The Ideology of Modernism

It is in no way surprising that the most influential contemporary schools of writing should still be committed to the dogmas of "modernist" antirealism. It is here that we must begin our investigation:

First, we are to contrast the possibilities of a bourgeois realism. We must compare the two main trends in contemporary bourgeois literature, and look at the answers they give to the major ideological and artistic questions of our time.

We shall concentrate on the underlying ideological basis of these trends (ideological in the sense of: not the strictly philosophical, sense). What must be avoided at all costs is the approach generally adopted by bourgeois-modernist critics themselves: that exaggerated concern with formal criteria, with questions of style and literary technique. This approach may appear to distinguish sharply between "modern" and "traditional" writing (i.e., contemporary writers who adhere to the styles of the last century).

In fact, it fails to locate the decisive formal problem and turns a blind eye to their inherent dialectics. We are presented with a false polarization which, by exaggerating the importance of stylistic differences, conceals the opposing principles underlying and determining contrasting styles.

Let us take an example: the monologue interior. Compare, for instance, Bloom's monologue in The Lovers, or Joyce's monologue in Ulysses. At the beginning and at the end of Ulysses, with Joyce's stream-of-consciousness technique, it is itself an informative principle, governing the narrative pattern and the presentation of characters. One thing is clear: here there is something absolute; it is not and cannot be a question of the aesthetic ambition informing Ulysses. Yet Thomas Mann, on the other hand, the monologist, who is present in the same work, is simply a technical device, allowing the author to narrate aspects of his character which would not have been otherwise available.

With the principle of absorption of the world, and without the aesthetic ambition informing Ulysses, it is the case that one must take the view that Joyce's technique is not presented as a contrast to the world of single impressions. This, in turn, is the core of Goethe's personality, to the complexity of his relations with his own past, present, and even future experience. The stream of association is only apparently free. The monologue is composed of the almost entire experience of the writer; it is a carefully plotted sequence gradually forming the core of Goethe's personality.

Every person or event, emerging momentarily from the stream and vanishing again, is given a specific place, weight, a definite position in the pattern of the whole. Joyce, on the other hand, starts with an unconventional presentation, the compositional principle is that of the traditional style. In the way that Joyce is characterized, the transitions and climaxes are generated, the monologue of epic narration are faithfully observed.

It would be absurd, in view of Joyce's artistic ambition and his past artistic abilities, to qualify the exaggerated attention he paid to the detailed recording of sense-data, and his neglect of ideas and emotions, as artistic failure. All this was in conformity with Joyce's artistic intentions; and, by use of such techniques, he may be said to have achieved them successfully. But between Joyce's intentions and those of Thomas Mann there is a total opposition. The permutually occurring patterns of sense and memory-data, their powerful charge — but sensibility and directionlessness — fields of force, give rise to an epic structure which is static, reflecting a belief in the basically static character of events.

Translated by John and Helen Medder.

The ostentatious view governing the image of man in the work of leading modernist writers is the exact opposite of this. Man, for these writers, is a joyous and active, social, unable to enter into relationships with other individuals, but only in a superficial, accidental manner, only on the basis of existing, by retrospective reflection. But the "other," too, are basically solitary, beyond significant human relationships.

This basic loneliness of man must not be confused with that individual loneliness to be found in the literature of traditional realism. In the latter case, we are dealing with a particular situation in which a human being may be a part of the writer's character or to the circumstances of his life. Solitude may be objectively conditioned, as with Sappho's Philotossos, put aside on the basis of the individual's experience or on the product of inner necessity, as with Tolstoy's Ivan Ilyitch or Flaubert's Frédéric Moreau in the Education Sentimentale. But it is always merely a fragment, a phase, a climax, or antithesis, in the life of the community as a whole. The fate of such individuals is characterized by certain human existential circumstances. Besides and beyond their solitary and often common life, the strife and togetherness of other human beings, goes on as before. In a word, their loneliness is a specific social fate, not a universal condition human.

The latter, of course, is characteristic of all too many of the individuals of modem society. I would like, in the present study, to spare the reader tedious excursions into philosophy. But I cannot refrain from drawing the reader's attention to Heidegger's description of human existence as a "thrownness into-being" (Geworfenheit ins Dasein). A more graphic evocation of the ontological loneliness of the individual would be hard to imagine. Man is "thrown-into-being." This implies, not merely that man is constitutionally unable to establish relationships with things.
or persons outside himself; but also that it is impossible to determine theoretically the origin and goal of human existence.

Man, thus conceived, is an historical being. (The fact that Heidegger does admit a form of "authentic" history in his system is not really pertinent. I have shown elsewhere that Heidegger tends to belittle history as "voluntary," and his "authentic" history is not distinguishable from his own philosophy.) This negation of history takes two different forms in modernist literature. First, the hero is strictly confined within the limits of his own experience. There is no possibility for him — and he is not aware of the fact — any precedent reality beyond his own self-acting upon or being acted upon by him. (Secondly, the hero himself is without personal history. He is "thrown into the world"; meaningly, unfashionably. He does not develop through contact with the world; he neither forms nor is formed by it. The only "development" in his literature is the gradual revelation of the historical condition. Man is now what he has always been and always will be."

The narrator, the examining subject, is in motion; the examined reality is static.

Of course, doctrines of this kind are only really viable in philosophical abstraction, and then only with a tragic logic. A philosophical writer, however extreme his theoretical configuration, will always in practice have to compromise with the demands of historicality and of social environment. Joyce uses Dublin, Kafka's and Musil's Heppen Monarchist, as the locus of his masterpiece, but the locus they lovingly depict is little more than a historical accident. It is not to be taken as their artistic intention.

This view of human existence has specific literary consequences. Particularly in one category, of primary theoretical and practical importance, to which we must now give our attention: that of potentiality. Philosophy distinguishes between abstract and concrete (in Hegel, "real") potentiality. These two categories, their interrelation and opposition, are rooted in itself. Potentiality — seen abstractly or subjectively — is richer than actuality, innumerable possibilities for man's development are imaginable, only a small proportion of which will be realized. Modern subjectivism, taking those imagined possibilities for actuality, converts them into melancholy and fascination. When the last realisations of these possibilities, these melancholy becomes tinged with contentment. Hofmannsthal's Sobotta expressed the reaction of the generation first exposed to this experience: "The burden of those endlessly pondered, and now forever possible possibilities..."

How far were those possibilities even concrete or "real"? Clearly, they existed only in the imagination of the subject, as dreams or daydreams. In Faulkner, whose work this imaginative potentiality plays an important part, was evidently aware that reality must thereby be subjectivised and made to appear arbitrary. Consider this comment of his: "They were all talking simultaneously, getting flushed and excited, quarrelling, making the unreal into a reality, then into a probability, then into an infallible fact, as human beings do when they put their wishes into words." The possibilities in a man's mind, the particular pattern of intensity and suggestiveness they assume, will of course be characteristic of that individual. In practice, their number will be reduced on the infinite, even to the most imaginary individual, is that hopeless undertaking, the limitation of the consciousness of individuality, let alone to come to grips with man's actual fate, by means of potentiality. The abstract character of potentiality is clear from the fact that it cannot determine development — subjective mental states, however permanent or protracted, can be decisive. Rather, the development of potentiality is determined by the factors of interest, such as external or internal, which further or inhibit their growth.

But in life potentiality can, of course, become reality. Situations arise in which a man is confronted with a choice, and in the act of choice a man's character may reveal itself in a light that surprises even himself. In literature — and particularly in dramatic literature — the denouement often consists of the realization of just such a potentiality, which circumstances have kept from coming to the fore. These potentialities are then "real" or concrete potentialities. The fate of the subject depends upon the potentiality in question, even if it should condemn him to a tragic end. In advance, while still a subjective potentiality, the character's mind, there is no way of distinguishing it from the innumerable abstract potentialities of his mind. It may even be buried away so completely that, before the moment of decision, it has never entered his mind even as an abstract potentiality. The subject, after taking his decision, may be unconscious of his own actions. Thus Richard Dorjeon, Shaw's Devil's Disciple, having sacrificed himself as Pastor Anderson, confesses: "I have often asked myself for the motive, but I find no good reason to explain why I acted as I did."

Yet it is a decision which has altered the direction of his life. Of course, this is an extreme case. But the qualitative leap of the denouement, cancelling and at the same time restoring the continuity of the individual consciousness, can never be predicted. The concrete potentiality cannot be isolated from the myriad abstract potentialities. Only actual decision reveals the distinction between the two. One truth: a fact of reflection of reality, must demonstrate both the abstract and concrete potentialities of individual beings in extreme situations of this kind. A character's concrete potentiality once revealed, his abstract potentialities will appear essentially inauthentic. Moravia, for instance, in his novel The Inconstant One, describes a young man of the decadent bourgeois family, Michel, who takes up his mind to kill his sister's seducer. While Michel, having made his decision, is planning the murder, a large number of abstract — but highly suggestive — possibilities are laid before us. Unfortunately for Michel the murder is actually carried out, and, from the scald details of the action, Michel's character emerges as it is — representative of that background from which, in subjective fantasy, he had imagined he could escape.

Abstract potentiality belongs wholly to the realm of subjectivity; the concrete potentiality is concerned with the dialectic between the individual's subjectivity and objective reality.

The literary presentation of the latter thus implies a description of actual persons inhabiting a palpable, identifiable world. Only in the interaction of character and environment can the concrete potentiality of a particular individual be singled out from the "past infinity" of purely abstract potentialities, and emerge as the determining potentiality of just this individual at just this phase of his development. This principle alone enables the artist to distinguish concrete potentiality from a myriad abstracts.

But the ontology, on which the image of man in modernist literature is based, invalidates this principle. If the "human condition" — man as a social being, incapable of meaningful relationships — is identified with reality itself, the distinction between abstract and concrete potentiality becomes null and void. The categories tend to merge. Thus Cesare Pavese notes with John Dos Passos, and his Cesare contemporaneous, Alfred Doblin, a sharp oscillation between "superficial verism" and "abstract Expressionistic scansion."

Critics of Dos Passos, Pavese writes that fictional characters "ought to be created by deliberate selection and description of individual features, rather than by the indirect method. Passos's characters are interchangeable from one individual to another. He describes the artistic consequences: by excluding man's subjectivity, at the expense of the objective reality of his environment, man's subjectivity itself is impoverished.

The problem, once again, is ideological. This is not to say that the ideology underlying modernist criticism is identical with it. On the contrary: the ideology exists in extremely various, even contradictory forms. The rejection of narrative objectivity, the surrender to subjectivity, may take the form of Joyce's stream of consciousness, or of Musil's "active passivity," his "existence without quality," or of Gide's "action gratuite," where abstract potentiality achieves pseudo-realization. As individual character manifests itself in life's moments of decision, so too in literature. If the distinction between abstract and
concrete potentiality vanishes, if man’s inwardness is identified with an abstract subjectivity, human personality must necessarily disintegrate.

T. S. Eliot described this phenomenon, this mode of portraying human personality, as...

Shape without form, shade without colour,
Paralysed font, gesture without motion. 8

The disintegration of personality is matched by a disintegration of the outer world. In one sense, this is simply a further consequence of our argument. For the identification of abstract and concrete human potentiality rests on the assumption that the objective world is inherently inexplicable. Certain leading modernist writers, attempting a theoretical apology, have admitted this quite frankly. Often this theoretical impossibility of understanding reality is the point of departure, rather than the evaluation of subjectivity. But in any case the connection between the two is plain. The German poet Gottfried Benn, for instance, informs us that “there is no outer reality, only human consciousness, constantly building, modifying, rebuilding new worlds out of its own creativity.” Musil, as always, gives a moral twist to this thought. Unbekannt, the hero of his The Man without Qualities, when asked what he would do if he were in God’s place, replies: “I should be compelled to abolish reality.” Subjective existence “without qualities” is the complement of the negation of outer reality.

The negation of outer reality is not always an abstract idea. It is present in almost all modernist literature. In conversation, Musil once gave the period of his great novel, “between 1912 and 1914.” But he was quick to modify this statement by adding: “I have not, I must insist, written a historical novel. I am not concerned with actual events. Events, anyhow, are interchangeable. I am interested in what is typical, in what one might call the ghostly aspect of reality.” The word “ghostly” is interesting. It points to a major tendency in modernist literature: the attenuation of actuality. In Kafka, the descriptive detail is of an extraordinary immediacy and authenticity. But Kafka’s eerie ingenuity, its reality directed towards substituting his angst-ridden vision of the world for objective reality, the realistic detail is the expression of a ghostly unreality, a nightmare world, whose function is to evoke angst. The same phenomenon can be seen in writers who attempt to combine Kafka’s techniques with a critique of society — like the German writer, Wolfgang Koeppen, in his satirical novel about Bonn, Das Treibhaus. A similar attenuation of reality underlies Joyce’s stream of consciousness. It is, of course, intensified where the stream of consciousness is itself the medium through which reality is presented. And it is carried to absurdum where the stream of consciousness is that of an absent subject or of an idiot — consider the first part of Faulkner’s Sound and Fury, or a still more extreme case, Beckett’s Molloy.

Attention to reality and dissolution of personality are thus interdependent: the stronger one, the stronger the other. Underlying both is the lack of a consistent view of human nature. Man is reduced to a sequence of unrelated experiential fragments; he is as inexplicable to others as to himself. In Eliot’s Cocktail Party the psychiatrist, who voices the opinions of the author, describes the phenomenon...

Ah, but we die to each other daily
What we know of other people?
Is only our memory of the moments
During which we knew them. And they have
changed since then.
To pretend that they and we are the same
Is a useful and convenient social convention
Which must sometimes be broken. We must also
remember
That at every meeting we are meeting a stranger.

The dissolution of personality, originally the unconscious product of the identification of concrete and abstract potentiality, is elevated to a deliberate principle in the light of consciousness. It is no accident that Götterdämmerung culminated in its theoretical tract Doppelleben. 9 For Benn, this dissolution of personality took the form of a schizophrenic dichotomy. According to him, there was in man’s personality no coherent pattern of motivation or behavior. Man’s animal nature is opposed to his denaturalized, sublimated thought processes. The unity of thought and action is “backwoods philosophy”; thought and being are “quite separate entities.” Man must be either a moral or a thinking being — he cannot be both at once.

These are not, I think, purely private, eccentric speculations. Of course, they are derived from Benn’s specific experience. But there is an inner connection between these ideas and a certain tradition of bourgeois thought. It is more than a hundred years since Kierkegaard first attacked the Hegelian view that the inner and outer world form an objective dialectical unity, that they are indisputably married in spite of their apparent opposition. Kierkegaard denied any such unity. According to Kierkegaard, the individual exists within an opaque, impenetrable “incognito.”

This philosophy attained remarkable popularity after the Second World War — proof that even the most abstruse theories may reflect social reality. Men like Martin Heidegger, Ernst Jünger, the lawyer Carl Schmitt, Gottfried Benn and others passionately embraced this doctrine of the eternal incognito, which implies that a man’s external deeds are no guide to his motives. In this respect Heidegger and Schmitt were closely related. The “incognito,” according to Schmitt, was necessary, to give these “intellectual” participation in Nazism. Heidegger, as Rector of Freiburg University, had glorified Hitler’s gesture of power at his inauguration; Carl Schmitt had put his greatest legal gifts at Hitler’s disposal. The facts were too well known to be simply denied. But, if this impenetrable incognito were the true “condition humaine” might not the “condition humaine” be secret opponents of Hitler all the time, only supporting him in the world of appearances? Ernst von Salomon’s cynical frankness about his opportunism in The Questionnaire (keeping his reservations to himself or declining them only in the presence of intimate friends) may be read as an ironic commentary on this ideology of the incognito as we find it, say, in the writings of Ernst Jünger.

This digression may serve to show, taking an extreme example, what the social implications of such an ontology may be. In the literary field, this particular philosophy was of cardinal importance: by destroying the complex issue of man’s relations with his environment, it reduced the dissolution of personality. For it is just the opposition between a man and his environment that determines the development of his personality. There is no great hero of fiction — from Homer’s Achilles to Mann’s Adrian Leverkühn or Solzhenitsyn’s Gogor Melyevsky — whose personality is not the product of such an opposition. I have shown how disastrous the denial of the distinction between abstract and concrete potentiality must be for the presentation of character. The destruction of the complex issue of man’s interaction with his environment likewise saps the vitality of this opposition. Certainly, some writers who adhere to this ideology have attempted, not unsuccessfully, to portray this opposition in concrete terms. But the underlying ideology deprives them of the dynamic, developmental significance. The contradictions coexist, unresolved, contributing to the further dissolution of the problem in the individual, the “condition humaine.”

The story is told in the novel of Robert Musil that he was quite conscious of the implications of his method. Of his hero Ulrich he remarked: “One is found with a simple choice: either one must run with the pack (when in Rome, do as the Romans do); or one becomes a neurotic.” Musil here introduces the problem, central to all modern literature, of the alienation of psychology.

This problem was first widely discussed in the Naturalist period. More than fifty years ago, that dozen of Berlin dramatic critics, Alfred Kerr, was writing: “Morbidly is the legitimate poetry of Naturalism. For what is poetry in everyday life? Morbid obsession, escape from life’s decay. Only in this way can a character be translated to a rare climate and yet retain an air of reality.” Interestingly, here, is the notion that the poetic necessity of the pathological derives from the prosaic quality of life under capitalism. I would maintain — we shall return to this point — that in...

8 human condition. Lukács’s use of the French adverbial to the Martin novel Le Condition Humaine, Le Condition Humaine (Man’s Fate) by André Malraux.

9 Double life.
modern writing there is a continuity from Naturism to the Modernism of our day—a continuity restricted, admittedly, to underlying ideological principles. What at first was no more than dim anticipation of approaching catastrophe developed after 1914 into an all-prevailing obsession. And I would suggest that the ever-increasing part played by psychopathology was one of the main features of the continuity. At each period—depending on the prevailing social and historical conditions—psychopathology was given a new emphasis, a different significance and artistic function. Kerr's description suggests that in naturism the interest in psychopathology sprang from an aesthetic need; it was an attempt to escape from the dreariness of life under capitalism. The quotation from Musil shows that some years later the opposition acquired a moral slant: "The obsession withanity had ceased to have a merely decorative function, bringing color into the greyness of reality, and become a moral protest against capitalism."

With Musil—and with many other modernist writers—psychopathology became the goal, the terminus ad quem, of their artistic intent. But there were objections, difficulties inherent in their intention, which follows from its underlying ideology. There is, first, a lack of definition. The protest expressed by this flight into psychopathology is an abstract gesture, its rejection of reality is wholesale and summary, containing no concrete criticism. It is a gesture, moreover, that is destined to lead nowhere; it is an escape into nothingness. Thus the propagators of this ideology are mistaken in thinking that such a protest could ever be fruitful in literature. In any protest against particular social conditions, these conditions themselves must have the central place. The bourgeois protest against feudal society, the proletarian against bourgeois society, made their point of departure a criticism of the old order. In both cases the protest—reaching out beyond the point of departure—was based on a concrete terminus ad quem: the establishment of a new order. However, indefinite the structure and content of this new order, the will towards its more exact definition was not lacking.

How different the protest of writers like Musil! The terminus a quo (the corrupt society of our time) is inevitably the main source of energy, since the terminus ad quem (the escape into psychopathology) is a mere abstraction. The rejection of modern reality is merely subjective. Consistently in terms of man's relation with his environment, the new man lacks both content and direction. And this lack is exaggerated still further by the character of the terminus ad quem. For the protest is an empty gesture, expressing nausea, or disgust, or longing its content—or rather lack of content—is derived from the fact that such a view of life cannot impact a sense of direction. These writers are not wholly wrong in believing that psychopathology is their surest refuge; it is the ideological compensation of their historical position.

This obsession with the pathological is not easy to be found in literature. Freudian psychopathology is its most obvious expression. The treatment of the subject is only superficially different from that in modern literature, as everyone knows. Freud's starting point was "everyday life." In order to explain "slips" and daydreams, however, he had to have recourse to psychopathology. In his lectures, speaking of resistance and repression, he was again in the grip of the idea of the pathological: symptom-formation as we understand it to what extent the study of pathological conditions can shed light on the workings of the normal mind." Freud believed he had found the key to the understanding of the normal personality in the psychology of the abnormal. This belief is still very remote, more evident in the psychological school of "Kleistianism," which also assumes that psychological abnormalities can explain normal psychology. It is only when we compare Freud's psychology with that of Pavlov, who takes the Hippocratic view that mental abnormality is a deviation from a norm that we see it in its true light.

Clearly, this is not strictly a scientific literary-critical problem. It is an ideological problem, deriving from the ontological dogma of the solitariness of man. The literature of realism, based on the Aristotelian concept of man as cow politician," is entitled to develop a new typology. or each new phase in the evolution of a society, it displays the contradictions within society and within the individual in the context of a dialectical unity. (Here, individuals embodying violent and extraordinary passions are still within the range of a socially normal typology [Shakespeare, Pushkin, Stendhal].) But, in this literature, the new man is simply a different reflection of the contradictions always existing in man and society; eccentricity is a socially-conditioned distortion. Obviously, the passions of the great heroes must not be confused with "eccentricity." In the colloquial sense: Christian Dorenskoffs is an "eccentric." Adrian Leverkühn is not. The typology of Gevernethen makes a true typology impossible: It is replaced by an abstract polarity of the eccentric and the socially average. We have seen why this polarity—which in traditional realism serves to increase our understanding of social normality—leads in modernism to a fascination with morbid eccentricity. Eccentricity becomes the necessary complement of the average; and this polarity is held to exhaust human potentiality. The implications of this idea are shown in another remark of Musil's: "If humanity dreads collectively, it would do better to wish every individual his own way."

What served, with Musil, as the ideological basis of a new typology—escape into neurosis as a protest against the evils of society—becomes with other modernist writers an immutable condition human. Musil's statement loses its conditional "if" and becomes a simple description of reality. Lack of subjectivity in the description of the outer world finds its complement in the reduction of reality to a nightmare. Beckett's Malloy is perhaps the nos plus ultram of this development, although Joyce's vision of reality as an incoherent stream of consciousness had already assumed in Proust a nightmare quality. In Beckett's novel we have the same vision twice over. He presents us with an image of the utmost human degradation—an idiot's vegetative existence. Then, as help is imminent from a mysterious unspecified source, the rescuer himself sinks into idiocy. The story is told through the parallel streams of consciousness of the idiot and of his rescuer.

Along with the adoption of perversion and idiocy as types of the condition human, we find what amounts to frank glorification. Tarkovsky's movie, where sexual perversion—the form of the idol—first appears as a bull—is presented as a triumphant return to nature, as the liberation of man from the religion of convention. The chor- us—i.e., the author—puts the following question (which, though rhetorical, clearly expects an affirmative reply): "Is there any difference—no, we are ourselves and reverberate as we go..." His Montherlant expresses it as plainly as Musil, though with different moral and emotional emphasis, the hidden—once might say repressed—social character of the protest underlying this obsession with psychopathology, its perversion and anti-humanism. There are many illustrations of this in modernist writing. A poem of Benn's will serve to make the point:

O that we were our primal ancestors,
Small forges of peace in hot, sultry swamps,
Life, death—conception, parturition
Emerging from those juices soundlessly.
A fraud of seaweed or a dance of sand.
Passed by the wind and heavens axe..."

Benn, on the other hand, expresses it as plainly as Musil, though with different moral and emotional emphasis, the hidden—once might say repressed—social character of the protest underlying this obsession with psychopathology, its perversion and anti-humanism. There are many illustrations of this in modernist writing. A poem of Benn's will serve to make the point:

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1Starting point.
2Political animal.
3Ultimate point.

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of the abnormals and to an undisguised anti-


tropy limited in this way to the homo-
nayar sensorial and the idiot also opens the door to
"experimental" stylistic distortion. Distortion, becom-
ing inseparable a part of the portrayal of
reality as the recourse to the pathological. But lit-
erature must have a concept of the normal if it is to
"place" distortion correctly; that is to say, to
see it at distortion. With such a typology this
placing is impossible, since the normal is no
longer a proper object of literary interest. Life
under capitalism is, often tightly, presented as a
distortion (a perversion or analysis) of the
human substance. To prevent psychology
theory as a way of escape from this distortion is
itself a distortion. We are invited to measure one
type of distortion against another and arrive, ac-
nessibly, at universal distortion. There is no prin-
ciple to set against the general pattern, no
standard by which the petty-bourgeois and the
pathological can be seen in their social context. And
these tendencies, far from being relativized
with time, become ever more absolute. Distortion
becomes the normal condition of human exist-
ance, the proper style, the formative principle.

I have demonstrated some of the literary impli-
cations of this ideology. Let us now pursue
argument further. It is clear, I think, that modernism
must deprive literature of a sense of perspective.
This would be surprising rigorous modernists
such as Kafka and Musil will always indig-
nantly resist, to provide their readers with any
such thing, I will still illustrate the implications
of the idea of perspective later. Let us
here that, in any work of art, perspective is of
overriding importance. It determines the course and
content; it draws together the threads of the narra-
tion; it enables the artist to choose between the im-
portant and the superficial, the crucial and the
episodic. The direction in which characters de-
velop is determined by perspective, only these fea-
tures being described which are material to their
development. The more rigid the perspective — as in
Melville or the Greeks — the more economical
and straining the selection.

Modernism develops this selective principle. It
asserts that it can dispense with it, or can replace
it with its dogma of the condition humaine. A nat-
uralistic style is bound to be the result. This style
of affairs which to my mind characterizes all
modernist art of the past fifty years — is dis-
guised by critics who systematically glorify the
modernist movement. By concentrating on cos-
nological criteria, by isolating technique from content,
and exaggerating its importance, these critics
seem to derive from judgment on the formal or artistic sig-
nificance of subject matter. They are unable, in
consequence, of making the aesthetic distinction
between realism and naturalism. This distinction
depends on the presence or absence in a work of
art of "hierarchy of significance" in the situation
and characters presented. Compared with this,
formal criteria are of secondary importance.

That is why it is possible to speak of the basically
naturalistic character of modernist literature — and
to see in the literary expression of an ideology
continuity. This is not to deny that variations in
style reflect changes in society. But the particular
form of this principle of naturalistic aritnlessness;
this lack of hierarchic structure, may take is not
decisive:  WO encounter in the all-determining
"social conditions" of Naturalism, in Symbolism's
impressionist methods and its cultivation of the
exotic, in the fragmentation of objective reality in
Romanticism and Constructivism and the German
Neue Sachlichkeit, 2 and, again, in Surrealism's
stream of consciousness.

These schools have in common a basically sta-
tical approach to reality. This is clearly related to
their lack of perspective. Characteristically,
Gottfried Benn actually incorporated this in his
artistic program. One of his volumes bears the title


2New objectivity or impersonality.


The rejection of any concept of the future
for Benn the criterion of wisdom. But even those
modernist writers who are less extreme in their
rejection of history tend to present social and his-
torical phenomena as static. It is then, of small
importance whether this condition is "eternal," or
only a transitional stage punctuated by sudden
stages of (even in early Naturalism the static
presentation was often broken up by these cata-

drophes, without altering its basic character).
Musil, for instance, writes in his essay, The
Writer in Our Age: "One knows just as little about
the present. Pattly, this is because we are, as,
always, too close to the present. But it is also
because the present into which we were plunged
two decades ago is of a particularly all-
embracing and inescapable character." Whether
or not Musil knew of Heidegger's philosophy, the
idea of Gewordenheit is clearly at work here. And
the following reveals plainly how, for Musil, this
static state was upset by the catastrophe of 1914:
"All of a sudden, the world was full of vio-


ence... In European civilization, there was a
sudden rift . . . ." In short: this state apprehension
of reality in modernist literature is no passing
illusion; it is rooted in the ideology of modernism.

To establish the basic distinction between mod-
ernism and that realism which, from Homer to
Thoreau, always understood change and development to be the proper subject of litera-
ture, we must go deeper into the underlying iode-
ological problem. In The House of the Dead
Dostoevsky gave an interesting account of the
concept's attitude to work. He described how the pris-
ers, in spite of brutal discipline, turned about, working
hard but for nothing, and used the motions of work until a new overseer arrived and
allocted them a new project, after which they were
allowed to go home. "The work was hard,"
Dostoevsky continues, "but, Christ, with what
energy they threw themselves into it!" Gene was all
their former incicence and pretense incompe-
tence. Later in the book Dostoevsky sums up his
experiences: "If a man loses hope and has no aim in
view, sheer boredom can turn him into a beast . . . . ." I have said that the problem of perspec-
tive in literature is directly related to the principle
of selection. Let me go further: underlying the
problem is a profound ethical complex, reflected in
the composition of the work itself. Every human
action is based on a presupposition of its inherent
meaningfulness, at least to the subject. Absence of
meaning makes a mockery of action and reduces
it to naturalistic description.

Clearly, there can be no literature without at
least the appearance of change or development.
This conclusion should not be interpreted in a
mechanical metatrophic sense. We have already
diagnosed the obsession with metaphorology in
modernist literature as a desire to escape from the
reality of capitalism. But this implies the absolute
privacy of the term "eternal," the condition from
which it is desired to escape. Any movement
which the term "eternal" is condemned to impotence. As the ideology of most modernist
writers asserts the unimportance of transcendent
reality (even if this is reduced to a mere state of con-
sciousness) human activity is of a priori, rendered
impotent and robbed of meaning.

The apprehension of reality to which this leads
is most consistently and convincingly realized in
the work of Kafka. Kafka remarks of Josef K., as
he is being led to execution: "He thought of files,
their tiny limbs breaking as they struggle away
from the "fly-paper."" This mood of total impo-
tence, of paralysis in the face of the unintelligible
power of circumstances, informs all his work.
Thomas Mann, in The Magic Mountain, takes a differ-
ent, even an opposite, direction: that of The Trial,
this view of the world, from the perspective of a
trapped and struggling fly, is all-pervasive. This
experience, this vision of a world dominated by
anger and of man at the mercy of incomprehensible
forces, makes Kafka's work the very type of
modernist art. Techniques, elsewhere of merely
formal significance, are reduced here to a
primitive awe in the presence of an utterly strange
and hostile reality. Kafka's anger is the experi-
ence par excellence of modernism.

Two instances from musical criticism —
which can afford to be both franker and more
theoretical than literary criticism — show that it is
indeed a universal experience with which we are
dealing. The composer, Hans Eisler, says of
Schönberg: "Long before the invention of the
bombard, he expressed what people were to feel in
the air raid shelters." Even more characteristic
— though they seem from a modernist point of view — is
Theodor W. Adorno's comment (in The Age of
Modern Music) of symptoms of decadence in
modernist music: "The sounds are still the same.

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MARXIST CRITICISM

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But the experience of anger, which made their origins great, has vanished. Modernist music, he continues, has lost touch with the truth that was its raison d'être. Composers are no longer equal to the emotional preoccupations of their modernism. And that is why modernist music has failed. The diminution of the original super-obscured vision of life (whether one, as Adorno thinks, to inability to respond to the magnitude of the horror on or, as I believe, to the fact that this obsession with anger among bourgeois intellectuals has already begun to recede), has brought about a loss of substance in modern music, and destroyed its authenticity as a modern art form.

This is a shred analysis of the paradoxical situation of the modernist artist, particularly where he is trying to express deep and genuine experience. The deeper the experience, the greater the damage to the artistic whole. But this tendency towards disintegration, this loss of artistic unity, cannot be written off as a mere failure, the product of experimental clichés. Modernist philosophy, after all, encountered these problems long before modern literature, painting or music.

A case in point is the problem of time. Subjective idealism's notion of time manifested itself in a time-bound, abstractly conceived, from the standpoint of space, and particularity of place. As if the separation between art and time were minimal, for the new age of imperialism, Bergson widened it further. Experience time, subjective time, now became identical with real time; the rift between art and time, and that of the objective world was complete. Bergson, like all modernist philosophers, who took up and varied this theme, proved that their concept of time alone sufficed insight into authenticity, i.e., subjective, reality. The same tendency soon made its appearance in literature.

The German left-wing critic and essayist of the twenties, Walter Benjamin, has well described Proust’s vision of time and the technique he uses to present it in his great novel: "We all know that Proust does not describe a man’s life as it actually happens, but as it is remembered by a man who has lived through it. Yet this puts it far too crudely. For it is not actual experience that is important, but the texture of reminiscence, the Proustian’s tapestry, a map of memory.” The connection with Bergson’s theory of time and memory is obvious. But whereas with Bergson, in the abstraction of philosophy, the unity of perception is preserved, Benjamin shows that with Proust’s novel, a result of the radical integration of the two senses, objectivity is lost. “A living event is final, concluded at least on the level of experience. But a remembered event is infinitely possible key to everything that preceded it and everything that will follow it.”

But the consequences of isolating time and reducing it to a subjective category. But time is by no means the only component whose removal can lead to such disintegration. Here again, Hofmannsthal anticipated later developments. His imaginary "Monsieur Chardons" reflects: “I have lost the ability to think of things as enduring, to think of everything being forever.” The result is a condition of apathy, punctuated by manic fits. The development towards a definite pathological protest is here anticipated — admitted in glamorous, romantic guise. But it is the same disintegration that is at work.

Previous realistic literature, however violent its criticism of reality, had always retained the reality of the world it described and seen it as a living whole inseparable from man himself. But the major realists of our time deliberately introduce elements of disintegration into their work — for instance, the subjectivizing of time, and use art to portray the contemporary world more accurately. In this way, the once-unified unity of time becomes a constructed unity (I have shown elsewhere that the device of the temporal plane in Thomas Mann’s Doctor Faustus serves to emphasize its historicity). But in modernist literature, the disintegration of the world of man, and consequent disintegration of personality — coincides with the ideological intention. Thus anger, this basic modern experience, this product of Gewohnheit, has its emotional origin in the experience of a disintegrating society. But it attains its effects by evoking the disintegration of the world of man. To complete our examination of modernist literature, we must consider for a moment the question of allegory. Allegory is that aesthetic genre which lends itself per excellence to a description of man’s alienation from objective reality. Allegory is a problematic genre because it relates an impression of an immediate meaning to human existence which, however unconscious, however combined with religious concepts of transcendence — is the basis of traditional art.

Thus in medieval art we observe a new secularity (in spite of the continual use of religious subjects) triumphing more and more, from the time of Giotto to the allegorizing of an earlier period. Certain reservations should be made at this point. First, we must distinguish between literature and the visual arts. In the latter, the limitations of allegory can be more easily overcome in that transcendental allegorical subjects can be clothed in an aesthetic immediacy (even if of a merely decorative kind) and the rift in reality is in some sense eliminated — we have only to think of Byzantine mosaic art. This decorative element has no real equivalent in literature; it exists only in a figurative sense, and then only as a secondary component. Allegorical art of the quality of Byzantine mosaics is only rarely possible in literature. Secondly, we must bear in mind in examining allegory — and this is of great importance for our argument — that a historical distinction does the concept of transcendence in question conflict within itself (tendencies towards immanence in Byzantine art of Giotto), or is the product precisely of a selection of these tendencies?

Allegory, in modernist literature, is clearly the labor of the mind. Transcendence implies here, more or less consciously, the negation of any unifying or uniting immanence in the world or the life of man. We have already examined the underlying ideological basis of this view and its stylistic consequences.

To conclude our analysis, and to establish the allegorical character of modernist literature, I must refer again to the work of one of the foremost theoreticians of modernism — to Walter Benjamin. Benjamin’s examination of allegory was a product of his researches into German Baroque drama. Benjamin made his analysis of these relatively minor plays the occasion for a general discussion of the aesthetics of allegory. He was asking, in effect, why it is that transcendence, which is the essence of allegory, cannot be destroyed aesthetically itself.

Benjamin gives a very contemporary definition of allegory. He does not labor the analogies between modern art and the Baroque; each analogy were tamox at best, and gone much adrift by the fashionable criticism of the time. Rather, he uses the Baroque forms to critique modernism, imputing the characteristics of the latter to the former. In so doing, Benjamin became the first critic to attempt a philosophical analysis of the aesthetic paradox underlying modernist art. He writes:

In Allegory, the falsity hypocrises of history looks to the observer like a patterned primordial landscape.
History, all the suffering and failure it contains, finds expression in the human face — or, rather, in the human skull. No sense of freedom, no classical proportion, no human emotion lives in its features — not only human existence in general, but the sum of every individual human being is symbolized in this most palpable token of mortality. This is the core of the allegorical vision, of the Baroque idea of history as the present of the world: History is significant only in the sinews of its corruption. Significance is a figment of mortality — because it is death that marks the passage from complicity to monumentalization.

Benjamin returns again and again to this link between allegory and the annihilation of history: In the light of this vision history appears, not as the gradual realization of the eternal, but as a process of inevitable decay. Allegory thus goes beyond beauty. What exists are not the physical objects, allegories are in the world of the mind.

Benjamin points here to the aesthetic consequences of modernism — though projected into the Baroque drama — more shrewdly and consistently than any of his contemporaries. He sees that the notion of objective time is essential to any understanding of history, and that the notion of subjective time is a product of a period of decay. A thorough knowledge of the problematic nature of art thus becomes for him — correctly, from his point of view — one of the hallmarks of allegory in Baroque drama. It is problematic, on the one hand, because it is an art on expressing absolute transcendence that fails to do so because of the medium at its disposal. It is also problematic because it is an art reflecting the corruption of the world and bringing about its own dissolution in the process. Benjamin discovers "an immense, anti-aesthetic subjectivity" in Baroque literature, associated with "a theologically-determined subjectivity." (We shall presently show — a point I have discussed elsewhere in relation to Heidegger's philosophy — how in literature a "religious atheism" of this kind can acquire a theological character.) Romantic — and, on a higher plane, Baroque — writers were well aware of this problem, and gave their understanding, not only theoretically, but artistically — that is to say allegorically — expression. "The image," Benjamin remarks, "becomes a rune in the sphere of allegorical intuition. When touched by the light of theology, its symbolic beauty is gone. The fake appearance of totality vanishes. The image can be paraded no longer holds true; the world it once contained has disappeared."

The consequences for art are far-reaching, and Benjamin does not hesitate to point them out: "Every person, every object, every relationship can stand for something else. This transferability constitutes a devastating, though just, judgment on the profane world — which is thereby branded as a world where such things are of small importance." Benjamin knows, of course, that although details are "transferable," and thus insignificant, they are not banished from art altogether. On the contrary. Precisely in modern art, with which he is ultimately concerned, descriptive detail is often of an extraordinary sensuous, suggestive power — we think again of Kafka. But this, as we showed in the case of Musil (a writer who does not consciously aim at allegory) does not prevent the materiality of the world from undergoing permanent alteration, from becoming transferable and arbitrary. Just this, modernist writers maintain, is typical of their own apprehension of reality. Yet presented in this way, the world becomes, as Benjamin calls it, "elated and deprecating at the same time."

For the reason that their art is not ultimately transferable is rooted in a belief in the world's rationality and in man's ability to penetrate its secrets. In realistic literature each descriptive detail is both individual and typical. Medieval allegory, and modernist ideology, however, deny the typic. By destroying the coherence of the world, they reduce it to a world of more particularity (once again, the connection between modernism and naturalism is plain). Detail, in its allegorical transferability, though brought into a direct, if paradoxical connection: with transcendence, becomes an abstract function of the transcendent to which it points. Modernist literature thus employs concepts typically with abstract particularity.

We are here applying Benjamin's paradox directly to aesthetics and criticism, and particularly to the aesthetics of modernism. And, indeed, we have reversed his scale of values, we have deviated from the course of his argument. Elsewhere, he speaks out even more plainly: "If the Baroque mask had fallen, revealing the modernist skull underneath:

Allegory is left empty-handed. The forces of evil, ugly evil, precisely, the non-existence of that which allegory purports to represent.

The paradox Benjamin arrives at — his investigation of the aesthetics of Baroque tragedy has culminated in a negation of aesthetics — sheds a good deal of light on modernist literature, and particularly on Kafka. In interpreting his writings allegorically I am not, of course, following Marx, who finds a specifically religious allegory in Kafka's works. Kafka refused any such interpretation in a remark he is said to have made to Brod himself: "We are nothing but figures, all of us; physical actions forming in God's mind," Kafka rejected, too, the gnostic concept of God as an evil demigurje: "The world is a cruel whale of God, and everyday's work." When Brod attempted to give him an optimistic slant, Kafka shrugged off the attempt: "Oh, hope enough, hope without and — but, not, alas, for us."

These remarks, quoted by Benjamin in his brilliant essay on Kafka, point to the general spiritual climate of his work: "He possesses the experience of the modern world, the utter meaninglessness of man's world, and particularly that of present-day bourgeois man." Kafka, whether he says so openly or not, is an atheist. An atheist, though, of that modern species who regard God's removal from the scene not as a liberation: as did Epicurus and the Encyclopedia — but as a token of the "Godlessness" of the world, its utter desolation of fertility. Jacobsen's Nils Lyhne was the first novel to describe this state of mind of the atheistic bourgeois intelligentsia. Modern religious atheism is characterized, on the one hand, by the fact that belief has lost its revolutionary edge — the empty heavens are the projection of a world beyond hope of redemption. On the other hand, religious atheism shows that the desire for salvation lives on with diminished force in a world without God, worshipping the voice created by God's absence.

The supreme judges in The Trial, the castle administration in The Castle, represent transcendence in Kafka's allegorical universe, the transcendence of Nothingness. Everything points to them, and they could give meaning to everything. Everybody believes in their existence and omnipotence; but nobody knows them, nobody knows how they can be reached. If there is a God here, it can only be the God of religious atheism: atheos agnostikos.2"

We become acquainted with a repellant host of subordinating authorities: brutal, corrupt, pedantic — and, at the same time, unreliable and irresponsible. It is a portrait of the bourgeois society Kafka knew, with a dash of Parzival local coloring. But it is also allegorical in that the doings of this bureaucracy and of those dependent on it, its improper victims, are not concrete and realistic, but a reflection of that Nothingness which governs existence. The hidden, non-existent God of Kafka's world derives his spectral character from the fact that his own non-existence is the ground of all existence; and the portrayed reality, uncannily accurate as it is, is apocalyptic in the shadow of that dependence. The only purpose of "transcendence" — the intangible Nietzschean Ницше — is to reveal the факты броцииевского2 of the world.

That abstract particularity which we saw to be the aesthetic consequence of allegory reaches its high mark in Kafka. He is a marvelous observer; the spectral character of reality affects him so closely that even the slightest episodes have an oppressive, nightmarish immediacy. As an artist, he is not content to evoke the surface of life. He is aware that individual detail must point to general significance. But how does he go about the business of abstraction? He has emptied everyday life of meaning by using the allegorical method; he has allowed detail to be amply illuminated by his transcendental Nothingness. This allegorical transcendence bars Kafka's way to realism, prevents him from investing observed detail with typical significance. Kafka is not able, in spite of his extraordinary evocative power, in spite of his unique sensibility, to achieve that fusion of the particular and the general which is the essence of realistic art. His aim is to raise the individual detail to its immediate particularity (without generalizing its content) to the level of abstraction. Kafka's method is typical,

2The departed no-God.

3Emblazoning reality.

4With nothing beyond it.
The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction

Our fine arts were developed, their types and uses were established, in times very different from the present, by men whose power of action upon things was insignificant in comparison with ours. But the astounding growth of our techniques, the adaptability and precision they have attained, the ideas and habits they are creating, make it a certainty that profound changes are impending in the ancient craft of the Beautiful. In all the arts there is a physical component which can no longer be considered or treated as it used to be, which cannot remain unaffected by our modern knowledge and power.

For the last twenty years neither master nor space nor time has been what it was from fine immemorial. We must expect great innovations to transform the entire technique of the arts, thereby affecting artistic invention itself and perhaps even bringing about an amazing change in our very notion of art.

— Paul Valéry, "Pensez sur l’art. La Conquête de l’obédience," Paris

However, theories about the art of the proletariat after its assumption of power or about the art of a classless society would have less bearing on these demands than theories about the developmental tendencies of art under present conditions of production. Their dialectic is no less noticeable in the superstructure than in the economy. It would therefore be wrong to underestimate the value of such gestures as a weapon. They brush aside a number of outdated concepts, such as creativity and genius, eternal value and mystery—concepts whose uncontrolled use (and at present almost uncontrollable) application would lead to a processing of data in the Fascist sense. The concepts which are introduced into the theory of art in what follows differ from the more familiar terms in that they are completely useless for the purposes of Fascism. They are, on the other hand, useful for the formulation of revolutionary demands in the politics of art.

Walter Benjamin
1892–1940

It is said that Walter Benjamin, one of the most influential cultural theorists in the Marxist tradition, did not look into Marx’s writings until the final decade of his tragically abbreviated life. Benjamin was born in Berlin to a wealthy Jewish family. His studies at Freiburg, Munich, Berlin, and Bonn resulted in a doctorate in 1919, but his dissertation on German tragic drama—a brilliant but unauthorized performance completed when he was thirty-three—was rejected by the University of Frankfurt. With a university career closed to him, Benjamin appears to have turned to journalism. From 1923 to 1933 Benjamin made his living mainly with his pen and became friendly with a number of left-wing intellectuals, including Bertolt Brecht. His visits to Moscow in the winter of 1926–27 confirmed his sympathy with the Soviet state, although he never joined the Communist party. When the Nazi seizure of power drove him from Berlin—he emigrated to Paris in 1933—communists from the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research enabled him to eke out a living. During these years of exile, he wrote some of his most admired work, including "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1936). In 1940, Benjamin committed suicide in Port Bou, Spain, in the mistaken belief that his plan to emigrate to America had been thwarted and that he would have to return to Nazi-occupied France. The translation of "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" is from the collection Illuminations (1969).

Preface

When Marx undertook his critique of the capitalistic mode of production, this mode was in its infancy. Marx directed his efforts in such a way as to give them a predictive value. He went back to the basic conditions underlying capitalistic production and through his presentation showed what could be expected of capitalism in the future. The result was that one could expect not only to exploit the proletariat with increasing intensity, but ultimately to create conditions which would make it possible to abolish capitalism itself.

The transformation of the superstructure, which takes place far more slowly than that of the substructure, has taken more than half a century to manifest in all areas of culture the change in the conditions of production. Only today can it be indicated what form this has taken. Certain pragmatic requirements should be met by these statements.

Translated by Harry Zohn.
