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Introduction

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In the late nineteenth century, writers and artists perceived a crisis in their fields of endeavor. The symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé wrote of a "crisis in verse," the naturalist playwright August Strindberg of a "theatrical crisis."[1] Over the following generation, this crisis would manifest itself in questions about a central feature of literature and art: their ability to represent reality. At least since Plato and Aristotle, the arts had been associated with *mimesis*, the imitation or representation of reality. Although other features of art, notably its rhetorical effects on its audience and its ability to express the emotions or thoughts of the artist, had been prized by various periods or movements, these had never been entirely detached from art's power of representation.[2] By the early twentieth century, however, some artists began to pursue an art that no longer claimed to represent reality. The symbolist painter Maurice Denis observed in 1890, "It is well to remember that a picture – before being a battle horse, a nude woman, or some anecdote – is essentially a flat surface covered with colors assembled in a certain order."[3] Twenty years later, painters were arranging colors on flat surfaces – or even pasting objects onto flat surfaces – in order to create abstract designs, with no battle horse, nude woman, or other anecdote whatsoever.

Abstract, or "nonrepresentational," or "nonobjective," art has often been taken as the epitome of modern art. As a result, the history of modern art has been understood in terms of an almost scientific set of experiments leading up to the ultimate discovery, abstraction. Parallels have been found in modern literature – free verse, the "stream of consciousness," the breaking down of the fourth wall in the theater. Such formal innovations may appear in the history of artistic forms as discoveries, akin to Isaac Newton's formulation of the law of gravity, Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, or Albert Einstein's relativity

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theorem, apparently a discovery of a truth that preceded the scientist's or artist's inquiry. However, like those scientific discoveries, formal developments in art and literature take place in a historical context, and since art has traditionally aimed to represent reality, innovations in the means of representation cannot be entirely extricated from the problem of the new realities that the artist feels no longer able to represent by the old means. The modernist crisis of representation was two-fold: a crisis in what could be represented and a crisis in how it should be represented, or in other words a crisis in both the content and the form of artistic representation. One especially influential strand of modernism, often taken as emblematic of the movement as a whole, rejected representation altogether. In part because the early theorists of modernism were particularly concerned with the formal characteristics of the work of art or literature, the history of modernism has largely been written in terms of formal developments. Equally, however, modernism resulted from the challenge of representing new content, the historical experiences of the modern world, in the context of changing social norms about the status of art and literature themselves.

Historians of modernism have frequently concerned themselves with the relationship between content and form in the crisis of representation. In the 1930s the German-Jewish Marxist critic Walter Benjamin identified a "crisis of artistic reproduction" that corresponded to a "crisis of perception itself" and had begun with Charles Baudelaire in the mid-nineteenth century.[4] Leftist English writers of Benjamin's generation, such as John Cornford, Cecil Day-Lewis, Michael Roberts, and Alick West, used the term "crisis" to explore the relationship between the radical innovations in the arts of the previous decade or two and the social, economic, and political catastrophes of their own time.[5] Most of these writers were convinced that modernism reflected a crisis in capitalism. Later critics inspired by Marxism, including Fredric Jameson, traced the historical roots of the "crisis of representation" to literary modernism, but saw its effects as continuing into their own "postmodern" era.[6] In this book I trace the unfolding of the crisis of representation in English and European literature and in the arts. While I share with Benjamin, Jameson, and others a sense that the revolution in the arts now called "modernism" stems from social and political transformations that began in the mid-nineteenth century, I do not believe that a simple causal relationship can be discerned between a crisis in capitalism and a crisis in the arts. Rather, I believe that multiple causes, some internal to the arts and others deriving from broader historical forces, interacted in the development of modernism. I hope to show how developments in literary form emerge out of a background of social, political, intellectual, and existential ferment. The relationship between literary or artistic innovations and changing

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historical circumstances is complex, and it is mediated by the history of ideas. The nineteenth century experienced simultaneous crises that contributed in a variety of ways to the development of modernism in the early twentieth century. These transformations can be grouped into three major categories: the literary and artistic (crisis of representation); the socio-political (crisis of liberalism); and the philosophical and scientific (crisis of reason). The following discussion of these three crises surveys each in a roughly chronological fashion. To balance the emphasis in later chapters on the social and political context of modernism, this Introduction focuses on its roots in intellectual and literary history.

Crisis of representation

Modern art and literature are known for their rejection of traditional conventions for representing the world and constructing works of art. An all-white canvas by Kasimir Malevich, or a mass-produced snow shovel exhibited by Marcel Duchamp as *In Advance of the Broken Arm* (1915), challenge museum-goers to question the definition of art, the expertise of curators, and their own status as connoisseurs. In general, work that is considered "modern" is experimental, rather than traditional, though many of these experiments draw on and develop techniques inherent in more traditional art. The modernists consciously sought to make art that was radically different from the art of earlier periods. To do so, they experimented with new styles and techniques as well as subject matter that had not been treated seriously by artists and writers in previous generations. Four technical innovations can illustrate the formal aspect of the crisis of representation. Nonobjective (or, loosely, "abstract") painting presented patterns of lines and colors on a canvas with no ostensible "subject." Free verse abandoned traditional versification methods including meter, rhyme, and stanza forms; it often also violated standard syntax. In narrative, the stream of consciousness purported to represent the thoughts of an individual character without any intervention of a narrator figure. And in theater playwrights broke down the "fourth wall" that separates the stage from the audience and allowed their characters to discuss their own status as characters in a play. These innovations, drawn from different media and genres, indicate the range of the crisis of representation and also how various its effects could be in diverse contexts. Certain shared concerns defined all these experiments as modernist. In each case modernism called attention to the medium of the literary or artistic work, defined itself in contrast to convention, and radically altered the means of representation.

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Modern painting demonstrates most dramatically the break with earlier modes. Beginning with Paul Cézanne and Edouard Manet, painters challenged the Renaissance system of perspective that created an illusion of three-dimensional depth on a flat, two-dimensional canvas. The cubism of Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso, and the subsequent turn to purely nonrepresentational or abstract art by Wassily Kandinsky, Malevich, Piet Mondrian, and others, abandoned all effort at illusionism and instead celebrated the flat plane of the canvas, representing nothing but itself. In literature, too, the early twentieth century witnessed attempts to escape from mimesis: the Russian futurists invented *zaum*, a poetic language made up entirely of nonsense words; in their *Stationendramen* German expressionist playwrights replaced lifelike characters with abstractions representing states of mind or the different parts of a protagonist's soul; the novelist James Joyce wrote his last novel, *Finnegans Wake* (1939), in a multilingual jargon meant to represent the logic of dreams. In all these cases the modernists turned away from the ideal of a language that would offer a transparent window onto reality; they favored instead a complex language that drew attention to its own texture. The poet Archibald MacLeish wrote, in his "Ars Poetica" (1926), that "A poem should not mean / But be."

Despite the more radical experiments of the literary avant-garde, however, literature in general clung stubbornly to reality. Although writers might stress the importance of the sounds of words or the visual organization of words on the page, words tended, except in extreme cases, to maintain their referential function; in addition to being, they meant. Literature therefore continued to represent reality, sometimes in distorted forms or in nightmarish parody, sometimes in comic detail or with multiple layers of symbolic intention, but usually with some implicit ideal of mimesis underlying all the literary experiments. Modernist literature seldom went as far as modern art in the direction of pure abstraction, and therefore parallels with the arts present a challenge: it would be unwise to suggest that modern art had "succeeded" in escaping from representation where modernist literature had "failed." Furthermore, some art historians have challenged the version of the history of modern art that makes the rejection of mimesis the sole truly modern characteristic. Such a history privileges cubism and abstract art over other movements, such as expressionism, dada, or surrealism. It obviously fails to account for the career of a major modern artist such as Henri Matisse, whose art never really approached pure abstraction; more surprisingly, it also fails to account for the works of Picasso after his cubist period, when, having introduced the technical innovations that would lead to abstract art, he returned to mimesis.

In literature a purely formal account of modernism distorts the record even further. The mimetic intention underlies much apparently nonmimetic art.

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The victory of free verse over traditional meters, decisively won in English by Ezra Pound and his friends, was actually undertaken in the name of mimesis. Pound emphasized that poetry should imitate spoken language rather than conventional meters. It should contain "nothing, *nothing*, that you couldn't, in some circumstance, in the stress of some emotion, *actually say*."[7] The stream of consciousness, while breaking from the "realist" convention of the omniscient narrator, in fact corresponded to another form of realism, what Ian Watt has called the "realism of presentation," which attempts to present reality as it is experienced by the individual character, rather than from the viewpoint of an omniscient narrator.[8] The modern theater broke not so much with the representation of reality as with the illusionism that claimed that a stage set could represent reality. Ever since the seventeenth century, plays had been presented on a stage framed by a proscenium arch, as if the audience were looking in on a scene painted according to the rules of perspective developed in the Renaissance. A number of modern playwrights destroyed this illusion, allowing their characters to acknowledge their fictive status, while modern producers and directors experimented with other methods of staging plays, abolishing the proscenium arch. In all the literary cases just mentioned, conventional representations were replaced not with nonrepresentations, but with new systems of representation that acknowledged the limitations of the old conventions.

Recognizing this fact about modernist literature, which may indeed distinguish it from modern art, illuminates a central problem about the originality of modernism. The defenders and interpreters of modernism have oscillated between two related views: on the one hand, that modernism means an end to all conventional forms of representation, and on the other hand that modernism means the creation of new conventions of representation, more appropriate than the old ones to the modern age. The foregoing analysis suggests that modernism represents not the rejection of conventions altogether but simply a new, more authentic set of conventions. However, the originality of modernism consists, perhaps, not in its introduction of just one more set of conventions (the Renaissance and romanticism had each introduced new conventions in the past). Rather, its specificity lies in the recognition that the conventions of art needed constant renewal, a sort of permanent revolution, to borrow a phrase from the political world. Modernism insisted that each artist or writer must create anew the appropriate conventions for representing reality as he or she experienced it. Indeed, for the greatest modernists, like Picasso or Joyce, the task was to create these conventions anew for each subsequent phase of the artist's career. Modernism put an intense emphasis on originality, famously formulated by Baudelaire: "Modernity is the transitory, the fugitive, the contingent; it is one half of art, the other being the eternal and immutable . . . nearly all our

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originality comes from the stamp that time impresses upon our sensibility."[9] Originality lay not in discovering timeless truths but in embracing the transitory nature of modernity itself. Since the modernists had to invent brand-new means of representation for the modern world, they could not assume that an audience would understand their innovations. The famous hostility of audiences to the productions of modern art and literature results from the internal imperative of modernism always to reinvent the means of representation. The crisis of representation becomes permanent, but this does not mean, in most cases, that representation itself is abandoned. The modernists were not necessarily seeking an art without any conventions, but rather an art that examined its own conventionality, that put the conventions of art on display, an art that put art itself in question.

In the history of philosophy, the crisis of representation can be traced to the writings of the eighteenth-century philosopher Immanuel Kant. Kant formulated some of the crucial philosophical problems of modernity, and he is as central a figure in the crises of liberalism and of reason as in the crisis of representation. A crucial difficulty in the traditional conception of art as representation is the dualism that distinguishes the image or representation of a thing from the thing represented. One influential view, going back to Plato, holds that art can never be true because it is never more than an imitation of the appearances of reality, rather than (like philosophy) an analysis of their underlying forms or ideas. Art is therefore twice removed from the ultimate reality, the reality of forms. This dualism came under attack in the work of Kant, who argued that we can never have direct, unmediated access to reality. Since all our perceptions come to us through our senses and our thoughts, we can never directly know the "thing in itself," the underlying form at which Plato aimed, but only its appearances, what Kant called "phenomena." The strict dualism between reality and the representation of reality therefore breaks down: the only reality that humans can perceive is appearance. Art, or philosophy, can give a more or less adequate representation of these appearances, but neither has direct access to an ultimate reality behind appearances. Later philosophers thought that art might in some respects offer a better account of the world of appearances than philosophy could and that reality could never be disentangled from our representations of it.[10]

The philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche, Edmund Husserl, and Martin Heidegger showed the errors into which the opposition of reality and representation had led Western thought. Nietzsche challenged the Platonic preference for reality over representation, depth over surface (his philosophy is discussed in the section on "Hermeneutics of suspicion" below). Husserl, a contemporary of the modernists, created a system, phenomenology, meant to avoid the

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dualism between reality and representation. Since we as perceivers have access only to phenomena, appearances, he "bracketed" or refused to answer the question of correspondence – whether those phenomena correspond to an actually existing reality "out there."[11] This "phenomenological reduction" shares much with modernist literature and art, which attempt a rigorous analysis of the phenomena of perception, often without claiming the ability to represent any reality external to the perceiving subject. Cubism can be understood as a phenomenology of vision, an attempt to render what the eye sees before the mind has processed it. The stream-of-consciousness novel offers a phenomenology of mind, an account of the contents, in Virginia Woolf's phrase, of "an ordinary mind on an ordinary day," without any filtering devices. Modernist writers, in particular, emphasized the attempt to capture immediate experience, "to record the atoms as they fall upon the mind," independent of all philosophical categories or ideas, experience as it is actually lived.[12] They found inspiration for this effort in the philosophies of Henri Bergson, F. H. Bradley, and especially William James, who introduced the dominant metaphor of a "stream of consciousness."[13]

The modernist effort to record the phenomena of perception differed from the traditional understanding that art represented a reality outside the mind. When modern artists and writers turned away from the mimetic or representational function of art, they had two obvious alternatives: the rhetorical and the expressive functions. The rhetorical function, art's ability to move or convince an audience, was a traditional justification of art, most famously summarized by the Latin poet Horace, who wrote that the purpose of art was "to instruct and to delight." Rhetoric held a certain primacy in classicism, a view of art dominant in the eighteenth century. The expressive function, the ability of art or literature to express the thoughts or feelings of the artist, had become central to justifications of art in the romantic period, beginning in the late eighteenth century. The romantics prefigured many aspects of modernism: the emphasis on the lone genius who follows his (or occasionally her) own inspiration and disregards the tenets and rules of art; a faith in the spiritual qualities of art understood as independent of organized religion; the basic hostility of the artist to society and convention; and the effort to create an art that speaks the language of the common people.

The philosopher Charles Taylor has summarized a fundamentally modern attitude of "romantic expressivism," and has argued that this expressivism had a profound influence on modernism. The romantics sought in art a way to combat the tendency of modernity to "fragment human life: dividing it into disconnected departments, like reason and feeling; dividing us from nature; dividing us from each other."[14] They sought to reintegrate the human personality

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through art. This impulse remains strong in modernism, too, for example in the work of D. H. Lawrence. However, most modernists were more likely than the romantics to accept the fragmentation of human life, nature, and society as inevitable, and to expect that art and literature would reflect the fragmentary nature of the modern experience in their own forms. In some cases this fragmentation seems to have been aimed at achieving a higher reintegration, symbolized for example by Molly Bloom's "yes" at the end of Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) or the Sanskrit words "Shantih shantih shantih" at the end of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922), which Eliot glossed with the biblical phrase "The Peace which passeth understanding." Often, however, the modernists were willing to accept that no reintegration of human life through art was possible and therefore to leave their works with the appearance of being unfinished or incomplete; the same rejection of the integrating force of art also accounts for the modernist fascination with the ugly (see Chapter One). For the romantics, the world was full of a hidden meaning which the artist had to discover. The modernists generally saw the world as devoid of inherent significance. For them, the task of the artist was not to discover a preexistent meaning, but to create a new meaning out of the chaos and anarchy of actual modern life. If anything, this gave art an even higher value than it had for romanticism. As Taylor puts it, "Art becomes one of the, if not the, paradigm medium in which we express, hence define, hence realize ourselves."[15] This high status of the work of art was contested in modernism. Where some, such as Heidegger, saw art and poetry as a special mode of human activity that could disclose truths unavailable through other modes, others, like the dadaists, mocked the very idea of art or claimed to break down the distance between the "high" art of the museums and the reality of modern, especially urban, life.

Some critics (including M. H. Abrams, Paul de Man, and Taylor) have treated modernism essentially as a late form of romanticism.[16] Yet, in addition to the general differences of attitude just outlined, which may be seen as an intensification of tendencies already inherent in romanticism, modernism differs from the earlier movement in its emphasis on the need continually to reinvent the means of representation. Modernism involves a much more wholesale challenge than romanticism to such systems of representation as pictorial perspective and to the ideal of transparent or mimetic language. The transition from romanticism to modernism can be understood in part as resulting from a new justification of the work of art. Historically, art had been understood in terms of its mimetic function (as a representation of reality, ever since the Greeks), its rhetorical function (its effect on the audience, emphasized by Horace and later neoclassical theorists), or its expressive function (as the expression of the artist's genius, emphasized by the romantics). In modernism art came to be

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justified for no function at all, or rather for its artistic function, for its status as a work of art independent of its relations to reality, an audience, or an artist. This justification of art, like the crisis of representation itself, goes back to Kant, and Kant offered a term for it: the autonomy, or self-regulation, of art. Those who defend art's autonomy generally emphasize its formal features, the way that the work of art itself creates the rules by which it can be interpreted and understood. In this sense, what the modernist work of art expresses is not "ourselves" but itself. It becomes an almost hieratic object, containing a meaning that transcends not only its status as representation and the understanding of its audience but even the intentions of its creator. For some modernists, art approaches a sacred function, no longer (as in the Middle Ages) subservient to the rituals of the Church, but understood as itself a site of sacred power.

In Kant's view, the work of art, in so far as it is art, serves no purpose outside itself. Although obviously created by actual people in the course of their lives in history, the work of art does not exist to serve their interests or further their ideological beliefs or any ideological beliefs at all. The market value of a work of art, and its propaganda value, may be of interest to the artist, the dealer or publisher, or to a political movement, but they are irrelevant (perhaps even deleterious) to its quality as art. Kant defended the work of art against earlier attacks by claiming that it has no direct effect on the world, or more precisely that it serves no particular interests: you cannot eat it; it does not (or should not) promote any particular ideology; it does not give you any sexual pleasure; it has no real purpose; it serves no end other than itself. The mystery for Kant was that, despite its lack of an end outside itself, the work of art is purposive, it has shape and form, it seems the product of someone's intention. This "purposiveness without a purpose" is what makes art an end in itself.[17] According to Kant, we go to the work of art not to learn something about the outside world, not to fulfill our own desires, not to have our minds changed about a matter of politics, but for the sake of the work of art itself. In this sense, a work of art is an expression of our highest humanity, for Kant saw the difference between humans and animals as consisting in the fact that we can be disinterested, we can do something for its own sake.[18]

Kant emphasized the autonomy of the work of art and developed a formalist aesthetics. In late nineteenth-century England, a literary movement known as aestheticism married formalist aesthetics to a worldview that cultivated the autonomy of art as the ultimate expression of human values (see Chapter One). Despite his formalism, Kant tended to understand the work of art as serving very general moral ends – in particular, the development of

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human disinterestedness. The aestheticists elevated art above other moral ends. Walter Pater praised the "love of art for its own sake," while, more aggressively, Oscar Wilde wrote with approval that "all art is quite useless."[19] This element of aestheticism had a great influence on modernism, and even so political a poet as W. H. Auden eventually came around to the view that "poetry makes nothing happen."[20] Those who share the aestheticist sensibility tend also to emphasize the formal qualities of the literary work, as opposed to its thematic content, and therefore the privileging of the history of formal innovation in accounts of modernism reflects the modernists' own concern with form as the distinguishing characteristic of the work of art, independent of author, audience, or reality.

The crisis of representation, though most easily illustrated by the visual arts, was exacerbated in literature by the very medium out of which literature is created: language. In the early twentieth century, several linguists and philosophers, most influentially Ferdinand de Saussure and Ludwig Wittgenstein, analyzed the way that language functions as a system of representation. Saussure emphasized the arbitrariness of the relationship between what he called "the signifier" and "the signified," that is, between the words dog, *chien*, *Hund*, *perro*, or *cane*, and the concept of a dog.[21] Wittgenstein studied how the rules of language make up a sort of "language game," and suggested that the rules of the game, rather than the reality it is meant to describe, govern how language is used. On the eve of the Russian Revolution, the Russian formalists created the first modern school of literary theory, emphasizing the primacy of the self-referential "literary" function of language over its mimetic function. These conceptions of language drew attention to the fact, familiar to the opponents of poetry ever since Plato proposed the banishment of poets from the ideal republic, that language represents reality in an especially unreliable manner. Many modernists embraced the idea of the literary work as a particularly sophisticated sort of language game, in which the relations among words were more important than the relations of words to nonlinguistic reality. They broke up syntax, created linguistic puzzles, and made use of quotation, allusion, and parody, all to challenge the conception of language as straightforwardly mimetic. Thus, while language did stubbornly maintain its tendency to refer to outside reality, the modernists often thwarted this inherent tendency toward representation by organizing their literary works according to the nonreferential functions of language. The development of modernist literary technique is largely the story of writers' attempts to wrest their own styles from the maelstrom created by the constant interplay between the referential and the nonreferential forces of language.