

FIVE FACES OF MODERNITY

Modernism Avant-Garde Decadence

Kitsch Postmodernism

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DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS DURHAM 1987

For Adriana and Irina

Ninth printing in paperback, 2006

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Printed in the United States of America

on acid-free paper ∞

Faces of Modernity was originally published by
Indiana University Press in 1977.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Calinescu, Matei

Five faces of modernity.

Rev. ed. of: Faces of modernity/Matei Calinescu.

c 1977

Bibliography. Includes index.

1. Modernism (Aesthetics) 2. Avant-garde (Aesthetics)

Matei. Faces of Modernity: II. Title.

BH301.M54C34 1987 111'.85 86-32756

ISBN 0-8223-0726-X

ISBN 0-8223-0767-7 (pbk.)

ible time (which critical reason has purified of all transcendent or sacred meaning), engenders the utopia of a radiant instant of invention that can suppress time by repeating itself endlessly—as the central element of a new and final tradition (no matter how antitraditionally conceived). In principle, if not in practice, the modern artist is both aesthetically and morally obliged to be aware of his contradictory position, of the fact that his achievement of modernity is bound not only to be limited and relative (circumscribed by what Beckett calls the “order of the feasible”), but also to perpetuate the past that it tries to negate and to oppose the very notion of the future that it tries to promote. Some of the nihilistic statements of modern and avant-garde artists seem to be made in direct response to such a disturbing awareness of being snarled in a knot of incompatibilities. The clash between the utopian criticism of the present and the antiutopian criticism of the future resolves itself into a variety of nihilisms that will be discussed at more length in the chapter dealing with the concept of decadence.

LITERARY AND OTHER MODERNISMS

The history of the word “modernism” shows that it was not used, in Europe or elsewhere, before the Quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns had reached its climax, that is, before the first decades of the eighteenth century. It is not difficult to understand why, at the height of the Battle of the Books, the suffix *ism*—indicative, among other things, of irrational adherence to the principles of a cult—was added to the term *modern* not by the moderns themselves but by their adversaries. The defenders of classical tradition were thus able to suggest that the attitude of the moderns was biased, that their claim of being superior to the ancients contained an element of dubious and finally disqualifying partisanship. An

expression of intellectual contempt, “modernism” was little more than a terminological weapon in the hands of the antimoderns. In his *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755), Samuel Johnson, who lists the word as a neologism invented by Swift, quotes the following passage from a letter to Pope: “Scribblers send us over their trash in prose and verse, with abominable curtailments and quaint modernisms.”⁷⁸ In Swift’s eye, modernism was nothing but a self-evident example of the corruption of English by those derogatorily referred to as “modernists” in *The Tale of a Tub* (1704).⁷⁹

To come across conscious attempts to rehabilitate “modernism” or at least neutralize its polemical connotations we have to wait until the last decades of the nineteenth century. But, as we shall see, even after such attempts were made, the lingering pejorative meaning of the word could be brought to the surface again, as in the condemnation of the heresy of “modernism” by the Catholic church in 1907. With occasional lapses into the semantics of disparagement, the notion gained wider acceptance and legitimacy only after the 1920s. Within the highly controversial terminological “constellation” of the “modern,” “modernism” was not only a latecomer but certainly the concept with the most deep-rooted polemical connotations. That is why it took such considerable time for it to be vindicated.

The first to use the label of “modernism” approvingly to designate a larger contemporary movement of aesthetic renovation was Rubén Darío, the acknowledged founder of *el modernismo* in the early 1890s. There is nearly unanimous consent among literary historians of the Hispanic world that the birth of the *movimiento modernista* in Latin America has, among other things, the significance of a declaration of cultural independence of South America. The spirit of Darío’s modernism clearly implied a downright rejection of Spain’s cultural authority. The refreshing, “modernizing” French influence (combining the major postromantic trends, parnassian, decadent, and symbolist) was consciously and fruitfully played off against the old rhetorical clichés that prevailed in the Spanish literature of the time. The new movement, which achieved

full self-awareness in Darío, went quite quickly through its first tentative stages. Its representatives, perfect contemporaries of the French "decadents," flirted for a short while with the notion of decadence, then took on the label of "symbolism" (which had become popular in France after Moréas's 1886 Symbolist Manifesto), then, finally, in the early 1890s, chose to call themselves *modernistas*. The choice of *modernismo* was a felicitous one because it made it possible for the adherents of the new poetic movement to go beyond the rather parochial squabbles that were characteristic of the contemporaneous French literary scene. Although Hispanic modernism is often regarded as a variant of French *symbolisme*, it would be much more correct to say that it constitutes a *synthesis* of all the major innovative tendencies that manifested themselves in late nineteenth-century France. The fact is that the French literary life of the period was divided up into a variety of conflicting schools, movements, or even sects ("*Parnasse*," "*décadisme*," "*symbolisme*," "*école romane*," etc.) which, in their efforts to assert themselves as separate entities, failed to realize what they actually had in common. It was much less difficult to perceive this common element from a foreign perspective, and this was exactly what the *modernistas* succeeded in doing. As foreigners, even though some of them spent long periods in France, they were detached from the climate of group rivalries and petty polemics that prevailed in the Parisian intellectual life of the moment, and they were able to penetrate beyond the mere appearances of difference to grasp the underlying spirit of radical renovation, which they promoted under the name *modernismo*.

It is interesting to note here that French literary history itself, fascinated with the detail of late nineteenth-century aesthetic polemics, has been unable or unwilling to develop an historical-theoretical concept comparable to the Hispanic *modernismo*. This fascination with detail and minimal issues was perhaps the result of the belated triumph of positivism in French literary scholarship.⁸⁰ Suspicious of theory and theoretical constructs, positivism in historical disciplines has invariably led to the kind of historical "atomism"

that has characterized the bulk of France's *critique universitaire* for more than a half century. It is true that during the last two decades a strong reaction against this type of aconceptual criticism has manifested itself under the label of "*la nouvelle critique*." But this new criticism, mostly structuralist and, as such, uninterested in history, has done practically nothing to replace the atomistic outlook of positivist criticism with broader and more fruitful *historical* hypotheses.

Rubén Darío spoke of *modernismo* as early as 1888, when, in an article published in the Chilean *Revista de Arte y Letras*, he praised the modernist quality of style of the Mexican writer Ricardo Contreras ("*el absoluto modernismo en la expresión*").⁸¹ His first description of *modernismo* as a movement (represented by "a small but triumphant and proud group of writers and poets from Spanish America") dates from 1890. It occurs in an article entitled "*Fotografado*," apparently written in Guatemala, and recounting Darío's encounter in Lima with Ricardo Palma (1833–1919). Palma was not a *modernista*, but his open-mindedness and catholicity of taste, which Darío highly commends, permitted him to understand the *espíritu nuevo* (new spirit) that modernism was consistently promoting both in prose and poetry.⁸² Three years later Darío once again employs the term *modernismo* in the preface to Jesús Hernández Somoza's book *Historia de tres años del Gobierno Sacasa* (1893). Here the author of *Azul* recalls that Modesto Barrios, the Nicaraguan writer, had been one of the initiators of modernism with his translations from Théophile Gautier ("*traducía a Gautier y daba las primeras nociones del modernismo*"). But even before Barrios, Darío goes on to say, "a great writer, Ricardo Contreras, had brought us the good tidings, preaching the gospel of French letters."⁸³

In 1894, in a review of Gómez Carrillo's *Sensaciones de arte*, Darío Herrera conveys his perception of *el modernismo*, stressing the importance, indeed the essentiality, of the French example. Gómez Carrillo, we are told, "like Rubén Darío, like Gutiérrez Nájera, like Soto Hall, like all those who drink from the French fountain, has been able to add to the sonorous music of the Spanish the concision, grace, coloring, the brilliant turns of phrase and the artis-

tic and exotic rarities which abound in modern Gallic literature."⁸⁴ Modernism is nothing but the assimilation by Castilian poetry and prose of the exacting refinements that characterize the best in modern French writing.

"Modernismo," used with increasing frequency in its positive sense, was not long in revealing its latent negative connotations—a situation the traditionalists quickly turned to their own advantage. The term became their most potent weapon against the *modernistas*, a strategy so effective that after 1894 Darío himself avoided the word. In the preface to *El canto errante* (1907), for instance, he spoke, without qualifying it, of the *movimiento* that he had largely contributed to initiate in "las flamantes letras españolas."⁸⁵ In the meantime, reflecting the powerful reaction against modernism, the 1899 edition of the *Diccionario de la lengua española* published by the Spanish Academy defined the term *modernismo* as follows: "... excessive affection for the modern and contempt for the ancient, especially in art and literature."⁸⁶

Neither the cause fought for under the banner of modernism nor the notion itself was abandoned, however. In the chapter devoted to the term *modernismo* ("Historia de un nombre") in his important book *Breve historia del modernismo* (1954), Max Henríquez Ureña cites two highly significant modernist professions of faith during the very heyday of the antimodernist reaction. The first one comes from the Latin American José Enrique Rodó, who in his study on *Rubén Darío* (1899) declared: "Yo soy un modernista también...." The second one, dating from 1902, involves one of the greatest names of continental Spanish literature, Ramón del Valle-Inclán.⁸⁷ Valle-Inclán's testimony is interesting because it anticipates a later tendency to consider modernism not just as a literary school or movement but as a larger phenomenon, the expression of the spiritual needs of a whole epoch. The Spanish writer perceives modernism as a deeply liberating influence: "I have preferred to struggle to create for myself a personal style instead of looking for a ready-made one by imitating the writers of the seventeenth century.... This is how

I became a professed modernist: Looking for me in myself and not in others.... If in literature there exists something which could be called modernism, it is certainly a strong desire for personal originality [*personalidad*]."⁸⁸

The term *modernismo* went on being used by Spanish-speaking writers and critics, and by the middle of the next decade it had become less controversial but at the same time less precise, so that in *La guerra literaria, 1898-1914* Manuel Machado could complain: "A word of purely common origin, created out of the astonishment of the majority for the latest novelties, modernism means something different to each person who utters it."⁸⁹ This lack of an accepted definition prompted the same author to note that modernism, "far from being a school, is the complete and utter end of all schools."⁹⁰ As demonstrated by the subsequent development of the concept in Hispanic criticism, it was precisely the impossibility of identifying modernism with a particular school or narrowly defined movement that constituted its basic quality, namely, that of offering the opportunity to account for a diversity of schools and individual initiatives by means of a unitary yet flexible critical category.

Since the early 1920s, *modernismo* has established itself as a major period term in Hispanic criticism. I do not intend here to follow in any detail the history of this concept in South American and Spanish criticism. The problem has been dealt with by, among others, Ned J. Davison, whose book *The Concept of Modernism in Hispanic Criticism* (1966) offers a useful review of scholarship on the subject (although I disagree with certain aspects of his analysis). After trying to delineate the area of essential critical "Consensus," Davison groups the various and sometimes sharply contradictory interpretations of Hispanic modernism into two broad categories under the headings: "Modernism as Aestheticism" and "The Epochal View." This distinction presents major difficulties (is not aestheticism an epochal phenomenon?), but it is acceptable as a working hypothesis in a study that, like Davison's, has primarily didactic and expository purposes. One may, however, reproach Davison

with having reduced the aestheticist interpretation of modernism to a single author, Juan Marinello, and moreover to one who, as a quasi-Marxist, is totally opposed to the "fetishism of form," which, according to him, constitutes the essence of modernism; even more surprising is Davison's failure to point out the ideological reasons for Marinello's polemical attitude toward modernism. Probably the chapter on "Modernism as Aestheticism" should have centered around the various efforts to find convincing criteria for differentiating between the Latin American *modernismo* (characterized, according to Pedro Salinas, by "aestheticism and the search for beauty"⁹¹) and the Spanish Generation of 1898 (which assigned itself broader ethical and philosophical goals).

Pedro Salinas's view, expressed in his important article "*El problema del modernismo en España, o un conflicto entre dos espíritus*" (1941), implies both a narrowing down and a rejection of modernism because of its cosmopolitan aestheticism. Considered largely as a fashion, the spirit of modernism had nothing in common with the seriousness of the will to change and the complex intellectual pathos of the Generation of 1898. To make his point as clear as possible, Salinas approvingly quotes Unamuno's indictment of *modernismo* (included in the 1912 volume of polemical essays *Contra esto y aquello*): "Eternalism [*eternismo*] and not modernism is what I stand for; not modernism, which will be antiquated and grotesque in ten years, when the fashion is gone."⁹² But can we actually reduce modernism to a passing fad, as its adversaries at the beginning of the century attempted to do? Or, on the contrary, should we try to set modernism in a broader perspective and, instead of regarding it as a Spanish American or even Hispanic phenomenon, discover in it, apart from the numerous distinctive features, the elements by which it is related to other Western cultures similarly engaged in the adventure of modernity?

If we consider the evolution of the concept of modernism during the last three or four decades, it is clear that the second alternative has proven more fruitful. Salinas's approach has found some defen-

ders (for instance, Guillermo Diaz Plaja in his *Modernismo frente a noventa y ocho*, 1951) and there are still literary historians who for ideological or other reasons prefer to deal with a strictly limited version of *modernismo*. The opposite trend, however, seems to be prevailing. The most famous defender of the broad interpretation was without doubt Juan Ramón Jiménez, whose notes for the course on *modernismo* held at the University of Puerto Rico in 1953 were published in 1962.⁹³ This orientation is also represented, among others, by Federico de Onís and by Jiménez's editor and commentator, Ricardo Gullón (*Direcciones del Modernismo*, 1963, reprinted in an enlarged edition in 1971).⁹⁴ After all, there is a choice between a more or less parochial view of *modernismo* (an Hispanic variant of French *symbolisme*, both notions taken in a positivistically restricted sense) and a view according to which there would be no substantial differences between *modernismo* and what Anglo-American criticism understands by "modernism."

The latter view appears as no novelty if we think that, back in 1920, Isaac Goldberg was arguing in his *Studies in Spanish American Literature* that modernism "is not a phenomenon restricted to Castilian and Ibero-American writers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, but rather an aspect of a spirit that inundated the world of Western thought during that era." And the same author goes on to say that modernism could not be characterized as a "school." Likewise, he points out that the word "movement" would be inadequate because "it does not convey the dynamic conception at the bottom of modernism, which . . . is the synthesis of several movements. In the latter sense modernism, far from having run its course, has entered upon a continental phase which promises to bear fruitful and significant results."⁹⁵

From the point of view defended by Jiménez, Onís, or Gullón, the Spanish American *modernismo* and the so-called Generation of Ninety-Eight are related phenomena, and Unamuno, who was horrified by the term, appears as one of the most typically modernist spirits in the Hispanic world. This does not mean that these critics

ignore the differences between modernism in Latin America and Spain. Onís does not fail to stress them in his essay "*Sobre el concepto del Modernismo*" (1949):

When during the decade 1890–1900 the first great representatives of modernism—Benavente, Unamuno, Ganivet, Valle-Inclán, *Azorín*—emerge in Spain belatedly as compared to America and Europe, the literature they produce has an autochthonous and original character, and is independent from previous American examples. However, American and Spanish literature coincide in tendency and spirit, despite the differences that will always exist between Spain and America. Individualism is stronger in Spain and cosmopolitanism weaker; the attitude toward the nineteenth century more negative; and the problem of closing the gap between Spain and Europe takes on the dimensions of a national tragedy. But deeply there is an essential correspondence between modernism in Spain and America.⁹⁶

Hispanic modernism, Onís contended in 1934, in the introduction to his anthology of modernist poetry, was nothing but the "Hispanic form of the universal literary and spiritual crisis started around 1885 . . . and manifesting itself in art, science, religion, politics and, gradually, in all other aspects of life. . . ."⁹⁷ But the "epochal" theory of modernism became both more consistent and more complex only as a reaction to the view plausibly and pregnantly expressed by Salinas in "*El problema del modernismo*." Ironically, Salinas rendered a great service to the very cause he opposed: he gave his potential adversaries a fertile topic for debate, aroused their self-consciousness, and furnished them with what they had been missing—the opportunity for rallying. In other words, he made an issue out of modernism. As Gullón has suggested, Jiménez became a theorist of modernism by way of reaction to Salinas and to those others who had developed Salinas's distinction between *modernismo* and the Generation of Ninety-Eight into a downright opposition.⁹⁸

In his massive *Antología de la poesía española e hispanoamericana* (1882–1932), Federico de Onís offers perhaps the best example of how *modernismo* can be applied as a broad period

concept. A glance at the anthology's table of contents is sufficient to give us an idea of what Onís understands by *modernismo*. The book is divided into six parts: "The Transition from Romanticism to Modernism: 1882–1896," which offers selections from the poetry of such authors as Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera, José Martí, José Asunción Silva, etc.; a section devoted entirely to Rubén Darío; "The Triumph of Modernism: 1896–1905," which consists of three sections, the first two being devoted respectively to *Poetas españoles* (Miguel de Unamuno, Francisco Villaespesa, Manuel Machado, Antonio Machado, Eduardo Marquina, Ramón Pérez de Ayala, and Ramón del Valle-Inclán) and *Poetas Americanos* (Guillermo Valencia, Ricardo Jaimes Freyre, Leopoldo Lugones, Amado Nervo, etc.); a section devoted entirely to Juan Ramón Jiménez; "Postmodernismo: 1905–1914"—postmodernism, according to the author, being "a conservative reaction within modernism itself, when the latter settles down and becomes rhetorical like any literary revolution that has won out";⁹⁹ and "Ultramodernismo: 1914–1932," which consists of two sections, each one of them observing the dichotomy between American and Spanish poets: (1) "The Transition from Modernism to *Ultraísmo*" and (2) "*Ultraísmo*." Among the Spanish ultraists we come across such important names as Pedro Salinas, Jorge Guillén, Federico García Lorca, Rafael Alberti. The representatives of American ultraism are Vicente Huidobro, César Vallejo, Jorge Luis Borges, Pablo Neruda, etc. As we can see, the restricted sense of *modernismo* is not negated but, being introduced in a larger historical context, it is actually enlarged and renewed on the very basis of its original meaning. Clearly, ultramodernism is different from (and in almost every respect more extreme than) *modernismo*, but this does not preclude the possibility of seeing them both as manifestations of the same interest in *modernity*, a *modernity* which is certainly changing—to the point that change constitutes its essence—and which is in any one of its major aspects in radical contrast to the stability of tradition. In this sense, Onís is perfectly entitled to argue that it is an error to disregard the indissoluble link between modernism and *modernity*: "Our error is,"

Onís confesses, "in the implication that there is a difference between 'Modernism' and 'modernity,' because Modernism is essentially, as those who gave it the name realized, the search for modernity."¹⁰⁰ As we have seen earlier, modernity always implies the sense of an "antitraditional tradition," and this accounts for, among other things, modernism's renewed capability of denying itself—its various historical "traditions"—without losing its identity. Modernity—and modernism—is a "tradition against itself," to repeat once again Octavio Paz's previously quoted formula.

Students of the concept of modernism in Hispanic criticism, and in particular those who defend the broad "epochal" approach to it, have consistently stressed the parallelism between the emergence of *modernismo* in literature and the sweeping theological debate on "modernism" that marks the turn of the century in the history of the Roman Catholic church. The term "modernism" first acquired a clearly international—though largely negative—status when it was used in connection with the modernizing tendency that appeared within the Catholic world, manifesting itself most significantly in France, Germany, and Italy. This tendency, which challenged some of the basic tenets of Catholicism (probably the most organically traditional of all Christian churches), had been tolerated if not encouraged during the liberal pontificate of Leo XIII, but was actively opposed and officially suppressed by Leo's conservative successor, Pius X. In hindsight, it is not too difficult to understand why such figures as the Abbé Alfred Loisy, Friedrich von Hügel, Ernesto Buonaiuti, George Tyrell, and others, who believed in the possibility of a synthesis of Catholicism and modernity and tried to reconcile Catholic tradition with the conclusions of positive science and historical criticism, were bound to come under official attack. Their ideas had a Reformation ring about them, insofar as they implied a thorough revision of the concepts of supernatural authority and unquestionable historical legitimacy, on which the whole of Catholic doctrine was based. So, the harsh condemnation of "modernism" in the encyclical letter *Pascendi dominici gregis* (issued in September

1907) should not be considered an exception to the Vatican's philosophy; the exception had occurred in the earlier official toleration of what was going to be called "modernism."

Loisy was certainly right when he claimed that *il y a autant de modernismes que de modernistes* (a statement, incidentally, that applies perfectly to literary modernism as well). It is quite clear that the Pope's encyclical letter was less than fair when it attempted to create the notion that there was such a thing as a "unitary" modernist doctrine that the faithful should reject globally. In theory, however, the encyclical was justified in pointing out the incompatibility between Catholic tradition and modernity; and if it is true that "there are as many modernisms as there are modernists," it is equally true that modernism, excluding any predetermined unity of views among its adherents, has, nevertheless, an identity, albeit an entirely negative one. This identity is based on a rejection of or, as is the case with the Catholic modernists, at least a questioning of authority in both its theoretical and practical aspects.

We are not interested here in either the exact history of the controversy or the validity of one or the other side's arguments, but strictly in the terminological strategy adopted by the church. By defending the *spiritual* (and atemporal) concept of religion against the broadly and variedly *temporal* and critical-historical concerns of the "modernists," the Pope and his advisers were able to exploit the still very strong polemical connotations of the word "modernism." Interestingly, the term had not been employed before (except very sporadically in 1904 and 1905) in the official language of the Roman Catholic church.¹⁰¹

Is it because of the influence of the church that in Italy "modernismo" has retained a largely pejorative meaning? Or should we look for the explanation of this remarkable fact elsewhere—in the association of the term with certain superficial and boisterous avant-garde manifestations? For, when applied to literature, the Italian notion of "modernismo" clearly tends to suggest the rather

cheap and verbose "modernolatry" of people like Marinetti and some other futurists. It is probably with such an association in mind that Renato Poggioli in his *Theory of the Avant-Garde* tries to work out a clear-cut opposition between "modernity" and what appears to be its grotesque parody, "modernism":

Both modernity and modernism go back etymologically to the concept of *la mode* [this etymology, suggestive as it may be, is erroneous]; but only the second agrees with the spirit and the letter of it. It is not in fact the modern which is destined to die . . . but the modernistic. . . . The avant-garde . . . is characterized not only by its own modernity but also by the particular type of modernism which is opposed to it. . . . Modernism leads up to, and beyond the extreme limits, of everything in the modern spirit which is most vain, frivolous, fleeting, and ephemeral. The honest-to-goodness nemesis of modernity, it cheapens and vulgarizes modernity into what Marinetti called, encomiastically, *modernolatry*: nothing but a blind adoration of the idols and fetishes of our time.¹⁰²

Poggioli's view of "modernism" as an "involuntary caricature" of modernity may appear surprising to today's Anglo-American student of literature, for whom "modernism" is a scholarly label as legitimate as, say, "baroque" or "romanticism" (amusingly, when Poggioli's book was published in translation in the United States, reviewers disregarded the author's distaste for the notion "modernism" and proposed that the reader simply understand "modernism" whenever he comes across the term "avant-garde").

When was "modernism" used in the English-speaking world in anything close to its present-day literary meaning? It is difficult to set even an approximate date. The OED turns out not to be very helpful. With the exception of Swift's already mentioned "Letter to Pope," all the examples found under the heading of "modernism" are drawn from works written during the nineteenth century, and in most of them the word is used as a synonym for "modernity" in a very general sense (this becomes clear when we consider such phrases as "the modernism of its language"—with reference to *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*—or "illustrating . . . the spirit of modern-

ism"—with reference to the American Republic). More recent and more specialized dictionaries or literary encyclopedias—such as Joseph T. Shipley's *Dictionary of World Literary Terms*¹⁰³—list the word and sometimes offer useful definitions, but they all seem uninterested in the question of when and how "modernism" became a specifically literary or artistic notion. This is so perhaps because the use of "modernism" in the language of criticism is quite recent, and nothing is more difficult to deal with than recent history. Under the circumstances it seems safe to assume that in the English-speaking countries the term "modernism" acquired a distinctive literary significance during the first two decades of our century.

For the historian of the notion of modernism in an artistic-literary sense it may be noteworthy that a short-lived little magazine, calling itself *The Modernist: A Monthly Magazine of Modern Arts and Letters*, was published in 1919. The first issue (I, 1, November 1919) lists among the contributors such names as George Bernard Shaw, Theodore Dreiser, Hart Crane, and Georges Duhamel, but the reader is soon disappointed to realize that none of these authors had offered the magazine anything previously unpublished. The foreword to the first issue makes it clear that *The Modernist*, after all, is more concerned with politics than with literature or the arts. In the aftermath of World War I, the program of the magazine is committed to the cause of progress, revolutionary change, and socialism. "In the crucible of this awful conflict," the editor, James Waldo Fawcett, writes, "every tradition, every inherited standard, has been tested; many laws have been destroyed, many pretences have been abandoned. . . . In the sky of Russia a new star has appeared, a star progressing westward, watched now by the poor and downtrodden of every land with shining, eager eyes. . . . The very atmosphere is electric with impending revolution, revision and reconstruction in all the affairs of life. The past is dead. Only the present is reality. We dream of the future, but we may not see it yet as it will truly be."

Much more interesting for the specifically literary use of the

term modernism is John Crowe Ransom's statement on "The Future of Poetry," made in *The Fugitive* in 1924 (*The Fugitive: A Journal of Poetry*, Vol. III, No. 1, February 1924, pp. 2-4). John Crowe Ransom, who later on was to create the label of "New Criticism" and to become one of the major representatives of this movement, did not attempt to define modernism, but some of the points he made can help us see how modernism was viewed in the early 1920s by an outstanding member of an advanced literary group. Ransom writes in "The Future of Poetry," which may well be considered a poetic manifesto:

The arts generally have had to recognize Modernism—how should poetry escape? And yet what is Modernism? It is undefined. . . . In poetry the Imagists, in our time and place, made a valiant effort to formulate their program. Their modernist manifestoes were exciting, their practice was crude. . . . They announced at least two notable principles.

In the first place, they declared for honesty of theme and accuracy of expression. . . . They conceived the first duty of the Moderns as being to disembarass poetry of its terrible incubus of piety, in the full classical sense of that term, and they rendered the service.

Their second principle followed. Emphasizing the newness of the matter, . . . they were obliged to make their meters more elastic to accommodate their novelties. . . . Their free verse was no form at all, yet it made history.

Quite predictably, as John Crowe Ransom goes on to point out, against the formlessness involved by the second of these principles there came a "sweeping reaction." The problem was to take account of the dual role of words in poetry, and "to conduct a logical sequence with their meanings on the one hand, and to realize an objective pattern with their sounds on the other." Ransom was conscious of the fact that the difficulties posed by such a strict poetics were insurmountable and were bound to lead to a situation of crisis. Although the word "crisis" does not occur in his article, this notion is clearly implied, and it is probably more important for the understanding of Ransom's concept of modernism than the actual terms in which he formulates the modern poet's predicament:

But we moderns are impatient and destructive [my italics]. We forget entirely the enormous technical difficulty of the poetic art, and we examine the meanings of poems with a more and more microscopic analysis: we examine them in fact just as strictly as we examine the meanings of a prose which was composed without any handicap of metrical restrictions; and we do not obtain so readily as our fathers the ecstasy which is the total effect of poetry, the sense of miracle before the union of inner meaning and objective form. Our souls are not, in fact, in the enjoyment of full good health. For no art and no religion is possible until we make allowances. . . . Modern poets are their own severest critics; their own documents, on second reading, have been known to induce in poets a fatal paralysis of the writing digit. . . .

The future of poetry is immense? One is not so sure in these days, since it has felt *the fatal irritant of Modernism* [my italics]. Too much is demanded by the critic, attempted by the poet. . . . The intelligent poet of today is very painfully perched in a position which he cannot indefinitely occupy: vulgarly, he is straddling the fence, and cannot with safety land on either side.

By 1927, when Laura Riding and Robert Graves publish their collaborative *Survey of Modernist Poetry*, the term must have established itself as a meaningful—though still largely controversial—literary category. Characteristically, Riding and Graves define "modernist" poetry (as distinct from "modern" poetry in the neutral chronological sense) by its willful deviation from accepted poetic tradition, by the attempt to "free the *poem* of many of the traditional habits which prevented it from achieving its full significance."¹⁰⁴ Seen from this point of view, the most outstanding feature of "modernist" poetry is the difficulty it presents to the average reader. Their survey is to a large extent an attempt to explain the "unpopularity of modernist poetry with the plain reader" (the title of the fourth chapter) and to point out the specifically aesthetic reasons for "the divorce of *advanced contemporary* poetry [italics mine] from the common-sense standards of ordinary intelligence."¹⁰⁵

Concerning the term "modernism" itself, Riding and Graves seem to take it for granted and as a result do not try to offer an even remotely systematic definition. The main elements for such a defini-

tion are there, however, and the reader can bring them together and work out a fairly consistent concept of modernism. The basic opposition between traditional poetry/modernist poetry is stated from the outset. Modernist poetry is also characterized as *advanced* ("the sophistications of advanced modern poetry," "advanced contemporary poetry"¹⁰⁶). Modernist poets like e. e. cummings, we are told, are supported by "the pressure of more advanced critical opinion."¹⁰⁷ The seventh chapter of the book, "Modernist Poetry and Civilization," brings new and helpful terminological clarifications. The authors distinguish between "genuine modernism" and the "vulgar meaning of modernism . . . [which] is modern-ness, a keeping-up in poetry with the pace of civilization and intellectual history."¹⁰⁸ In its "perverted sense," modernism can become a sort of antitraditional "tyranny, increasing contemporary mannerisms in poetry."¹⁰⁹ The sense of modernism can be further perverted, the authors go on to say, by the existence of the middle class—representing "the intelligent plain-man point of view." "This middle population . . . is the prop and advocate of civilization; and the idea of civilization as a steady human progress does not exclude the idea of a modernist, *historically* forward poetry. A possible rapprochement exists, therefore, between this middle population, to whom poetry is just one of the many instruments of progress, and that type of contemporary poetical writing which advertises itself by its historical progressiveness."¹¹⁰

But surely this is false modernism. True modernism is not *historically* but only *aesthetically* forward. False modernism, then, is reducible to "faith in history," while genuine modernism is nothing more than "faith in the immediate, the *new* doings of poems (or poets or poetry) as not necessarily derived from history."¹¹¹ But why call such a poetry "modernist"? Riding and Graves fail to give a satisfactory answer to this important question. The fact that the representatives of "new poetry" are called (and call themselves) modernists is more than just a matter of arbitrary preference. Is not the cult of novelty a specific product of the history of modernity? Is

not the "purist" creed of some outstanding modernists an *attitude* toward history and specifically toward modernity? Is not modernism's antitraditionalism an aesthetic manifestation of the characteristically modern urge for *change* (an urge that has been historically served by the myth of progress but that can exist outside and sometimes even in direct opposition to that myth)? The argument of modernism's neutrality with regard to history is unconvincing, as is the opinion of Riding and Graves that the term "modernism" as applied to the innovative trends in the poetry of the 1920s is justified by little more than a subjective preference: "There is, indeed, a genuine modernism which is not a part of a 'modernist' programme but a natural and personal manner and attitude in the poet to his work, and which accepts the denomination 'modernist' because it prefers it to other denominations."¹¹²

A *Survey of Modernist Poetry* was published at a time when the spirit of modernism was asserting itself with full force in English and American literature. Modernism had already produced a highly significant body of works in both poetry and prose, although its creativity was to continue at the same level of intensity and richness for another two decades or more. It was, however, too early for a more comprehensive critical synthesis or for a critical assessment of the concept of modernism. The student of terminology should also consider another aspect of historical semantics that may explain why the development of an independent notion of "modernism" was rather slow in England and the United States. This comparative slowness was partially due to the evolution of "modern" as both an adjective and a noun. When "modern" ceased to be a synonym for "contemporary," it became capable of performing the basic semantic functions of "modernism," unimpeded by the potentially pejorative or vulgar associations from which the latter term had freed itself only very recently. Thus, a large number of aesthetic theories, insights, and choices, which today we would not hesitate to describe as "modernist," went on being formulated within the broader framework of the idea of "the modern."

COMPARING THE MODERNS TO THE CONTEMPORARIES

During the last century there has been such an enormous increase in the use of the terms "modern," "modernity," and "modernism" (the latter designating a conscious commitment to modernity, whose normative character is thus openly recognized), that in the domain of aesthetics alone it would probably take a study of forbidding proportions to follow in any detail the terminological history of the modern idea. But even before such extensive research is undertaken and its conclusions known, there are a few crucial points that no student of the concept of modernity should ignore.

From a broader perspective, the most important recent event seems to be the desynonymization of "modern" and "contemporary." Such a development would have been difficult to predict, even as recently as the time of Baudelaire. The author of the "Salons" went on using the two words interchangeably, although not without showing a clear preference for "modern," with all its implicit ambiguities. As I have tried to suggest, "modern" was for Baudelaire a privileged semantic space, a locus where opposites coincided and where, for a fleeting instant, the poetic alchemy was rendered possible by which mud is changed into something rich and strange. Baudelaire was undoubtedly attracted by the lack of neutrality of "modern" as a notion, which sometimes he could use derogatorily, at other times positively, and which he was finally able to cast into the more comprehensive and highly original mold of *modernité*. Thus to be "modern" became the central norm of an aesthetics that might be described as a dialectic of temporality (hinging on the notions of permanence and impermanence) applied to the arts. But Baudelaire did not establish a clear-cut distinction between "modern" and "contemporary." When was this distinction

first used? We are unable to fix a date, but it seems reasonable to assume that "modern" and "contemporary" were not felt to be crucially different before the early twentieth century, when the movement that we call modernism had become fully self-conscious.

It is not surprising that "modern" and "contemporary" came to be desynonymized. The process that is accountable for this differentiation is not without some striking precedents if we think of the evolution of other major concepts of criticism. Despite unavoidable exceptions, there seems to be a general rule applying to literary and artistic terms that are employed, at some point or other in their semantic career, for the purposes of periodization (Wellek and Warren call them "period terms" and discuss some of the logical difficulties implied in their usage¹¹³). The genetic rule I have in mind is based on the demonstrable fact that each one of these terms has three fundamental aspects of meaning, which are formed in a corresponding number of broadly defined stages. The triple semantic structure of most "period terms" is quite easy to indicate: they always imply a *value* judgment, positive or negative (for instance, we may like or dislike "baroque" art or, more generally, things that strike us as "baroque"); they refer with more or less specificity to a particular segment of *history*, depending very much on the context and the concerns of the user; they also describe a "*type*," which may have been more frequent in a certain historical period, but can have been illustrated in other periods as well (can we not attribute a "romantic" frame of mind to a contemporary artist? and can we not discuss the "modernity" of the seventeenth-century "metaphysical poets"?). Considering now the question of how these meanings were generated (different in each individual case, but similar when conceived in a broader historical outline), let us briefly examine each of the three phases, by means of which it may be possible to impose some order on this tremendously intricate matter.

(1) To begin with, we note that the most important period terms in use today come from the common language, and, with respect to their origins, they seem to be and actually are almost hopelessly heterogeneous: some of them were assimilated from classical Latin

(*classicus*), some come from medieval Latin ("romantic" was derived from *romanice*, designating the vernacular languages spoken by Western European peoples, as distinguished from Latin), some others were borrowed from modern languages ("baroque" originated from the Portuguese *barrueco*, originally used in the technical jargon of jewelers to designate a pearl of irregular shape), etc. The only common feature of such terms, at this early stage of their rich semantic careers, appears to have been their capacity for lending themselves to figurative uses, combined with a strong value statement—"classic" was originally a good word, applied to things that deserved to be admired; "baroque," in seventeenth-century France, a definitely bad word, referring to a certain kind of ugliness due to irregularity and exaggeration; etc.

(2) During the second phase of their evolution, period terms undergo a process of "historicization." They are used increasingly as periodizing instruments, but without losing their original function of expressing choices of taste. In France, for instance, the term "*classique*," as applied to the neoclassical authors of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and to their followers, became strongly pejorative in the language of the young romantics; at the same time, in academic circles, "*romantique*" came to be equated with "decadent" and was regarded as an insulting label.

(3) In time, the polemical potential of such terms becomes eroded, and with this erosion a more relativistic approach becomes possible. In this phase, the meaning of already well-established period terms undergoes a process of conceptual "systematization," in the sense that the distinctive features of the various historical styles are projected structurally, and thus taken out from the linear and irreversible flow of historical time. That is why we can speak of a "romantic," or "baroque," or, in our case, "modern" type that can be encountered in both chronologically remote and chronologically contiguous periods of history. This possibility accounts for the emergence (especially in Germany, where Nietzsche's theory of the Apollonian-Dionysian conflict was so influential) of a global view of cultural history as a process explainable through continually renewed clashes between two recurrent and opposing types. It is

interesting, from our point of view, that the propounders of such dual evolutionary schemes of cultural history often make use of terms previously employed in the language of periodization—Wölfflin identifies the two principles at work throughout cultural history as "baroque" and "classicism"; Curtius and his disciples speak of "mannerism" and "classicism" (along these lines the view of G. R. Hocke that the modernist movement is just the most recent variant of "mannerism" is noteworthy).¹¹⁴

Returning to our account of the modern concept's historical metamorphoses, let us now consider the opposition between "modern" and "contemporary" as it is exemplified in a significant critical text written by a participant in the modernist adventure—Stephen Spender's *Struggle of the Modern* (1963):

Modern art is that in which the artist reflects awareness of an unprecedented modern situation in its form and idiom. The quality which I call modern shows in the realized sensibility of style and form more than in subject matter. Thus, early in the scientific and industrial era, the age of Progress, I would not call Tennyson, Ruskin, Carlyle moderns because although they were aware of the effects of science, and most contemporary in their interest, they remained within the tradition of rationalism, unshaken in the powers of what Lawrence called the "conscious ego." They had the Voltairean "I".... The Voltairean "I" of Shaw, Wells, and the others, acts upon events. The "modern" "I" of Rimbaud, Joyce, Proust, Eliot's *Prufrock* is acted upon by them. The Voltairean "I" has the characteristics—rationalism, progressive politics, etc.—of the world the writer attempts to influence, whereas the modern "I" through receptiveness, suffering, passivity, transforms the world to which it is exposed.... The Voltairean egoists are contemporaries without being, from an aesthetic or literary point of view, moderns. What they write is rationalist, sociological, political and responsible. The writing of the moderns is the art of observers conscious of the action of the conditions observed upon their sensibility. Their critical awareness includes ironic self-criticism.¹¹⁵

Spender goes on to say that while the contemporary accepts (not uncritically) "the forces moving through the modern world, its values of science and progress," the modern "tends to see life as a whole and hence in modern conditions to condemn it as a whole."¹¹⁶

Although he accuses the contemporaries of having "partisan" attitudes (they are even likely to be "revolutionary"), Spender's own approach to modernity (through the concept of "wholeness" as opposed to contemporary "fragmentation") is hardly an example of impartiality. But in spite of his subjectivity, Spender's effort—not just in the quoted passages but throughout the entire book—is directed toward a structural rather than a merely historical definition of the modern. We need not agree with his particular conclusions to realize that his approach is fruitful, at least insofar as it tries to solve terminologically the inner tensions that went on growing within the concept of modernity since the romantic movement. It is not difficult to notice that what Spender means by "contemporary" specifically refers to the *other* modernity (and its effects on the literary mind), to the modernity of reason and progress, to the bourgeois modernity, whose principles can be turned even against the bourgeoisie (as happens in most contemporary revolutionary doctrines), to the modernity that produced the notion of "realism" and against which *aesthetic modernity* has reacted with increasing intensity ever since the first decades of the nineteenth century. It is, however, questionable whether aesthetic modernity has ever been capable of totally separating itself from its "contemporary" counterpart. Is not the polemicism of aesthetic modernity—even in its most implicit forms (not to mention the obvious ones, charged as they are with a sense of frustration and outrage)—a kind of dependence? And, on the other hand, has not the hated bourgeois modernity, at least during the last half century, tried to assimilate and promote artistic modernity to the extent that today the heritage of modernism and even the most extreme manifestations of the avant-garde have gained "official" recognition?

These and other similar questions will be raised again and again in this study, especially in the chapters devoted to the concepts of the "avant-garde" and "postmodernism," where they will receive closer attention. For the moment I shall limit myself to adding a few more general observations in connection with the remarkable phenomenon of the taming of the aesthetic and subversive modernity

by the "contemporary" spirit (in Spender's sense). This taming is nowhere so evident and so effective as in the teaching of modern literature.

The incompatibilities involved in the position in which the self-conscious professor of modern literature finds himself have been discussed in "On the Teaching of Modern Literature,"¹¹⁷ the thought-provoking essay by Lionel Trilling, included in his volume *Beyond Culture* (1961). In the introductory part of the essay, Trilling recalls the highly interesting sense given to the term "modern" by Matthew Arnold in the inaugural lecture held at Oxford in 1857 and published in 1867 in *Macmillan's Magazine* under the title "On the Modern Element in Literature." It might be instructive to think of the two perfectly contrasting uses made of the word "modern" by two perfect contemporaries: Matthew Arnold and Baudelaire. A cultural traditionalist, for whom the role of religion was to be taken over by culture, Matthew Arnold enlarged the scope of modernity's concept to comprise whatever was rationally valid and relevant in the whole cultural heritage of mankind. We may add that he was, in light of his understanding of modernity as a period of universal syntheses of values, a follower of Goethe's particular kind of cultural utopianism expressed in the idea of *Weltliteratur*—World Literature. If we take into account Arnold's loftily idealistic frame of reference, it is not hard to understand why he could, as Trilling puts it, "use the word modern in a wholly honorific sense. So much so, indeed, that he seems to dismiss all temporal ideas from the word and makes it signify certain timeless intellectual and civic virtues. A society, he said, is a modern society when it maintains a condition of repose, confidence, free activity of the mind, and tolerance of divergent views. . . ."¹¹⁸ Clearly, Arnold's ideal of the modern has nothing to do with our sense of modernity as a culture of rupture. However, in a way—and Trilling should perhaps have made this point more explicit—the professor of modern literature is put in the ironic position of "Arnoldizing" ideas and experiences that would have horrified Arnold. Is he not supposed to establish, within the context of the modern, validities, preferences, and, finally, hierarchies of

value? In the final analysis, he is there to serve the "contemporary" spirit, which believes in progress, education, perfectibility, etc.; and he serves it even if he does not want to, because the bare fact of lecturing on modernity implies an "honorific" and dignified use of the term "modern." The professor of modern literature, however, has a right to feel anguished when he discerns in his students' response, as Trilling puts it, "the socialization of the anti-social, the acculturation of the anti-cultural, the legitimization of the subversive."

In sum, the *Querelle des anciens et des modernes* has been replaced by a Quarrel between the moderns and the contemporaries.¹¹⁹ This unexpected situation is another suggestive illustration of modernity as a "tradition against itself." When modernity comes to oppose concepts without which it would have been inconceivable—concepts such as those included by Spender in his definition of the "contemporary" (reason, progress, science)—it is simply pursuing its deepest vocation, its constitutive sense of creation through rupture and crisis.

THE IDEA OF THE AVANT-GARDE



FROM MODERNITY TO THE AVANT-GARDE

Insofar as the idea of modernity implies both a radical criticism of the past and a definite commitment to change and the values of the future, it is not difficult to understand why, especially during the last two centuries, the moderns favored the application of the agonistic metaphor of the "avant-garde" (or "advance guard," or "vanguard")¹ to various domains, including literature, the arts, and politics. The obvious military implications of the concept point quite aptly toward some attitudes and trends for which the avant-garde is directly indebted to the broader consciousness of modernity—a sharp sense of militancy, praise of nonconformism, courageous precursory exploration, and, on a more general plane, confidence in the final victory of *time* and immanence over traditions that try to appear as eternal, immutable, and transcendently determined. It was modernity's own alliance with time and long-lasting reliance on the concept of progress that made possible the myth of a self-conscious and heroic avant-garde in the struggle for futurity. Historically, the avant-garde started by dramatizing certain constitutive elements of the idea of modernity and making them into cornerstones of a revolutionary ethos. Thus, during the first half of the nineteenth century and even later, the concept of the avant-garde—both politically and culturally—was little more than a radicalized and strongly utopianized version of modernity.

From the point of view of a doctrinaire revolutionary (who cannot help considering himself a member of the avant-garde) the arbitrary past is automatically doomed, because justice is bound to triumph in the long run; but, as the oppressive influence of tradition can extend itself over a long period of time, it is important to act against it immediately and suppress it as soon as possible—by ur-