and throughout those countries that became members of the Soviet bloc. The adherence of Picasso, the most acclaimed modernist artist, to the French Communist Party in these years was highly publicized. It was but a short step to the conclusion that radicalism in culture and left-wing politics went hand in hand. There is more than a trace of this postwar assumption in Clark's *Farewell to an Idea*.

The problem is that such a view does not correspond to what we know about the cultural politics of modernism. A host of authors has now explored the relationship between modernism and fascism. The connections they have discovered are not merely conjunctural or related to patterns of personality; they are inherent in the modernist project itself. There is no need for me to summarize their arguments, which encompass a wide variety of intellectuals and national contexts and are now well known to historians, if contested by some.¹⁵⁰ Anyone who doubts that deeply felt fascist convictions could be combined with a commitment to modernist painting should read Emily Braun's book on Mario Sironi, a work that is as indispensable for cultural historians of twentieth-century Europe as it is for historians of the visual arts.¹⁵¹ Though it would be easy enough to compile a list of modernist writers and artists during the interwar years who fled politics and attempted to wait out the political storm on the sidelines, the point that needs emphasizing is that leading modernist figures were drawn toward movements of both the revolutionary left and right and were subject to their ideological influence, even when they resisted political commitment, because they desperately sought

¹⁴⁹ Helena Lewis's *The Politics of Surrealism* (New York, 1988) provides a succinct and sympathetic narrative of the surrealists' affair with the French Communist Party.

¹⁵⁰ Fredric Jameson, *Fables of Aggression: Wyndham Lewis, the Modernist as Fascist* (Berkeley, Calif., 1979); Zeev Sternhell, *Ni droite ni gauche*, rev. ed. (Paris, 2000; original ed. 1983); Jeffrey Herf, *Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture, and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich* (Cambridge, 1984); Andrew Hewitt, *Fascist Modernism: Aesthetics, Politics, and the Avant-Garde* (Stanford, Calif., 1993); Adamson, *Avant-Garde Florence* (n. 131 above); Jeffrey T. Schnapp, *Staging Fascism: 18BL and the Theater of Masses for Masses* (Stanford, Calif., 1996). Clark himself seems to acknowledge the possibility of a fascist modernism when he writes that "the disenchantment of the world is horrible, intolerable. Any mass movement or cult figure that promises a way out of it will be clung to like grim death. Better fascism than technocracy: there is a social id in most of us that goes on being tempted by that proposition" (p. 7).

¹⁵¹ Emily Braun, *Mario Sironi and Italian Modernism: Art and Politics under Fascism* (Cambridge, 2000).

liberation from a capitalist and bourgeois order they despised and had come to believe in the possibility of transcending.¹⁵² Many modernists, then, yielded to the embrace of politics; others allowed their work to be influenced by it in subtle and not-so-subtle ways; but the modernist love affair with right- and left-wing politics, whether overt or repressed, was doomed to disappointment and disillusionment.

What, then, is the theme of modernism's history? When and how did it end? Or has it lived on, in modified form, in what we call postmodernism? To submerge modernism within the framework of the *longue durée* of a digital revolution whose origins must be sought in the 1870s, as Everdell does, seems to me to oversimplify the complexities of the modernist story, to glaze over its dialectical twists and turns, and to grind down into a common gruel the mentalities and intentions of its protagonists. The contexts of cultural innovation disappear in the seamless unfolding of a single-barreled metanarrative, dazzlingly assembled but in the end unconvincing.

Stripped of its neologisms and some of its more idiosyncratic digressions, Smith's history of modernism in the visual arts has much to recommend it. His emphasis, for example, on the early nineteenth-century origins of modernism is suggestive; its highlighting of the distinction made by Kant and others between the crafts and high art casts new light on the complexity and difficulty of modernist works and provides a context for understanding the later tension in modernism between an art that aimed at the transformation of the masses and one that was comprehensible only to an enlightened elite. Smith's emphasis on the reaction of the post-World War I avant-gardes, such as the dadaists, the *Neue Sachlichkeit* movement, and the surrealists, against the formalism of pre-1914 modernism may also yield insights into the origins of our own postmodernist culture. What we take to be new may have precedents in the interwar years. But I am unable to follow Smith in his characterization of modernism as an imperialist project. Here he seems to confuse the place and time within which modernism took root and developed—Europe and the United States at the height of their imperial power—and their conscious program. This is not to question the impact of imperialism on modernism, or the interest of the less well known history of modernism outside Europe

¹⁵² In *Modernism and Mass Politics* (Stanford, Calif., 1995), Michael Tratner argues that four of the most canonic Anglo-American writers—James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, T. S. Eliot, W. B. Yeats—reacted to the crisis of liberalism and the coming of what they perceived as an age of masses in the post-World War I period by adopting some version of collectivism, whether of a right-wing (Eliot, Yeats) or left-wing (Joyce, Woolf) variety. The novelty of Tratner's book is his claim to be able to show the ways in which the political discourse of the period shaped the poetry and prose that these authors wrote during the 1920s and 1930s. For a sharp criticism of the thesis of this book by Vincent Sherry and a spirited reply by the author, see the *Times Literary Supplement* (August 30, 1996), p. 6, and (October 4, 1996), p. 21. Butler also warns against assuming that modernism can be equated with the political left to the exclusion of the right. "The wish to supersede the art of the past by a reconsideration of its languages seems to have engaged artists of the political right (such as Kandinsky, Eliot, Lewis, Pound, and Benn) just as much as it did those of the political left (such as Picasso, Joyce, many German expressionists, and much of the Dada movement)" (p. 277). He goes on to add that even self-proclaimed left-wing modernists were not necessarily more politically progressive than their more aesthetically conservative, realist contemporaries on whom they often depended for defense (p. 277).

and the United States, a topic that deserves the further study that it will surely receive.¹⁵³

I am intrigued by Clark's notion of modernism's history as one of failure, as I am by many of his other themes.¹⁵⁴ To people born in the twentieth century, a history of tragic failure is both more plausible and more attractive than one of Whiggish triumph. Clark succeeds in bestowing on certain of his protagonists—Pissarro, Picasso, Malevich, and Pollock—a heroic quality that adds a Sisyphean character to the story he tells. His heroes battle on the limits of art as it had traditionally been understood, struggling to achieve an epiphany that in the end eludes them. In its own way, this theme is as powerful as the one it seeks to displace: that of the passing of the modernist torch from one audacious innovator to his or her successor. Moreover, it grasps one aspect of modernism that is central to its understanding. Antibourgeois utopianism—a form of resistance to modernity—was, from the beginning, central to the modernist quest. Clark sums up Cézanne's feelings on this issue in a passage that may be even more expressive of his own view of modernism than it is of the painter's. "I wonder if modernism is really possible, at the highest pitch, without a utopian hope or a belief that the process of representation might remake the world and our knowledge of it. And how else is such an idea to be fired except by a wild disdain for the past. Dross in the crucible! Waste that remains and kills. The whip! The whip!"¹⁵⁵

In the long run, as we know, modernist culture was unable to deliver the anti-bourgeois utopia whose revolutionary promise attracted many intellectuals and artists.¹⁵⁶ To us at the beginning of the twenty-first century, it may seem strange

¹⁵³ Fredric Jameson claims that the traces of imperialism can be detected in Western modernism and are constitutive of it. But he goes on to add that "we must not look for them in the obvious places, in content or in representation. Save in the special case of Irish literature, and of Joyce, they will be detected spatially, as formal symptoms within the structure of First World modernist texts themselves"; Eagleton, Jameson, and Said (n. 12 above), p. 64. For suggestive insights into the development of modernism outside Europe and the United States, see Smith's chapter "Cultural Imperialism and the Formalesque," pp. 305–42.

¹⁵⁴ "If I chose there [in the previous chapter] to focus on one of Pissarro's many 'failures,' that was because I believe that precisely in failing his modernism attained its highest aesthetic dignity. 'Some defeats,' as Karl Liebknecht put it, 'are really victories, while some victories are more shameful than any defeat.' This is modernism's consolation." (Clark, *Farewell to an Idea*, 164). Nicholls also refers to the "failure" of modernism's metaphysical ambitions (p. 300), and Smith observes that "each modernist critique of Modernity invariably fails" (p. 12).

¹⁵⁵ Unable to find this passage, which appears in Clark's text (p. 135) without quotation marks, I wrote to him asking him for its provenance. He kindly replied in a letter of February 2, 2001, explaining that it was "an attempt by me to translate Cézanne's attitude—specifically, to unpack what I feel are the presuppositions & implications of the *actual* paragraph of the letter to [Emile] Bernard which I do quote. . . . I grant you it's a speculative reconstruction of Cézanne's thinking; but the lines to Bernard are specially charged (& given the background of Bernard's dismissal of 'anarchist' artists in the *Occident* article, not just charged but barbed, I think) & they do need thinking about."

¹⁵⁶ This theme was central to Robert Hughes's *The Shock of the New* (New York, 1980), a book that anticipates many of the themes I have developed in this essay. "What has our culture lost in 1980 that the *avant-garde* had in 1890?" Hughes asked. "Ebullience, idealism, confidence, the belief that there was plenty of territory to explore, and above all the sense that art, in the most disinterested and noble way, could find the necessary metaphors by which a radically changing culture could be explained to its inhabitants" (p. 9).

that anyone believed that merely formal or aesthetic innovations could, by themselves, produce a change in the way people lived their lives. If this is true—and I think it is—it indicates how distant we now are from the sensibility that produced early modernism.

In any case, modernism was eventually undermined by a mounting bill of particulars brought against it by new generations less taken with its increasingly well-worn novelties. Against modernist culture was held its alleged disdain of the masses and their culture; its difficulties and inaccessibility; its divorce from everyday life and the experience of ordinary people; its self-indulgent and deliberately hermetic complexity; its coldness and inhumanity; and its indifference to history, tradition, and the sanctity of place.¹⁵⁷ Later critics, as we have seen, would condemn it for its misogyny¹⁵⁸ and its contribution to the relaxation of standards;¹⁵⁹ some would hold it complicit in the political debacle of the 1930s and 1940s.¹⁶⁰ Even more basic, however, to the decline of modernism was the change in the conjuncture that followed the Second World War. With the waning of the prospect of an antibourgeois revolution, no matter how vaguely defined, one of the sustaining myths of modernism crumbled. Modernism lost its *raison d'être* once people could no longer imagine a society different from the hedonistic and consumption-driven one in which they lived.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁷ It is interesting how many of these aspects of modernism Ortega y Gasset touched on in his 1924 essay, "The Dehumanization of Art." For modernism's rejection of history, see Carl E. Schorske's collection of essays, *Thinking with History* (Princeton, N.J., 1998).

¹⁵⁸ See Nicholls (n. 25 above); and Cottington (n. 109 above), for the development of this theme. The question is to what extent the indisputable misogyny of much modernist culture was somehow related to modernism itself and to what extent it reflected broader misogynistic tendencies in European culture as a whole. For a judicious introduction to this issue, see Rita Felski, *The Gender of Modernism* (Cambridge, Mass., 1995), pp. 22–29. We also need to place more carefully in context the gender politics of specific modernist movements, like Italian futurism, as Lucia Re has done in her book, *Women and the Avant-Garde: Experimentalism, Gender and Politics in Modern Italian Culture*, forthcoming from the University of California Press, Berkeley. For the role of women in Italian futurism, see also Adamson, "Futurism, Mass Culture, and Women: The Reshaping of the Artistic Vocation, 1909–1920" (n. 30 above), pp. 102–6.

¹⁵⁹ "The attack on authority, the ridicule of anything established, the distortions of language and objects, the indifference to clear meaning, the violence to the human form, the return to the primitive elements of sensation, the growing list of genres called Anti-, of which the root principle is 'Expect nothing,' have made Modernism at once the mirror of disintegration and an incitement to extending it"; Barzun (n. 110 above), p. 727.

¹⁶⁰ For the relationship between modernism and Stalinist communism, see Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond* (Princeton, N.J., 1992). Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn has also argued that the avant-garde's urge toward destruction "preceded and foretold the most physically destructive revolution of the 20th century. Before erupting on the streets of Petrograd, this cataclysmic revolution erupted on the pages of the artistic and literary journals of the capital's bohemian circles. It is there that we first heard scathing imprecations against the entire Russian and European way of life, the calls to sweep away all religions or ethical codes, to tear down, overthrow, and trample all existing traditional culture, along with the self-extolment of the desperate innovators themselves, innovators who never did succeed in producing anything of worth" (from his acceptance speech on receiving the medal of honor for literature of the National Arts Club, reprinted in the *New York Times Book Review*, February 7, 1993, p. 3).

¹⁶¹ For a development of this argument from a Marxist perspective, see Perry Anderson, *The Origins of Postmodernity* (London, 1998), pp. 83–92. "Modernism, from its earliest origins in

But should this history be understood under the sign of failure? From a Marxist perspective, certainly. But most modernists were not Marxists, even if they longed after (or thought they longed after) some kind of collectivist solution to liberalism's crisis. In addition to its well-known shortcomings, areas of blindness, and misalliances, modernism, in the fullness of its multifaceted variety, has enriched our culture with a more complex and satisfactory understanding of the personality and its relationship to the larger forces that surround it; it has transformed our notion of the connection between past and present, between objective and subjective time; it has given us a deeper and more all-encompassing comprehension of our sexuality; and it has offered us new ways of representing the world and our place in it that were either nonexistent or only dimly grasped in 1900. To give but one example, simultaneity, a daring avant-garde idea before 1914, is for us an everyday aspect of experience. Though nothing may be able to reverse Max Weber's "disenchantment of the world," modernist artists have done much to keep alive our sense of wonder and delight (not to mention horror) in the midst of industrial discipline, bureaucratic routine, quantification, and the invasion of all aspects of life by commodification and the imperatives of the market. They have brought flashes of light to the "blindness" of the modernity that fills Clark with dread and revulsion.¹⁶² Moreover, modernism is far from dead: Everdell and Smith are certainly right to remind us that more of it lives on in our "postmodern" culture than most of us are inclined to think.¹⁶³

It is true that modernist forms no longer have the same meaning for us that they had for the people who created them. They lack the novelty, the ability to shock, the sense of danger and possibility, the seductive power of utopia. But this is merely because we live in a historical world very different from theirs. The modernists were living through the transition between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Baudelaire or Flaubert onwards, virtually defined itself as 'anti-bourgeois.' Postmodernism is what occurs when, without any victory [over the bourgeoisie], that adversary is gone" (p. 86).

¹⁶² "'Secularization' is a nice technical word for this blankness [of modernity]. It means specialization and abstraction; social life driven by a calculus of large-scale statistical chances, with everyone accepting (or resenting) a high level of risk; time and space turned into variables in that same calculus, both of them saturated by 'information' and played with endlessly, monotonously, on nets and screens; the de-skilling of everyday life (deference to experts and technicians in more and more of the microstructure of the self); available, invasive, haunting expertise; the chronic revision of everything in the light of 'studies.' I should say straightaway that this cluster of features seems to me tied to, and propelled by, one central process: the accumulation of capital, and the spread of capitalist markets into more and more of the world and the texture of human dealings" (Clark, *Farewell to an Idea*, p. 7).

¹⁶³ Everdell, *The First Moderns* (n. 14 above), concludes his book with the observation that "modernism is still with us and postmodernism may not mean half as much as Continental criticism thinks it does" (p. 360). Smith sees postmodernism "as the final efflorescence of a twentieth-century modernism that had been growing in opposition to the Formalesque since the Great War of 1914–18" (p. 6). For post–Second World War vestiges of modernist culture, see Peter Wollen's *Raiding the Ice-Box: Reflections on 20th Century Culture* (London, 1993). Fredric Jameson concedes that the elements of postmodernist culture existed within modernism itself, but he claims that a process of restructuring in which features that had earlier been subordinate have now become dominant justifies a break between what he sees as two distinct periods (Fredric Jameson, *The Cultural Turn* [London, 1998], pp. 18–19).

Seen from our vantage point on the cusp of the twenty-first century, they were in many ways closer to the former than to the latter. If we think in terms of a “long” nineteenth century that extends to 1914—and a strong argument can be made for doing so—modernism in its most important and representative manifestations would be rooted in it. And this would help us to explain the perennial problem we face in trying to separate modernism from romanticism, a movement with which it clearly has much in common.¹⁶⁴

Perhaps, then, Clark is wrong in suggesting, pessimistically, that we cannot understand modernism’s history because the modernity its protagonists prophesied has finally arrived. The logic of the “ruin” of modernism is not as impenetrable to us as he would have us believe. Indeed, his book is eloquent testimony to our ability to illuminate the heart of modernism’s darkness—which is fortunate, when one thinks about it, because modernism’s history, with all its dead ends and its lasting breakthroughs, holds precious clues to an understanding of our immediate past. Perhaps, then, we should amend Clark’s dark suggestion that modernism is “our antiquity,” with its imagery of ruins, decline, and collapse, to the somewhat more optimistic conclusion that modernism is our tradition, still alive (though no longer as exuberantly youthful as it once was), deeply flawed (like most traditions), and, yes (echoing Clark), the only one we have.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶⁴ Among those scholars who have recently written on the topic of modernism, Peter Gay is one of the few to confront squarely the problem of modernism’s relationship to romanticism. “One of the hurdles obstructing a stable definition of modernism,” he writes, “was its ambivalence toward romanticism; the moderns were both its belated heirs and its stoutest critics” (*Pleasure Wars* [n. 1 above], p. 203). Much remains to be done with the interconnections between the two movements.

¹⁶⁵ I wrote these lines before reading J. W. Burrow’s *The Crisis of Reason: European Thought, 1848–1914* (New Haven, Conn., 2000), which ends: “Post-modernism in literature, for all the critical volubility expended on it, looks more like a gloss on Modernism than its historical gravedigger. Modernism is our tradition” (p. 253).