

MODERNIST WRITING AND REACTIONARY POLITICS

CHARLES FERRALL

Victoria University of Wellington



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Introduction

I

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

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 Hobsbawm 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 culture¹⁰ 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 name⁴⁵ 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

Few other canonical modernist texts match the pessimism of *Heart of Darkness* but then few others are as damning in their critique of bourgeois modernity. Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, for example, affirms the redemptive powers of art but, significantly, only by coming close to committing the kind of symbolic violence whose very real consequences in a different context Conrad so powerfully describes. The abstract, post-Impressionist painting completed at the end of the novel by the resolutely unmarried painter, Lily, exemplifies an aesthetic sphere which transcends the oppositions within the Ramsays' marriage between the public and private spheres, masculine reason and feminine intuition.⁴⁸ Like so many modernist writers, Woolf represents aesthetic transcendence as a resolution of oedipal conflict: Lily completes her picture, begun before the war, of Mrs Ramsay and her youngest child, James, just as an older James and his sister Cam reach the lighthouse and reconcile themselves with a domineering father who had, at least in the case of James, imposed his own demands upon his wife and therefore interrupted James's idyllic relationship with his mother. Woolf claimed not to have read Freud until 1939, 'a deferral that must have required some effort', Elizabeth Abel notes,⁴⁹ since the Woolfs' Hogarth Press began publishing the English translation of Freud's complete works three years before the publication of *To the Lighthouse* in 1927. Nevertheless, 'Freudian' readings of *To the Lighthouse* are almost unavoidable because the Ramsays' marriage approximates so closely the kind of marriage which must have generated many of the patients of early psychoanalysis. Oedipus might not be ubiquitous, but the Victorian middle-class private/public division could not but have produced some very distant fathers and extremely close mother-son relationships (complicated in many cases, of course, by the existence of servants).

Nevertheless it could be argued that this dual form of oedipal resolution and aesthetic transcendence is achieved at some cost. Apart from the housekeepers Mrs Bast and Mrs McNab – whose domestic drudgery, incidentally, allows Lily and the other upper-middle-class occupants of the house to engage in aesthetic and intellectual labour of one kind or another – Charles Tansley is the only character in the novel who does not belong to the upper-middle class.⁵⁰ Although the son of a chemist and someone whose class resentment rankles nearly all the other characters in the novel, Tansley is nevertheless not unlike an adopted son. As someone at the

beginning of his academic career, he is probably in his mid-twenties whereas he speculates that Mrs Ramsay 'was fifty at least'.⁵¹ Tansley is about the right age for a son whereas Mrs Ramsay's own eight children, none of whom have reached adulthood, are rather young for a woman of her age. Of course Tansley might be wrong about her age but if that were so his speculation that she 'was fifty at least' sounds like the hyperbole of a child or young adolescent. Thus whatever her real age Tansley feels, like a son, an 'extraordinary pride' walking with Mrs Ramsay, 'the most beautiful person he had ever seen'⁵² and according to Mrs Ramsay parodies her husband's behaviour.⁵³ Nevertheless, his 'odious' prediction in the first section of the novel that there will be '[n]o going to the Lighthouse' causes Mrs Ramsay to think that '[i]f her husband required sacrifices (and indeed he did)' she would 'cheerfully' offer 'up to him Charles Tansley, who had snubbed her little boy'.⁵⁴ But Tansley is also old enough to be James's father. Indeed he is called 'the atheist' by the children not just because he wants to kill God-the-Father (as well as to succeed academically their own ageing father) but because he exaggerates or parodies Mr Ramsay's sceptical rationalism. In a sense Tansley is both a resentful son and a paternal wrecker of childhood illusions. Thus James and his father can only be reconciled and Lily achieve her vision if Tansley is sacrificed. Oedipal conflict is resolved by being displaced on to the only character in the novel other than the servants who does not belong to the upper-middle-class intelligentsia.

Such a reading of the novel could be used to support Lyotard's contention at the end of *The Postmodern Condition* that 'the price for the nostalgia of the whole and the one' and 'the transcendental illusion' of modernity is inevitably repression or 'terror'.⁵⁵ However in their different ways, Mrs Ramsay, her husband, their children and Lily all struggle to overcome their aversion to Tansley and Woolf's narrative dips into his consciousness and explains the source of his class resentment as though Woolf were also valiantly attempting to like the kind of man who could receive the university education she herself was denied. Tansley is never entirely a scapegoat figure. Towards the end of the novel, Lily remembers that he 'had got his fellowship. He had married; he lived at Golder's Green'.⁵⁶ Certainly, his success is due to hard work unlike that of the other members of the extended Ramsay household, August Carmichael and William Bankes, who succeed professionally with no apparent effort. It is also

significant that Tansley now lives in the partly Jewish suburb of Golder's Green, one of the suburbs from which creep '[t]he red-eyed scavengers' of Eliot's 'A Cooking Egg'.⁵⁷ But he *does* succeed and Lily presumably does include him in her vision. Woolf's vision is almost but not quite grounded upon symbolic violence.

Although upwardly mobile, Tansley is from the same broad lower-middle class as Eliot's 'young man carbuncular . . . A small house agent's clerk' in *The Waste Land*⁵⁸ and the shopkeepers in Yeats's 'September 1913', who 'fumble in a greasy till'.⁵⁹ Thus just as Lily's vision of aesthetic transcendence requires a degree of animus towards Tansley, so the '[t]he pleasant whining of a mandoline' which issues from the fishermen's 'public bar in Lower Thames Street' immediately succeeds Eliot's assault on the 'young man carbuncular' and 'Romantic Ireland' lives again in Yeats's verse as he accuses the shopkeepers of forgetting the heroic sacrifices of the past. Indeed it might be argued that the ideological fiction of the 'masses' was primarily a response to the cultural demands of the lower-middle classes rather than the working classes. However not only do Eliot and Yeats never question their own animosity but the class and general milieu to which these characters belong is seen as having no redeeming features. By 1913 Yeats had severed virtually all ties with the nationalist movement and the 'small house agent's clerk' and typist are the only characters in *The Waste Land* who can with any certainty be described as lower-middle-class. Certainly, Tansley grew up within this class but if he stands for all those men who, as a consequence of recent educational reforms, were gaining access to higher education then Lily is one of the New Women whose political demands had recently succeeded in extending the franchise to women.⁶⁰ By contrast the reactionary modernists were a part of a larger political culture which rejected even the emancipatory aspects of 'liberalism', 'progress' and 'democracy' while at the same time, paradoxically, being drawn to various kinds of revolutionary politics.

II

Before the First World War the main forum in England for writers and intellectuals hostile towards 'liberalism', 'progress' and 'democracy' was the *New Age*.⁶¹ This weekly paper played a crucial role in the formation of reactionary modernism because it was one of the

few places where those such as Lewis, Pound and Hulme could publish before little magazines like the *Egoist* and *Blast* were founded. Essentially, the *New Age* was home to three main varieties of anti-liberalism: Nietzscheanism, Guild Socialism and what would later become known as Distributivism. Each of these movements was largely a reaction to the wave of 'progressive' and 'liberal' opinion which swept through Britain following the landslide victory of the Liberal Party and its Labour allies in the general election of 1906. From 1909 onwards, the Liberal government introduced a range of legislation called the New Liberalism to which most historians now trace the origins of the Welfare State. In a series of articles published in the *New Age*, Hilaire Belloc argued that the New Liberalism would produce

a State in which the few are left in possession of the means of production while the many, who are left without such possession, remain much as they were save that they have their lives organized and regulated under those few capitalists who are responsible for the well-being of their subordinates.⁶²

These articles were later published as a book called *The Servile State*, arguably the most influential anti-liberal and anti-socialist tract of its time.

As an alternative to this 'servile state', Belloc and G. K. Chesterton advocated a return to a largely agrarian society of small landholders. By contrast, the Nietzscheans favoured the kinds of 'aristocratic' society which flourished before Christianity, Protestantism, 1688, 1789 and other numerous 'slave' revolts. One of their number, J. M. Kennedy, even advocated the creation of an actual slave class!⁶³ And the Guild Socialists argued for a form of economic democracy which would marry the concept of the medieval guilds with the contemporary trade unions, a Ruskinian medievalism with French Syndicalism. All of the members of these three movements were opposed to parliamentary democracy; most were hostile towards the Suffragists; and many were virulently antisemitic and enthusiastic about eugenics. Furthermore, although the editor of the paper, Alfred Orage, and all but the modernists amongst his stable of writers had quite conservative literary tastes, all expended considerable energy attacking the socialist politics and the literary realism of Britain's three most prominent writers, George Bernard Shaw, H. G. Wells and Arnold Bennett. As one contributor later remembered

No one . . . can look at the journals and memoirs of that half-dozen years from 1909 without getting the impression of something exceptionally alive and kicking about it. These were the days when Shaw and Wells and Bennett were really formative influences . . . It was . . . the age of the counter-offensive against them.⁶⁴

This counter-offensive did not enlist modernist and post-Impressionist literature and art into its ranks but its attacks upon the literary realism of the Shaw–Wells–Bennett triumvirate did help clear the way for several varieties of anti-realist art and literature. For example Orage maintained that the writer should not just ‘reproduce’ the ‘vulgar’ conditions of contemporary commercial reality but mount some kind of ‘heroic resistance’⁶⁵ whereas one of the Nietzscheans, J. M. Kennedy, argued that there were ‘two publics – one the small artistic public, and the other the great uncultured middle-class public’.⁶⁶ Although Orage and Kennedy had little in common aesthetically with Pound and Lewis, they nevertheless shared the same enemies. A few years later Orage’s caricature of the realists as commercial advertisers would reappear as Pound’s Mr Nixon in *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* and Kennedy’s ‘two publics’ would be personified in Lewis’s 1914 ‘play’ *Enemy of the Stars* as Arghol and Hanp.

The *New Age* did, however, directly influence the party politics of the reactionary modernists. It was the first paper to propagate the Social Credit doctrine which would captivate Pound after the war; Lewis later admitted that ‘Nietzsche was . . . the paramount influence, as was the case with so many people prior to world war I’,⁶⁷ and Eliot, who described Orage as ‘the best literary critic of that time in London’,⁶⁸ became a Vice President of the Distributivist League in 1936.⁶⁹

Although there were considerable differences between the *New Age*’s various contributors nearly all advocated the (sometimes violent) overthrow of liberal democracy while rejecting virtually every emancipatory aspect of modernity. For example the Nietzscheans’ call for a return to some kind of aristocracy precluded sympathy for just about every aspect of the modern world. Even the Distributivists with their advocacy of the rights of the small property holder saw no essential difference between capitalism and its modern adversaries. In *The Servile State*, for example, Belloc writes dismissively that ‘the stupider kind of Collectivist [or socialist] will often talk of a “Capitalist phase” of society as the necessary

precedent to a “Collectivist phase” as though he were someone ‘working *with* the grain of that society’.⁷⁰

The Guild Socialists could be viewed as an exception to this rejection of bourgeois modernity since most of them did advocate utilising the militant aspects of the existing trade union movement. Thus Orage remembered that

During the period 1906–12 . . . the idea of the *national* guild was first brought into relation both with historical and with recent economic development . . . The tide of Collectivism . . . was then . . . too powerful to admit of even the smallest counter-current. Some experience of collectivism in action and of political methods as distinct from economic methods was necessary before the mind of the Labour movement could be turned in another direction. This was brought about by the impulse known as Syndicalism which, in essence, is the demand of Labour to control its industry. At the same time that Syndicalism came to be discussed, a revival of trade-union activity took place, and on such a scale that it seemed to the present writers that at last the trade unions were now finally determined to form a permanent element in society.⁷¹

However it should be remembered that the founder of French Syndicalism, Georges Sorel, advocated the ‘myth’ of the General Strike as a form of ‘creative violence’ which would culminate not in a classless society but one in which the proletariat and bourgeoisie would maintain a healthy antagonist separation. Thus according to Sorel

proletarian violence confines employers to their rôle of producers, and tends to restore the separation of the classes, just when they seemed on the point of intermingling in the democratic marsh. Proletarian violence not only makes the future revolution certain, but it seems also to be the only means by which the European nations – at present stupefied by humanitarianism – can recover their former energy. This kind of violence compels capitalism to restrict its attentions solely to its material role and tends to restore to it the warlike qualities which it formerly possessed.⁷²

As Lewis pointed out much later, ‘it was a matter of complete indifference to [Sorel] which class got charged with hatred first: bourgeoisie or proletariat, it was all one’.⁷³

Such sentiments were not necessarily shared by all at the *New Age*. Nevertheless there are striking similarities between the *New Age* circle and the French alliance between Sorel’s Syndicalists and Charles Maurras’s *Action Française*. Both brought together members of the radical right and radical left; both argued that the revolutionary energy of the working classes had been recuperated and emasculated

by socialist or labour parliamentary parties; and both advocated forms of direct action, in particular the General Strike.⁷⁴ Of course in England there was no equivalent of the Dreyfus Affair (the nearest equivalent was probably the Marconi Scandal) and the *New Age* circle did not spawn a fascist movement. Nevertheless, according to T. E. Hulme the 'obscure figures' involved in the Dreyfus case 'all have their counterparts here, and . . . the drama they figure in is a universal one'.⁷⁵

The defining characteristic of the protagonists on one side of this universal drama, according to Hulme, is that they deny the 'essential connection' between 'the working-class movement' and the ideology of 'democracy'. Whereas the two-hundred-year-old ideology of 'democracy' is 'liberal', 'progressive', 'pacifist', 'rationalist' and 'hedonist', Sorel's 'contrasted system' is 'classical' and 'pessimistic' because it springs from

the conviction that man is by nature bad or limited, and can consequently only accomplish anything of value by discipline, ethical, heroic, or political. In other words, it believes in Original Sin. We may define Romantics, then, as all who do not believe in the Fall of Man. It is this opposition which in reality lies at the root of most of the other divisions in social and political thought.⁷⁶

Thus the ideology advocated by Hulme is a form of counter-revolution which uses the energy of the working-class movement to reinstate an authoritarian and hierarchical society. To define fascism (of which there were several varieties) as a parody of revolution by no means exhausts all the ways in which it can be described. Nevertheless if this is at least partially an adequate definition then Hulme's politics can certainly be described as fascistic.

These comments of Hulme's are taken from his 'Translator's Preface to Sorel's *Reflections on Violence*', first published in the *New Age* in October 1915. The crucial 'turn' in Hulme's politics, however, had occurred several years earlier. Hulme originally made his name as a promoter of Henri Bergson, believing that his vitalist philosophy was the most recent and successful attack on materialism and nineteenth-century mechanistic world views but by 1911 he had begun to assert that a particular 'type of mentality' had recently associated itself with Bergson and that such a 'mentality' was

at the back of all forms of romanticism. Translated into social beliefs, it is the begetter of all the Utopias. It is the source of all of the idealist support of Revolution.⁷⁷

In 1911, Hulme met Pierre Lasserre, a literary critic and member of the *Action Française*, and was impressed by both his anti-romanticism and his attack on Bergson.⁷⁸ The year is significant, because as Alan Robinson demonstrates, after the Parliament Bill of 1911 (designed to curb the power of the Lords), the promotion of ‘classical’ aesthetics was virtually synonymous with support for the defeated Lords or for Tory and radical Right politics in general.⁷⁹ Like the English Nietzscheans, Lasserre believed that all philosophy, literature and the other arts had been predominantly ‘democratic’, ‘liberal’ and ‘progressive’ since 1789. Thus Lasserre divides all history until the present into two aeons:

Il y a deux ‘passés’. Il y a celui des institutions et des organisations de la Révolution valet abolir tout vestige. Mais il y a celui qu’une siècle de Révolution constitue aujourd’hui. Voici cent dix-huit ans que les principes des ‘Droit de l’Homme,’ les idées de ‘Contrat social’ et de ‘Démocratie’ sont un objet de piété, aveugle ou non, en tout cas respectable, de passion religieuse même pour de très nombreux Français.⁸⁰

[There are two ‘pasts’. There is the past of those institutions and organisations of which the Revolution wanted to abolish all trace. But there is also the past constituted by a century of Revolution. For a hundred and eighteen years the principles of the Rights of Man, the ideas of the Social Contract and of Democracy have been an object of piety, blind or not, but definitely respectable, of religious passion even, for vast numbers of French people.]

Even if this were an accurate description of French history, it could hardly be applied to the English history. Nevertheless virtually everything Lasserre has to say in this text, *Le Romantisme Français*, is repeated by Hulme in his famous essay ‘Romanticism and Classicism’. Thus Hulme contends that the final goal of Romanticism is Progress even though such a *telos* is precisely what is contested by the tradition of anti-liberalism charted by Williams in *Culture and Society*. Essentially, by labelling bourgeois modernity ‘Romanticism’ and defining it as the belief ‘that man, the individual, is an infinite reservoir of possibilities’,⁸¹ Hulme is able to empty the idea of revolution of any emancipatory content. As Orage pointed out, Hulme’s insistence on the dogma of Original Sin is never balanced by any doctrine concerning itself with redemption.⁸²

In ‘Romanticism and Classicism’ Hulme is unable to find any examples of contemporary ‘classical’ verse. However after the first Post-Impressionist exhibition in London towards the end of 1910,

there was a striking body of visual art to which he could apply his cultural politics. Most of what Hulme has to say about the new art derives from Worringer's theory that the entire history of art can be reduced to the expression of two basic *Weltanschauungen*. Because the new art is 'abstract', 'geometrical' and 'mechanical' it must therefore, according to Hulme, also be an expression of the 'dread of space', 'agoraphobia' and spiritual alienation which Worringer thinks is characteristic of medieval and primitive art.⁸³ Thus for the first time in English cultural history, a writer describes the revolt against bourgeois modernity, not in terms of the 'vital', 'organic' or 'unified', but in terms of the 'geometrical', 'mechanical', 'dead', 'lifeless' or 'discontinuous'. Like every revolutionary movement since the Renaissance, Hulme calls for a break with the immediate past (which begins with the Renaissance) in terms of a return to the 'medieval' and 'primitive' but this is a break which will allow humankind, to use a phrase coined by Chesterton to describe Orage, to be 'emancipated from emancipation'.⁸⁴ Although Hulme's advocacy of the art of the new industrial and technological era failed to impress his colleagues at the *New Age*, it nevertheless closely resembled their own support for the new militant unionism. Just as Hulme reifies the machinery of the modern industrial world as a form of resistance to the very reason which produced it, so the *New Age* political writers sought to harness the militant energy of the increasingly radicalised industrial working class and turn it against a more than century-long tradition of democratic and emancipatory politics.

Significantly, most of the members of the *New Age* circle and reactionary modernism were from class backgrounds which, although considerably varied, either excluded them from the radical working-class movement or the progressive upper-middle-class intelligentsia. Ironically most of the *New Age* contributors came from class backgrounds not entirely dissimilar to the writers they most despised, Wells and Bennett.⁸⁵ According to one memoir, Orage's father died at an early age after dissipating his inheritance and his son was only able to continue his education past the minimum leaving age because of a family friend's generosity.⁸⁶ Hulme went to and was sent down from Cambridge, but his father owned a ceramic manufacturing business in Staffordshire, the county of Bennett's Five Towns.⁸⁷ Appropriately, in the debate published in *Cambridge Magazine* during early 1916, his pacifist adversary is Lord Bertrand Russell. Lewis received his education at Rugby and later the Slade

but he did so with little economic support from his absent American father and impoverished but doting mother. William Chace describes Pound's family as 'nouveau-poor: refined, with pretensions to gentility, with a memory of rather better times, with little room for social mobility'.⁸⁸ Pound's Vorticist ally, Gaudier-Brzeska was French and his father a carpenter. The other soon-to-be-Vorticists who seceded with such acrimony from Roger Fry's Omega workshop in 1913 were, as Charles Harrison points out, 'mostly the children of working men, shopkeepers, foreigners or the nouveau riche'.⁸⁹ Eliot was a graduate of Harvard but his father had acquired most of his wealth making bricks in St Louis, still a 'frontier town' during Eliot's father's adolescence.⁹⁰ Of all the reactionary modernists, Eliot maintained the most cordial relations with 'Bloomsbury' but if nothing else his friendship with Lewis, who made a career out of baiting Bloomsbury's 'bourgeois-bohemians', ensured that he could never be entirely assimilated into such an upper-middle-class liberal culture. Lawrence was closely associated with many of the leading members of Bloomsbury but after a serious bout of homosexual panic induced by seeing John Maynard Keynes in his pyjamas at Cambridge in early 1915, his relations with Bloomsbury became increasingly strained. And while Yeats's father was an artist he was not from that strata of the Anglo-Irish which included his son's much later friends, Lady Gregory and the Gore-Booths.

Thus much of modernism was not just, as Eagleton argues, 'the work of foreigners and émigrés'⁹¹ but also of those who were working-class but upwardly mobile, lower-middle-class, *déclassé* or, like Eliot and Yeats, on the margins of the *beau monde*. Because these writers came from quite a diverse range of class and cultural backgrounds, generalisations should only be made quite tentatively. Nevertheless we can say that none either kept or established any permanent connection to either the radical working class or the culturally progressive aspects of the upper-middle class. Theirs was a literature without roots in any larger progressive socio-economic class and for partly that reason it was one which expressed an extremely ambivalent relationship to modernity. Ironically, the reactionary modernists were barely less culturally marginalised than some of their targets, primarily women, the lower-middle class and Jews. Their disenchanting modernity required sacrifices, as perhaps does even the most progressive of modernities, but they tended to be sacrifices of the weak rather than the strong.