

The Unity of Plurality: Literary Effects in the 19th and 20th Centuries

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Abstract—The artistic manifestations that have taken place in the modern era have been reflected in modernisms. These varied and international aesthetic movements are primarily characterised by not having a single viewpoint or a single way of interpreting or understanding reality. Thus different, yet equally valid manifestations coexist at this time, among which we will highlight Realism and Symbolism. In parallel, we mustn't forget that the root of the word 'modern' has always encompassed the idea of the importance of the past, the embracing or denial of what came before, generating a feeling of superiority.

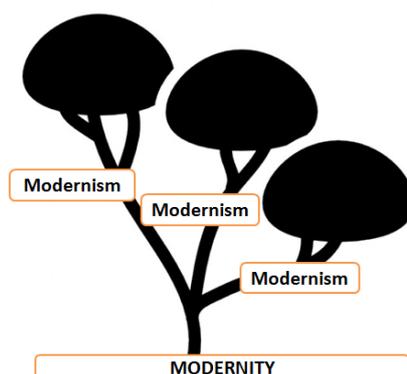
Index Terms—symbolism, realism, modernisms, individualism, art, time

I. THE MODERNISATION PROCESS AND ITS MANIFESTATIONS

The concept of 'modern times' is purely chronological, ranging from the 16th century to the early 20th century. Modernity is the mentality that accompanies this increasingly secular historical period, and modernism is the international aesthetic movement during which personalities as diverse as Fernando Pessoa, Miguel de Unamuno, Antonio Machado, Marcel Proust, Oscar Wilde, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound have appeared. Distinguishing the current era of modernity and modernism is not a trivial matter if this is pursued through an attempt to understand the historical context of the modern world.

Since the beginning of human history, the term modern has been used to characterise the mindset of eras that felt a need to distinguish themselves from their immediate past, and wanted to show their superiority over the previous period. In the 5th century AD, the fathers of the Christian Church used the term modern to refer to the new era of Christianity. The Renaissance—14th and 15th centuries—was modern in terms of rising above those deemed modern in the dark medieval years. In the European enlightenment of the 18th century, modernity is not only the immediate past, but also that which is ancient and, in parallel, its superiority points to the future progress of mankind through scientific knowledge and the emancipation of human beings by using reason.

Thus, the modernisation or illustration process arises. This is a process of change and transformation that includes all planes of existence, and cognitive, moral, social, and artistic relations. Science replaces religion as the preferred instrument for understanding the world; great distances cease to be so great; and time starts to be a fundamental factor (there were no watches until the Late Middle Ages). The feeling of living in a world that is constantly changing is something that modern man perceives, and modernity leads to a feeling of vertigo (Lozano, 2008, p. 407). Here, 18th century modernisms arise, which are simply intellectual movements of all kinds that created their artistic or literary works as the material of modern man's experiences. These modernisms offer a balanced vision of modernity, taking their positive and negative aspects into account. However, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, unbalanced modernisms emerged, which were both positive, seeing only the good in modernisation, such as technology that will lead us to a better future, or negative modernisms, which only see the crisis and disorder that is running rampant in these fields in which this new world is emerging. We view modernity as a large tree, and modernisms as its different branches. See Fig. 1:



Since the mid-19th century and throughout the 20th century, the word ‘modern’ has been applied to innovations in all areas, to anything that has displayed an iota of originality. This situation was caused by the diversity that characterises it. It is for this reason that the examples here range across a very broad field: painting, sculpture, prose and poetry, music and dance, architecture and design, theatre and cinema. The diversity of styles shows great respect for imaginative individuality, which sparked debates about tastes, expressiveness, morality, economics, policy, causes and social implications for two centuries. And although no researcher has attempted to include all the manifestations of modernity in one historical epoch, there is one common symptom: the particular threatens to impose itself on the general.

Despite these differences, modernity in any trend pursued two attributes, the lure of heresy and self-criticism. As regards the lure of heresy, artists derive satisfaction from carving out a revolutionary path—their own—and the fact of not being subordinated to the dominant authority. For this reason, much happiness comes from creating a poem, a picture or a building, and this is grounded in the idea of going against the establishment. The fight is for the absolute artistic autonomy of its creator, and the exercise of self-criticism goes beyond opposing convention and, at the same time, is an exploration of the self.

But modern artists reacting against that which has been established so far is just one sign of the importance that the past has for them. The importance of past statements generates denial or is overcome, something that is always displayed in an environment in which the particular individual is the centre. For each individual, his particular self is the most important thing and everything that happens to him is observed from there. The relevance of the individual against the group leads modernists to see viewpoint as something artificial, a union of selfish individuals. Thus, a new era of risk and uncertainty also emerges, leaving man isolated from a world that pretends to be new, and the specific individual wants to make a difference through his artistic work. According to Berman, modernity unites humanity in a paradoxical way, in the union of disunity (Berman, 2011, p. 1).

But modernity is unthinkable without a significant and influential number of sponsors willing to back it. The breeding ground of modernity arose in the United States, through an industrialisation and urbanisation process that—although it started at the end of the 18th century in England—developed somewhat later in other countries (for example, in Belgium, Germany and France), ushering in signs of social prosperity along with it. The invention of the railway led to a breakthrough in the transport of passengers and goods. In parallel, one of the main routes of modern art re-appeared, the urban phenomenon, whereby cities grew rapidly, and concert halls, theatres and stadiums were erected that consumers flocked to and filled. At this time, Paris became identified as a cultural city.

Another element to consider is the dissemination of art. This is because in earlier times this had been a monopoly of elite tastemakers responsible for defining fashion. The dissemination of art extended beyond the exclusive and cultural circles of the aristocracy, engendering the coining of the term bourgeoisie. The fact that art was targeted at an expanding public contributed to increasing its diversity. Capitalism developed techniques in order to make better use of its resources and, while the era of modern art took flight, mechanisation championed the process. On the negative side, these changes also resulted in unsafe neighbourhoods and in the excessive exploitation of workers, which some social critics denounced as the selfishness of capitalists.

In this atmosphere of progress, we can see the figure of Charles Baudelaire as the most plausible candidate to whom the paternity of modernisms could be attributed. To him, modernity lies in what is ephemeral, fleeting and contingent, and beauty is not found in politics or war, but in life itself. Baudelaire’s talent in combining technical knowledge with emotions is the trait that turned him into a paragon for modern poets. In the personal arena, this also contributed to him enjoying a dubious reputation as a bohemian, who consumed hashish and opium, seeking what he himself baptised ‘artificial paradises’. According to Matei Calinescu, modernity is no longer a given condition to Baudelaire, instead becoming a heroic choice, as the road to modernity is fraught with risks and difficulties (Calinescu, 2003, p. 64).

II. MODERN LITERARY MOVEMENTS: SYMBOLISM AND REALISM

Acceptance of the new literature was hardly an easy achievement, because avant-garde novelists demanded a degree of attention and concentration from their readers that other more accommodating writers saved them from. Modern literature became an arduous task, not only for its creators, but also for the public, and so not all of its creators followed this path. It was possible to distinguish between three types of reading public: the first group was the largest and this was made up of the uneducated masses, who had no knowledge of what literature was demanding. The second group, smaller than the first, but still representing a significant number, had easy access to culture and considered themselves above the mainstream, although they were reluctant to invest the time and effort involved in a cutting-edge piece. Finally, there was a tiny elite core of readers who were open to innovation and experiments. In addition, modern authors caused their readers to feel a certain degree of anxiety, due to the entirely unpredictable quality of their works, and this difference was most noticeable between traditional novelists and their modern successors. In contrast, traditional authors’ techniques did not require so much attention, something that the modernists’ creations did.

In Europe, the 17th and 18th centuries were a period of great development in mathematical and physics theories. However, poets far from seeing the universe as a machine, envisioned it as something mysterious and less rational. Literature then moved to the individual soul, the romantic poet who described things as he experienced them, searching for their ultimate meaning. This was the scenario that saw the birth of the Symbolist movement, founded by Stéphane Mallarmé a French poet who devoted his life to working with poetic language. According to him, accepting everything

as it deprives the mind of the delicious allure of believing that you are creating. Naming an object is to dispense with three-quarters of the pleasure of the poem, which stems from the satisfaction of slowly unravelling and divining it. Thus, it must be suggested and evoked, which is what the human imagination needs. Becoming intimate with things, rather than plainly stating what they are, is one of the purposes of the symbolists. Mallarmé supposes somewhat more, and the presumptions on which symbolism is based lead us to formulate its doctrine as follows: every feeling or sensation, every moment of consciousness is different. This makes it quite impossible to reproduce our feelings, as we experience them, in reality, by using conventional language or common literature. Each poet has a unique personality, so his task is to find a special and specific language that suits the expression of his personality and his feelings, always bearing in mind that each element is equal to the combination of other elements. Symbolism invents a new artistic language using symbols, because it is not possible to directly express something that is peculiar, fleeting and vague in the form of statements and descriptions. Instead, this can only be done through a succession of words and images, which will be used to make suggestions to the reader.

The Symbolist movement was born in France and was limited to a rather esoteric kind of French poetry, but over time it was destined to spread throughout the Western world. In 1899, the poet and critic Arthur Symons, influenced by Mallarmé's theories, published an essay entitled, "The Symbolist Movement in Literature". In the essay, he asserted that the soul of things can be made visible through symbols, and he proposed experiments in poetic prose and original ways of exploring poets' inner worlds in order to dominate their subjectivity. As we can see, Symons's vision raises questions about the language relating to tone, tact, vocabulary and intuition. Another Symbolist poet is Jules Laforgue, the heir to much of Corbière's literature. Laforgue's work is closely associated with the poetic commentator, something that should be noted, as few modernists were willing to take on the role of interpreters of their own art. One of Laforgue's most defended theories is the need for the poet to have a historical outlook: the past, in addition to having the quality of being the past, is present in our lives and affects us. Another of his ideas consists of espousing the impersonality of the poet, who lends his voice without sharing the feelings to which he refers. This greatly influenced the thought of several modern authors such as William Butler Yeats, Gertrude Stein, T. S. Eliot and James Joyce, since their works are—to a large extent—a continuation or expansion of symbolism.

The idea merits mention that both Joyce and Eliot pursued Symbolism without renouncing Realism, as both simultaneously observe and try to understand reality, which is quite uncommon. The Realist explains what happens and seeks the causal why (how, when, where), that is, he seeks solutions. The Symbolist seeks the essential why, the meaning and sense of things. In the two authors' works, we find the permanent desire to describe the world, without relinquishing that which upholds and explains it, since the complexity of the human soul can only be explained via the union of Realism and Symbolism.

It is interesting to note here the idea that, through their works, both Joyce and Eliot forsook developing a single theory that could explain everything, annulling the richness of the multiplicity of particularities. In the case of Joyce, his attitude towards the modernist climate is widely affected by the loneliness and experience arising from it. *Ulysses* was conceived as a book capable of expressing multiple styles and 18 different points of view, as this was the only way to capture the essence of the relativity that is present in reality. And the various narrative methods in *Ulysses* are different ways of ordering experience. Eliot, in the same way as Joyce, although primarily via poetry, takes the existence of a diverse and plural world as a starting point, in which there is a multiplicity of individuals and experiences. Reality is too rich to be expressed through one single omniscient narrator who knows and understands everything. What is authentic is diverse and, from a literary perspective, this can be translated as the presence of different viewpoints and states of mind. According to Edmund Wilson, the world of Proust, Einstein and Joyce is always changing, as it is perceived by different observers and by these observers at different times, something which could also be used to describe T. S. Eliot (Wilson, 1996, pp. 221-222).

According to this conception, Eliot's poetry would be a ritual and a mystery similar to a Cubist collage. Thus, Walton Litz said that Eliot's main poem, *The Wasteland*, would represent the biggest revelation of modern mankind's spiritual state, or 'Hell seen from Purgatory', with its plurality (Litz, 1973, p. 8). For an opposing interpretation, see R. M. Adams, who says that two early Eliot poems, entitled *Prufrock* and *The Wasteland*, instead of expressing modernism, describe the author's personal disintegration in the context of post-war Europe. For Adams, Eliot's modernism took place during a brief and limited period, in which he had a direct relationship with the poet Ezra Pound. One could say that Adams only supports true modernism in Eliot's early work (Adams, 1973, pp. 145 and 151). Furthermore, Hugh Kenner argues that *The Wasteland* is a determinant for a better understanding of modernism, and even perhaps of post-modernism (Kenner, 1973, p. 24). Similarly, Menand says that Eliot is modern, while rejecting the romantic trends of modernist literature, which in turn is a cause of liberalism, secularism and *laissez faire* that he personally detested (Menand, 2007, pp. 7 and 166).

III. LIFE AND BEAUTY: ART FOR ART'S SAKE

As mentioned, there are also other authors who, unlike Joyce and Eliot, defend Symbolism, and only Symbolism, as the authentic literary stance. This would be the case of Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde, who through his slogan 'art for art's sake' asserted the sovereignty of creators and their creations (Gay, 2007, pp. 68-69). This adage has many followers. To some, such as Baudelaire, the artist's task is not to copy reality, but to use imagination to unveil the

world's mysteries that, as we will see, somewhat matches Oscar Wilde's thought in his 1890 essay entitled "The Critic as Artist". The piece is a Socratic dialogue between two characters, Gilbert, who sets out the author's ideas, and Ernest, who like a student expresses his doubts and suspicions on different topics related to beauty and its manifestations. What is surprising in the text are Gilbert's explanations, as he responds to all of the objections that Ernest outlines naturally, even managing to convince readers. The essay is a textual defence of Symbolism, as alluded to above, from a theoretical stance.

Wilde asserts the supremacy of literature over other arts, as only literature is a reflection of human beings' everyday activities: 'Life and Literature, life and the perfect expression of life' (Wilde, 2001, p. 72). Life is the highest form that exists in the world, and only literature can express its richness. Art is spirit expressed through the subject matter. Artistic experience needs a physical medium, such as contemplating an oil painting, or reading a poem written on paper: 'Such things are less than the yellow trumpet of one daffodil of the field, far less than the meanest of the visible arts [...] for, just as Nature is struggling mind into matter, so Art is mind expressing itself under the conditions of matter, and thus, even in the lowliest of her manifestations, she speaks to both sense and soul alike' (Wilde, 2001, p. 184). There are very few human beings who are called upon to create, and not all who call themselves artists deserve that name, since in addition to a certain personal ability, both preparation and effort are required. Which is not to say that art can be subjected to the rigidity of a scientific formula, at which point it is no longer a passion. But literature, in addition to needing life to fulfil its function, requires a creator to make it true, infusing it with his breath, a task entrusted to the poet. This is why artists must have a prominent social position, because the world needs them in order to have art.

Wilde, as a good modern artist, far from wanting to deny the self, defends it, urging all poets to develop it and to be themselves, which is, in his opinion, the only way authors have of doing their job correctly: 'If you wish to understand others you must intensify your own individualism' (Wilde, 2001, p. 155). If we delve deeper into the issue, we discover that for Wilde the purpose of art is emotion itself, namely that art exists for mankind's enjoyment, for the delight of the senses. The slogan 'art for art's sake' therefore shows that life consists of enjoying the useless. This is expressed in the dialogue between Gilbert and Ernest below, the two protagonists in the essay quoted above: 'emotion for the sake of emotion is the aim of art, and emotion for the sake of action is the aim of life, and of that practical organisation of life that we call society' (Wilde, 2001, p. 178). The enjoyment or experience that human beings can obtain from their union with the artwork they gaze upon as viewers, which becomes part of them through their emotions, can only be achieved from an emotional standpoint. If we want to enjoy art, it is necessary to set reason aside, as it is an impediment: 'There are two ways of disliking art, Ernest. One is to dislike it. The other, to like it rationally' (Wilde, 2001, p. 218). In addition, for the artist beauty occupies a privileged place among human beings, having its own identity. There is a sense of beauty that is independent of reason and superior to all other senses. The sense of beauty possesses a value that is similar to the soul, prompting some to create, and others, to pure contemplation.

Another key issue to be noted is the relationship between the critic and the artist. According to Wilde, authentic criticism is loftier and more creative than the creation that spawns the critique, because it is a second form of creation of an already created artwork. Art criticism is more valuable than art itself because it echoes beauty in general, not stopping at particularities: 'It is the highest Criticism, for it criticises not merely the individual work of art, but Beauty itself' (Wilde, 2001, p. 134). The artist cannot recognise the beauty of another's work because he is too stuck on himself and on his task.

Oscar Wilde bears the past and its events in mind to then do away with it. The past is important, it exists, and I want to destroy it because, like what happens to most modern artists, the author believes tradition is a loadstone that must be discarded. Finding the meaning of our existence from that which has already existed would undermine artistic quality. We can only face the future if we are not tied to yesterday. In the words of Wilde: 'The man who regards his past is a man who deserves to have no future to look forward to' (Wilde, 2001, p. 210).

IV. CONCLUSIONS

The fact that Oscar Wilde asserts the critic's supremacy over actual creation is no small matter if one seeks understanding of the true meaning of the term, in addition to understanding his thought. Criticism is understood not as a negation of something or a simple listing of negative items, but is instead deemed a fair and realistic description of that which is being assessed. The true critic, especially the aesthetic critic, demands and pursues the perfection of what we have before us through truthful judgement of the subject. The critical spirit absolutely makes artistic creation possible.

As seen, there are many different authors and styles that arose during the modern era where, unlike the classical world, society starts to view itself as an artifice, since it was created by humans seeking their own survival and pleasure. However, if we are all seeking the same thing, is peaceful coexistence possible? This is the scenario in which modernisms erupt, which combines realism and mere description with other theories that advocate reflecting the richness of the world through the search for meaning.

In the same way that modernity was a long process that engendered changes in different areas of reality, these variations have influenced the specific way in which we—the Postmodernists—have of understanding the world and others. The importance of the individual, the self, is a cornerstone of modern structures, where we sometimes feel precisely that these structures are more important than we are. Disproportionate egos and selfishness have led to the

depersonalisation of processes, such as the internet, where the speed and constant updating of news turns out to be more important than us actually understanding them.

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