Introduction

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> Someone said: 'The dead writers are remote from us because
> we *know* so much more than they did'. Precisely, and they are
> that which we know.
>
> T. S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent'[1]

The idea of the modern has always harboured its opposite. If the
Judaeo-Christian awareness of history as moving towards an end
implied some kind of progress or, more apocalyptically, a notion of
Redemption, it also presumed a sense of degeneration or, more
catastrophically, of Fall. Similarly, when Bernard of Chartres used
the term 'modernus' in the twelfth century to claim that the
Moderns could see further than the Ancients, he also pointed out
that it was only because they were dwarfs standing on the shoulders
of giants. Two centuries later during the early Renaissance, the
division of history for the first time into the three eras of antiquity,
the immediate past of the 'dark' Middle Ages and a 'luminous'
future expressed a similar paradox or doubleness since the arrival of
this 'luminous' future depended upon a revival of antiquity.[2]

By the seventeenth century, however, the Ancients and the
Moderns were less aligned against the 'dark' ages than involved in a
querrelle or 'battle' with each other. And with the emergence of a
modern capitalist economy and the doctrine of aesthetic autonomy
towards the end of the next century, this 'battle' became one
between two competing modernities: an aesthetic modernity which
attempted to marry the primitive or medieval with originality and
spontaneity and the modernity of laissez-faire economics and liberal
democracy.[3] Thus when T. S. Eliot refigured the Ancients and the
Moderns in his famous 1917 essay as the Tradition and the Individual
Talent, his implicit adversary was as much laissez-faire individualism

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as the Romantic cult of what he calls 'personality'. Indeed upon revisiting the principles propounded in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' six years later in 'The Function of Criticism', he suggested that 'we may give a name' to 'the Inner Voice' of Romanticism: 'and the name . . . is Whiggery'.[4]

In essays such as 'The Function of Criticism' Eliot distinguished himself from his nineteenth century predecessors by situating the latter within the 'bourgeois' modernity to which they were and are customarily opposed. This is perhaps not surprising given that every generation must, arguably, consign their immediate predecessors to a kind of 'dark' age. Yet what is striking about Eliot and the other subjects of this study – W. B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, Wyndham Lewis and D. H. Lawrence – is, I will argue, the extent to which they combined a radical aesthetic modernity with an almost outright rejection of even the emancipatory aspects of bourgeois modernity. Like the late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century tradition charted by Raymond Williams in *Culture and Society*, the reactionary modernists expressed their hostility towards what was variously called 'liberalism', 'democracy', 'industrialism' and 'progress' in terms of a nostalgia for the cultures of premodernity while at the same time feeling compelled, in Pound's famous phrase, 'to make it new'. As Eliot maintained in his review of Lewis's *Tarr*, 'the artist . . . is more *primitive*, as well as more civilized, than his contemporaries'.[5] However unlike such conservatives as Edmund Burke the reactionaries were drawn to revolution while at the same time generally opposing, unlike later socialists such as William Morris, any process of democratisation. All five writers were, I will argue, attracted towards various fascist ideologies (although some finally rejected them), because such ideologies provided a kind of parody of 'revolution' which reflected their own ambivalence towards modernity.

Perhaps the most crucial aspect of the historical predicament of Anglo-American modernism was that it came into existence at a moment when the rift between the two modernities was, arguably, at its greatest. As Peter Bürger observes, with the Aestheticist and Symbolist movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, '[t]he apartness from the praxis of life that had always constituted the institutional status of art in bourgeois society now becomes the content of works'.[6] Shelley's 'unacknowledged legislators' had, we might say, ceased to recognise their own legislative potential. The doctrine of *l'art pour l'art* was a form of social protest

but it was also an acknowledgement of temporary defeat. After all, as Eric Hobsbawm argues, following the revolutions of 1848

the prospects of bourgeois society and its economy seemed relatively unproblematic, because their actual triumphs were so striking. For either the political resistances of 'old regimes' against which the French Revolution had been made were overcome, or these regimes themselves looked like accepting the economic, institutional and cultural hegemony of a triumphant bourgeois progress. Economically, the difficulties of an industrialization and economic growth limited by the narrowness of its pioneer base were overcome, not least by the spread of industrial transformation and the enormous widening of world markets. Socially, the explosive discontents of the poor during the Age of Revolution were consequently defused. In short, the major obstacles to continued and presumably unlimited bourgeois progress seemed to have been removed.[7]

Although Hobsbawn does point out that contradictions within this progress became more apparent after the Depression of 1870, its forward momentum was nevertheless such that the post-1870 period is often described as one of a 'second industrial revolution'.[8] Thus the final decades of the nineteenth century saw the emergence of various cults of 'efficiency' (such as that of the 'pilgrims' in *Heart of Darkness*) culminating in Taylorist principles of economic management and, finally, the Fordist production line. The same period also saw the European colonial project taken to its geographical limits and 'Victorian' gender roles (exemplified by Mr and Mrs Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse)* reach their point of most rigid opposition.

However while many of the movements of the *fin de siècle* and early twentieth century insisted on the 'autonomy' or 'purity' of their art as a way of resisting many of the aspects of this 'second industrial revolution', they did not necessarily desire to escape the exchange values of the broader capitalist marketplace altogether. As Lawrence Rainey argues, '[L]iterary modernism constitutes a strange and perhaps unprecedented withdrawal from the public sphere of cultural production and debate' but this was a retreat into a world where writer-promoters such as Pound could sell limited or deluxe editions of books like *Ulysses* as investments or commodities to a new elite of 'patron-investors' such as John Quinn. Just as, in the words of Rainey, '[M]odernism and commodity culture were not implacable enemies but fraternal rivals',[9] so the two modernities, for all their mutual hostility, were both the offspring of an earlier modernity.

Thus Andreas Huyssen's earlier and influential proposition that '[m]odernism constituted itself through a conscious strategy of

exclusion, an anxiety of contamination by its other: an increasingly consuming and engulfing mass culture'[10] is qualified but not contradicted by the recent scholarship of those such as Rainey who describe the marketing of the modernist text. Modernist culture was constituted through its resistance to 'mass' culture but this resistance also constituted, in Pierre Bourdieu's terms, its high 'cultural capital' and therefore, paradoxically, the considerable 'economic capital' for which it could be, at least eventually, exchanged.[11] Similarly, although the reactionary modernists were 'elitist' to the extent that they despised the emerging 'mass' culture and by implication the 'masses' who consumed it, they were also 'populist' to the extent that they dreamt of a popular audience in the future or, as Yeats puts it, of writing a 'cold and passionate' poem for a fisherman 'who does not exist'.[12] Ironically, this modernist dream was eventually realised in the post-war universities.

The reactionary modernists did, therefore, frequently and sometimes obsessively gender 'mass' culture as feminine but such a culture was also frequently seen as the product of an industrial society which, because of its cult of science and technology, could only be gendered as masculine. Alternatively, the pre-modern, the primitive, or the tradition could also be gendered as either feminine or masculine. The Tradition in Eliot's 'Tradition and the Individual Talent,' for example, is certainly a source of patriarchal authority but the way in which the individual talent 'surrender[s]' to it suggests a kind of primitive or oceanic merging of self and other.[13] Thus not only could a writer such as Lewis attack 'mass' culture in the name of a tradition of high masculine culture or critique like Yeats the instrumental reason of bourgeois modernity by invoking the 'primitive' and feminine other but he could also identify with the Madame Bovarys of a feminised cultural sphere like Lawrence or in Poundian fashion promote his writing in the cultural market place like some kind of Yankee entrepreneur. It is probably impossible to ascribe a gender to modernism.[14]

Nor is modernist withdrawal from the public sphere, resistance to 'mass' culture, or advocacy of autonomous art fundamentally opposed to any avant-gardist attempt to bridge the great divides of the early twentieth century. Bürger argues that

[o]nly after art, in nineteenth-century Aestheticism, has altogether detached itself from the praxis of life can the aesthetic develop 'purely.' But the other side of autonomy, art's lack of social impact, also becomes

recognizable. The avant-gardiste protest, whose aim it is to reintegrate art into the praxis of life, reveals the nexus between autonomy and the absence of any consequences.[15]

Although Bürger does point out that the 'aesthetic experience' which the historical avant-garde directed towards 'the praxis of life' was one which Aestheticism itself had 'developed', he nevertheless interprets avant-gardism largely as a critique of modernist or aestheticist doctrines of aesthetic autonomy. While this is to a large extent true, it could also be argued that the avant-gardist impulse was already harboured within the concept of *l'art pour l'art*.[16] For example in 'Arnold and Pater' (1930) Eliot derided the nineteenth-century poets not only for their social isolation but also, paradoxically, for meddling with social affairs. '[T]he dissolution of thought' in the nineteenth century, he argues,

the isolation of art, philosophy, religion, ethics and literature, is interrupted by various chimerical attempts to effect imperfect syntheses. Religion became morals, religion became art, religion became science or philosophy; various blundering attempts were made at alliances between various branches of thought. Each half-prophet believed that he had the whole truth. The alliances were as detrimental all round as the separations.[17]

Thus the theory of 'Art for Art's sake', which apparently valorises the autonomy of art and its separation from life, is actually, Eliot argues in 'Baudelaire' (1930), 'a *theory of life*' and its best known proponent, Pater, is 'primarily' a 'moralist' concerned that, in the words quoted by Eliot in 'Arnold and Pater', we ' "treat life in the spirit of art" '.[18] The impulse to separate art from life always generates a contrary impulse, the desire to imitate art and thus close the art/life divide.

Alternatively, the aestheticisation of life does not abolish aesthetic autonomy but only establishes it at a higher level. When Marcel Duchamp painted a moustache on the Mona Lisa it was not on the original, obviously, but a mass reproduction. Critics usually interpret this as an attack upon what Bürger calls the 'institution of art' – and so it was – but it could just as readily be seen as a defence of the authentic masterpiece against its banalisation by mass culture. Lewis's *Übermensch* of early modernism, Tarr, notices with distaste, for example, that his 'bourgeois-bohemian' mistress, Bertha, has 'a photograph of Mona Lisa' in her Paris apartment.[19] Similarly, when Bürger observes that Duchamp chose to sign his famous mass-produced urinal with the signature of R. Mutt so as to mock 'all

claims to individual creativity', he does not mention that 'Mr Mutt's fountain' is displayed in an inverted position unlike any actual urinal.[20] As Duchamp himself pointed out, when he 'took an ordinary article of life, placed it so that its useful significance disappeared under the new title and point of view', he 'created a new thought for that object' – or, we might say, a new art object.[21] The fact that such 'provocations' are now exhibited in museums is in part, as Bürger argues, a sign that the 'historical' avant-garde failed, but it is also in keeping with the original impulse of the historical avant-garde to turn life into art.

Avant-gardism can be regarded, then, as the most radical of modernities. By attacking the 'institution of art' it not only re-establishes aesthetic autonomy at a higher level by reconstituting the 'world' or 'life' as an aesthetic object but it also reproduces, again at a higher level, the undifferentiated cultural conditions of premodern, 'organic' or 'primitive' cultures. Jean Arp's collages and Tristan Tzara's poems are, according to the former, 'like nature . . . ordered ''according to the law of chance'' ' but this 'nature' or 'life' is characterised, unlike the 'nature' of cultures which experience only cyclical time, as a place of pure freedom and spontaneity.[22] In a sense, the avant-gardist impulse was an attempt to transcend the primitive/modern dichotomy.

Yet while the avant-garde's exemplary movement, Dada, was over almost as soon as it began, its capacity for self-negation could be interpreted as both a refusal to descend into self-parody and a recognition, as W. H. Auden puts it, 'In Memory of W. B. Yeats' (1939), that 'poetry makes nothing happen'.[23] Bürger makes one passing reference to the fact that 'the fascist politics of art . . . liquidates the autonomy status'[24] of art but he does not discuss Walter Benjamin's famous dictum in the epilogue to 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' that 'Fascism is the introduction of aesthetics into political life', nor does he mention Futurism, the movement which for Benjamin exemplifies this tendency.[25] Nevertheless like the avant-garde fascism both 'liquidates' aesthetic autonomy and provides according to Benjamin 'the consummation of ''*l'art pour l'art*'' '.[26] By aestheticising politics fascism conflates the autonomous spheres of art, morality and science, thereby negating what historians and philosophers from Max Weber to Jürgen Habermas have regarded as the defining characteristic of the Enlightenment project.[27] However by doing so politics is also

transformed or reborn as a spectacle or an aesthetic object defined by its autonomy. As Benjamin concludes, '[m]ankind, which in Homer's time was an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods, now is one for itself'.[28] Fascism can be described as a parody of the avant-garde because whereas the latter, at least according to Bürger, reintegrates art into a 'new life praxis' rather than the current 'means–ends rationality of the bourgeois everyday',[29] it achieves its effects as Benjamin points out 'without affecting the property structure which the masses strive to eliminate'.[30]

Furthermore if avant-gardism is the most radical of modernities then fascism also has a parodic relationship towards not just what Habermas calls 'the project of Enlightenment' or 'modernity' but towards that broader form of modernity which, at least according to my brief description, encompasses both the 'modern' and the 'mythic'. In an early and influential post-war analysis, the German historian Ernst Nolte interpreted fascism as a 'resistance' to 'transcendence', both of the 'practical' kind or that which has gone by such names as 'Enlightenment, technologization, liberalism, secularization, industrialization', and of the 'theoretical' kind or 'the reaching out of the mind beyond what exists and what can exist toward an absolute whole'.[31] But George Mosse replied that 'Fascism was a new religion . . . and it gave to its followers their own feeling of transcendence'.[32] Since then historians have been divided on whether or not fascism was a form of resistance to the 'modern' or 'modern' transcendence. Henry A. Turner, for example, argues that the Nazis only 'practiced modernization out of necessity in order to pursue their fundamentally anti-modern aims'[33] while other recent analyses have tended to interpret fascism as a product of rather than a resistance to the Enlightenment tradition. However even the latter concede that at least certain forms of fascism had strong anti-modern tendencies. Renzo De Felice, for example, interprets Italian fascism as a 'revolution of the middle classes' with its origins in the principles of 1789 but he also argues that in the more industrialised and modernised Germany '[n]azism sought a restoration of values and not the creation of new values'.[34] Similarly, Stanley G. Payne argues that '[f]ascism was nothing if not modernist, despite its high quotient of archaic or anachronistic warrior culture'[35] and Roger Griffin defines generic fascism as 'a palingenetic form of populist ultranationalism' which seeks to establish the 'new order' only 'within a secular and linear historical time' while

conceding that '*etymologically* ''palingenetic political myth'' could be taken to refer to a ''backward-looking'' nostalgia for a restoration of the past' (my emphasis).[36]

These are only a few of the more influential historians of fascism and there are many, such as A. James Gregor and Walter Laqueur, who believe in the words of the latter that 'an ideal generic definition covering every aspect of the phenomenon does not exist'.[37] Nevertheless if there is any validity to the view that modernity considered as a dialectical phenomenon embraces both the 'modern' and the 'ancient', then it may be unnecessary to take sides in what might be regarded as another version of the seventeenth-century Battle of the Books. For as Jeffrey Herf argues, '[t]he paradox of [German] reactionary modernism is that it rejected reason but embraced technology, reconciled *Innerlichkeit* with technical modernity'.[38] Thus in another context Marinetti represents his automobile in *The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism 1909* as both the symbol of the new century and as some sort of mythological beast while at the same time proclaiming that the Futurists will 'glorify war, the world's only hygiene – militarism, patriotism, the destructive gesture of freedom-bringers, beautiful ideas worth dying for, and scorn for woman'.[39] Similarly in *On the Boiler* Yeats writes that with the

multiplication of the uneducatable masses, it will become the duty of the educated classes to seize and control one or more of those necessities. The drilled and docile masses may submit, but a prolonged civil war seems more likely, with the victory of the skilful, riding their machines as did the feudal knights their armoured horses.[40]

Yet whereas the avant-garde attempts to re-establish life as an autonomous aesthetic sphere drained of instrumental reason, fascism reconstitutes the political arena as an aesthetic spectacle at war with the progressive and enlightened aspects of modernity. Yeats's and Marinetti's war machines fuse the mythic and the modern but they only do so by declaring war on women, untidy democracy, and the masses. Whereas the avant-garde desires to transcend instrumental reason, fascism reifies technology and thus negates the emancipatory aspects of the larger reason which produced it.

In its most radical aspect this fusion of the mythic and the modern can be described as a parodic messianism. George Steiner in *In Bluebeard's Castle* interprets German fascism as a form of resistance to the almost unbearable transcendental demands of 'the monotheistic

idea' whose 'three supreme moments . . . in Western culture' are Sinai, primitive Christianity and nineteenth century messianic socialism.[41] However as the character A. H. says to his Israeli captors in Steiner's later novel, *The Portage to San Cristobal of A. H.*, '[w]hat is a thousand-year *Reich* compared to the eternity of Zion? Perhaps I was the false Messiah sent before. Judge me and you must judge yourselves. *Übermenschen*, chosen ones!'[42] Of course A. H.'s point of view is not Steiner's. Nevertheless, there is a sense in which the *Führer*, *Volk* and *Reich* of Nazism could not have existed without the God, Chosen People and Promised Land of Jewish messianism. In its theological form – i.e. whether or not God is in some sense 'responsible' for Satan – this idea has concerned not a few theologians and I certainly find aspects of the idea that German fascism was a kind of demonic parody of Judaism deeply troubling. Nevertheless A. H.'s question can probably be answered in the negative only if we accept either or both of the following propositions: that the highly industrialised death camps did not in some way exemplify certain aspects of modernity and that the idea of modernity is entirely secular.

In any case, I will later argue that Pound's attempt to 'make it new' by a return to the 'pagan' produces a kind of parodic modernity which is grounded in symbolic violence towards 'the Jews'. Yet while this in part justifies describing much of his writing during his residence at Rapallo as 'fascist', 'reactionary' is a more suitable political label (if one exists!) for all but some of Yeats's later texts and most of the writing of the other subjects of this study. Not only does this writing tend to resist the kinds of parodic messianism described by Steiner but it also tends to affirm various kinds of separation between aesthetic and bourgeois modernity. Indeed, resistance to such messianism and the assertion of aesthetic autonomy may well be two aspects of the same phenomenon if it is true that the messianic desire to locate the kingdom of heaven on earth is also what drives the avant-garde's attempt to conflate these two modernities.

But if such assertions of aesthetic autonomy are what distinguish reactionary modernism from fascism, other criteria must be used to distinguish reactionary modernism from the many other varieties of 'progressive' modernism. While the most obvious criterion is the stance taken towards the democratising and generally emancipatory aspects of bourgeois modernity, this criterion can nevertheless only

be applied loosely. James Joyce's *Ulysses*, for example, probably defies political and aesthetic taxonomy. On the one hand the series of comic correspondences between Leopold Bloom's peregrinations about Dublin and Odysseus's adventures clearly deflate the revolutionary pretensions of those such as the Citizen in the 'Cyclops' chapter who identifies a future Irish state with the heroic and therefore aestheticised past of Celtic Ireland. On the other hand, the text's vast assimilation of contemporary print media and its status as a self-contained Book resembles the vaticinations of the avant-garde or the aesthetic corollary of the Citizen's violent modernity.

But even aside from such potentially unclassifiable texts, the boundary between a progressive aesthetic modernity and the negative aspects of the bourgeois modernity it critiques are by no means always clear. In Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, for example, Marlowe is horrified by the fact that Kurtz's report for the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs, which begins by communicating 'the notion of an exotic immensity ruled by an August Benevolence', is terminated by the 'terrifying' 'post-scriptum' ' "Exterminate all the brutes!" '. We might say that in the terms of Adorno's and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, he is terrified by the way in which 'enlightenment reverts to mythology'.[43] Yet just as Marlowe begins his journey up the Congo with the intention of returning Kurtz to 'civilisation' only to discover that he is 'thrilled' by the thought of his 'remote kinship'[44] with the people of the Congo, so upon his return he tells the Intended that Kurtz's last words – in actuality 'The horror! The horror!' – were her name[45] thus ensuring that barbarism and enlightenment or death and the 'idea' which he thinks 'redeems' European colonialism remain irrevocably entwined. Similarly just as Marlowe is unable to distance himself from the charismatic Kurtz, so the anonymous narrator observes at the novel's conclusion that the Thames – whose change of tide is about to carry himself, Marlowe, the Director of Companies, the Lawyer, and the Accountant, away from the world's dominant commercial metropolis – seems 'to lead into the heart of an immense darkness'.[46] The narrative's insistent doubling of characters, places and events, its atmosphere of psychological claustrophobia, its circular plot, and the embedding of its story-tellers like so many Chinese boxes – all suggest that even the most progressive or enlightened critiques of colonialism cannot escape the nightmare of modernity.[47]