INTRODUCTION

Modernism's Blasted History

The question of violence is one that commands a great deal of attention, thanks in large part to global media reportage, social and governmental forums and intellectual conclaves. Whether it be politicized violence, in the form of terror (and its state-approved counterpart, torture); religious violence, with its holy wars and rituals of bodily mutilation; or subtler shades of symbolic violence, such as those epistemic and/or hermeneutical violations of language and meaning that guide the exegetical practices of continental theory and philosophy, the subject in question plays an inordinately large role in contemporary thought. But that subject becomes more troubling and contentious when it is put in the context of *pleasure* – which is to say, when art enters the picture, and aestheticized violence is the outcome.

In historical terms, with very few exceptions, works of art depicting violence were regulated by implicit yet firm normative constraints. Scenes of cruelty and carnage made palatable, even aesthetically enjoyable, through the practiced manipulation of formal and stylistic devices were invariably used to serve a positive social agenda. With the advent of Romanticism, however, this adherence to cultural norms was loosened, and it continued to slacken off through the remainder of the nineteenth century. The decadence of the *fin de siècle* thus signifies a critical juncture; from that moment on, the meeting point of violence and aesthetics follows a different narrative path, a divisive and tortuous route that winds through to the present day. This study explores in detail the nature, shape and context of that moment, setting its compass by the evolution and fate of modernism in the early decades of the last century.

That the controversial legacy of aesthetic modernism is still thriving in the new century can be seen from a much-publicized incident. On 16 September 2001, the avant-garde composer Karlheinz Stockhausen appeared at a press conference organized by the Hamburg Music Festival. Among the questions put to him by the German press corps was what he understood by the term 'art'. Stockhausen replied that any genuinely artistic act involved a tearing, a

rending, a *violation* of everyday life. Relating this back to the previous week's attacks in New York City, at the behest of one particularly insistent journalist, he made the remark that has become a part of post-9/11 testimony:

> What has happened is – now you all have to turn your brains around – the greatest work of art there has ever been . . . This is the greatest possible work of art in the entire cosmos . . . Compared to this, we are nothing as composers . . . Some artists also try to cross the boundaries of what could ever be possible or imagined, to wake us up, to open another world for us.[1]

Reorienting one's thought processes, crossing boundaries into the unimaginable, finding new worlds to inhabit – the conceits surrounding Stockhausen's notorious pronouncement draw on the rhetoric of modernism. The true value of art, in his view, lies in its ability to wrench itself free from the safe, the secure and the self-evident – from which we might conclude that art, both in its making and its appreciation, is intimately bound up with violence and disruption.

The reaction to these comments was radically divided. The academic world, for the most part, showed sympathy for Stockhausen's position, considering it in its full context.[2] But the media launched a vehement backlash that no number of retractions could correct. The *New York Times* set the ball rolling with an outraged (and distorted) report painting Stockhausen as an 'egomaniac' with 'dangerously overblown ambitions' for art.[3] Maintaining the spirit of Stockhausen's own rhetoric, the *Times* reporter presented him as an overreacher bound to the directives of aesthetic modernism – elitist; aloof; hostile to commonplace sentiment; and, with his forbidding, twenty-seven-hour opera, devoted to the single-minded pursuit of artistic supremacy. On top of all this, Stockhausen had done the unthinkable: he had wilfully confused art with real-life tragedy and allowed aesthetic enjoyment to intrude on culture-wide trauma, suffering and grief.

The Stockhausen incident played out the way it did, I contend, because of what took place in the early decades of the previous century: a mounting interest in, and commitment to, a modernist aesthetic based on violence, antagonism and upheaval. Modernism's history, to put it bluntly, has been well and truly 'blasted'. From one angle, it is subject to reproach and condemnation for impugning art's ethical, redemptive endowment; from another, it is seen as an explosive intervention in literary culture, blasting a hole in its critical fortunes that has yet to be properly repaired. Thus, if modernism's destiny has been fatally compromised, it is because the urge to violate is now regarded as an integral part of its aesthetic makeup. The association with detachment, emotional reserve and intransigent artistic

practices indicates, in short, that the modernist aesthetic has a strand of compulsive belligerence woven into its DNA.

Yet Stockhausen's provocative assertion implies a principle that holds not just for modernism, but for art more broadly: that the terms 'violence' and 'aesthetics' *belong* together. To focus on spectacle, upheaval and sensation is to plot the points of contact where violence meets aesthetics. Thomas De Quincey, writing in the early 1820s, addresses the public's craving for sensation. In the first of his 'Murder' essays, he argues that a fire in Oxford Street, a potential 'conflagration of merit',[4] is arresting insofar as it provides sensory delight. He writes: 'I contend that the most virtuous man, under the premises stated, was entitled to make a luxury of the fire, and to hiss it, as he would any other performance that raised expectations in the public mind, which afterwards it disappointed.'[5] Although there is a satirical edge to De Quincey's observation, it contains a truth about art: that in order to capture a spectator's attention, art cannot but appeal to the most basic desire for spectacle, even (or perhaps especially) if it is visibly destructive. To pretend otherwise is to deny that art and life are affiliated in any way. The kind of art that is reflexive, that meditates on its own processes and practices – modernist art, in short – will therefore draw the two terms, violence and aesthetics, even closer together.

However, as De Quincey's remark suggests, the compulsion to draw the two terms together begins much earlier, in Romanticism. Joel Black, for example, uses De Quincy as one of his touchstones to examine *The Aesthetics of Murder* (1991). Black posits that there is a kind of reflex action that prompts us to conjoin violence with aesthetics. He writes:

> While art may turn toward violence in a futile endeavor to make itself more authentic, actual instances of social violence are regularly presented to us artistically, and routinely experienced by us aesthetically. The very activity by which we represent or 'picture' violence to ourselves is an aesthetic operation whereby we habitually transform brutal actions into art.[6]

The aesthetic infiltrates life, in other words, which is why De Quincey's fire gazer sees fit to hiss, when the scene falls short of a proper artistic spectacle. But the wider issue at stake here, reaching beyond Romanticism to aestheticist and modernist artistic attitudes, is transgression. For Frank Lentricchia and Jody McAuliffe, who identify Romanticism as the crucible for the violent aesthetic, the desire for *innovation* is coterminous with the desire for *violation*. They write: 'Transgressive artistic desire – which wants to make art whose very originality constitutes a step across and beyond the boundaries of the order in place – is desire not to violate

within a regime of culture (libel and pornography laws, for example) but desire to stand somehow outside, so much the better to violate and subvert the regime itself.'[7] Modernist art thus represents a kind of fulfilment, or at least an expansion, of intimations latent in nineteenth-century poetics.

The main purpose of this study is to examine how these intimations have come to be realized in the period from the mid-1830s to the late 1910s, or from Théophile Gautier's formal declaration of *l'art pour l'art* to Ezra Pound's poetic denunciation of that legacy. But despite this diachronic spread, from proto-aestheticist declaration to high-modernist polemic, the bulk of the study is devoted to English literary modernism in the first two decades of the last century. I argue, first, that this is the period in which the development of a violent aesthetic is most pronounced, and second, that it is this development that can be seen to define a dominant strand within the modernist movement as a whole. But to gainsay this development in its historical context, I trace it back to what I see as the main artistic tributary of aesthetic modernism: the movement of art for art's sake, as it metamorphoses into decadence, first in France (Gautier, Baudelaire, Huysmans) and then in England (the Pre-Raphaelites, Swinburne, Pater, Wilde). Aesthetics, I want to suggest, is not related to forms of violation in an incidental or adventitious kind of way; rather, it has these forms encoded, at least potentially, into its very nature.

At the core of this argument is the proposition that it is the transgressive agencies of the nineteenth-century Aesthetic movement that are recast and reshaped to fit the modernist project. These agencies emerge early in the nineteenth century through varieties of sexual irregularity, expanding to incorporate illness and criminality as the decadence is consolidated. It is in aestheticism that *aesthesis* is raised almost to the level of a sacred principle, as the quintessence of artistic expression, and it is aestheticism that is most (though not exclusively, and not always positively) influential in the development of aesthetic modernism. This is not to suggest that aestheticism-decadence is the sole progenitor of aesthetic modernism; naturalism and symbolism, for example, also make significant contributions. Nor is it to imply that there is an unproblematic evolution of literary aestheticism into literary modernism; to the contrary, this relationship is often fraught and convoluted, with any (guarded) affirmations offset by disavowal and/or rejection. To delineate more clearly the stakes of aesthetic modernism, then, we must look back to its revealing antecedent: that intensified arraignment of beauty and form known as aestheticism.

THE CURSE OF AESTHETICISM

The Aesthetic movement, or art for art's sake (and its culmination or offshoot, Decadence) has also had its share of adverse critical commentary. Even without its 'ism', as Martin Jay notes, the aesthetic is in certain contexts 'variously identified with irrationality, illusion, fantasy, myth, sensual education, the imposition of will, and humane indifference to ethical, religious, or cognitive considerations'.[8] The politics of aestheticism, in turn, convokes an elitist or aristocratic *hauteur*, a rejection of democratic practices and a disdain for common or quotidian experience. It stands for an intractable and extreme artificiality, raising the world of the creative imagination above both non-human nature and the 'real world' of material actuality. In Peter Bürger's words, it denotes 'art's detachment from the context of practical life'.[9]

Compounding these deficiencies is the widely held philosophical view that aestheticism stands for idealism – or beauty without realism – and for the denigration of human values. As P. E. Tennant remarks of Théophile Gautier, coiner of the term 'art for art's sake': 'With Gautier the old anthropocentric orientation of literature gives place to all that is non-man . . . Poetry becomes a sort of pure intuition of formal beauty little related to the human substance.'[10] Deviant, amoral and inhuman, the aestheticist credo has been condemned, in the most reproving instances, as an ethos of nihilism and despair, and as a tumour on the historical body of art. Yet despite this widespread censure, the precepts and attitudes most fundamental to aestheticism have shaped much of the art that can be identified as modernist.

It is not just that the ideology of the aesthetic autonomy is brought to the fore in aestheticism and culminates in modernism. It is also the figure of the aesthete, who at once embodies this aesthetic autonomy and subverts it, as such an individual cannot help but live in the real world. The *OED* defines the aesthete as '[o]ne who professes a special appreciation of what is beautiful, and endeavours to carry his ideas of beauty in practical manifestation'.[11] Therein lie (at least) two problems. What might 'special appreciation' entail – interest, enthusiasm, passion or devotion? Even more mysteriously, how does a 'practical manifestation' of this attitude express itself? And is 'practical' here opposed to 'theoretical', 'speculative' or 'imaginary'? The open-endedness of this latter quality allows for a perplexing array of possibilities. Yet despite its vagueness, this definition usefully draws attention to the pressure point of the aestheticist doctrine, which conditions its many and varied incarnations: the unconsummated relationship between art and life.

As most accounts of the doctrine tell us, aestheticism begins with a movement away from *mimesis*, or copying from nature, in favour of *poiesis*, creating from the mind, to make possible a form of art that is *autonomous*. Accompanying this move is a rejection of Victorian beliefs and values, a retreat from practical life and a longing for refuge in the artificial sphere of art. The artwork's self-governing integrity thus frees it from the structures of everyday experience. Consistent with the logic of autonomy, art becomes the supreme value and life seen as meaningful only to the extent that it promotes aesthetic experience. In addition, *l'art pour l'art* opens up possibilities for transgression, for contravening the orthodoxies of power. It is my contention, first, that autonomy has been overemphasized at the expense of transgression, and second, that aestheticist art and criticism are more entwined with aesthetics than with politics.

It seems clear that art and life cannot meet on equal terms; one must yield to the other. Leon Chai suggests that 'the proclamation of art for art's sake might also produce a yet higher appeal – of *life* for art's sake, which would mean not merely disengagement of form from social and moral interests but a subordination even of life itself to the canons of form'.[12] For the nineteenth-century aesthetician, this is manifested in the impetus to make life more like art, to render it an object worthy of aesthetic contemplation. But if one must surrender to the other, that is, if the gap between art and life cannot be bridged, all that remains is to render the difference inoperable. Felicia Bonaparte considers this to be an inevitable outcome. She writes: 'What makes aestheticism so dangerous is that, as Wilde well understands, it is a creed that cannot be held without being simultaneously implemented in life as fully as in art.'[13] Rather than separate art from life, then, aestheticism seeks to confound the distinction, artfully intervening in life to coerce it into becoming more like art. Once again, the problem of form arises, the question of the sort of shape a 'practical manifestation' might take.

The aestheticist-decadent quest to find crossover points between art and life is one of the implicit tributaries of modernism. As part of its remit, English literary modernism seeks to transform the world through sheer style, to awaken consciousness to itself through a violent renovation of language and literary form; what is transformative in the artistic sphere, then, will also be transformative in the wider sociocultural milieu. Though the modernist artist has a less insular attitude to the art-life dichotomy than his or her nineteenth-century precursor, the belief still abides that the creation of art – difficult, innovative, formally inventive art – can somehow redeem the anomie and uncertainty exacerbated by a pitiless modernity. As

we will see, this attitude is as much a product or outgrowth of the modern as it is in opposition to it.

DRAMA, DREAMS AND DRUGS

The French philosopher Alain Badiou, who has also written several plays, notes that theatre 'is always a public mediation on the relation or non-relation between artifice and life'.[14] To unravel this 'relation or non-relation' is to recognize that there is a distinction to be made between theatrical representation and dramatic form, or between theatre as a regulated mode of public entertainment and *theatricality* in a wider, more unruly sense. Badiou then outlines some aspects of what he calls the 'problem' of theatre, including 'displaying artifice such that the received forms of the natural can be criticized, or showing that any "nature" is an artificial construction'.[15] The first of these hints at aestheticism: flaunting artifice as a critique of nature/the natural (the real meaning of what it is to be *à rebours*), whereas the second points towards modernism and its unmasking of process, through which narrative, language and subjectivity are radically denaturalized and denatured. Both artistic traditions, then, address the commutations between artifice and nature, or (to shift the terms laterally) between the constructed (art) and the lived (life). However, they differ considerably in the attitudes they display towards theatricality.

In the nineteenth century, the theatre posed a threat to public morality. Nina Auerbach outlines its unsavoury countenance: 'Reverent Victorians shunned theatricality as the ultimate, deceitful mobility. It connotes not only lies, but a fluidity of character that decomposes the uniform integrity of the self.'[16] The figure that has come to embody this fluid, evanescent quality of performance is the dandy-aesthete. He 'stages' his life in a calculatedly heightened dramatic register, as if it were a theatrical spectacle. The social histrionics that are his stock-in-trade thus exemplify what Susan Sontag terms the 'theatricalization of experience':[17] the switch point where art and life can meet and trade places, thereby thwarting any easy division between the natural or spontaneous and the contrived.

Many modernists, too, saw theatricality as objectionable, as something to be resisted at all cost. In *Stage Fright* (2002), his study of 'modernist anti-theatricalism', Martin Puchner shows that this resistance is not founded on the kind of 'moralizing prejudice' that Auerbach describes as noted earlier, with its abhorrence of the 'immorality of public display'.[18] Rather, it is a prophylactic measure designed to protect that which modernism holds most dear. At the root of the problem is the performative dimension of

theatre: though based on premeditated artifice, it nonetheless brings into being an aesthetics of transience and unrepeatability, crossing the fixity of art with the fluidity of life. And because the theatre is dependent on the presence of the live actor, it is contrary to the depersonalizing, anti-mimetic spirit of modernism ('the actor's impersonation remains . . . fundamentally stuck in an unmediated type of mimesis').[19]

W. B. Yeats alludes to the modernist anxiety concerning transience and mimetic fidelity in 'Among School Children', his late meditation on love, death and art: 'How can we tell the dancer from the dance?'[20] The critical disposition of modernism demands that we make this distinction – that we abstract and sever the performance from the performer – in order to have complexity, distance and formal invention. The 'miscegenated' nature of theatrical performance was staunchly resisted by certain modernist writers, to such an extent that (as Puchner notes) 'a suspicion of the theater plays a constitutive role in the period of modernism, especially in modernist theater and drama'.[21] For the present study, this suspicion of the theatre (and theatricality) can be discerned in modernist attitudes to the dandy-aesthete, a figure that is roundly censured in essays by Wyndham Lewis and poems by T. S. Eliot and Era Pound. And when it comes to dealing with the art-life problematic, these writers sought other solutions.

Puchner's argument draws from, and augments, Peter Bürger's distinction between the (pro-theatrical) avant-garde and (anti-theatrical) high modernism. On the one hand, I side with Puchner in his assertion that modernist (anti-)theatricalism goes beyond the public stage (theatrical representation) and extends to theatricality in other areas (dramatic form more broadly). On the other, there are aspects of Bürger's theory, which also has much to say about the art-life (non-)relationship, with which I disagree. In *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Bürger's view of aestheticism is that in moving towards a pure aesthetic, it must become autonomous – yet in doing so, it is also forced to detach itself from the 'praxis of life'.[22] Aestheticism, writes Bürger, is 'where art becomes the content of art'.[23] I argue, by contrast, that aestheticist autonomy is not an absolute, but rather seeks to *confound* the distinction between art and life. Further, I contend that theatricality, insofar as it extends beyond the public stage, provides the most effective means of doing so.

Bürger also stresses the continuities between art in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, conflating aestheticism and aesthetic modernism as two stages in the development of 'bourgeois art' (overlooking the virulently antibourgeois cast of both movements). By contrast, I see the relationship between the two as more agonistic, as a complex, fraught renegotiation that

steers unevenly between affirmation and refusal. Bürger's modernist/avant-garde schism is also not applicable to the wider argument I am making about violence and aesthetics. For Bürger, the real change is initiated in the late 1910s and does not leave its mark until the 1920s; the narrative I describe, by contrast, is carried out by 1920. Thus, the development of the violent aesthetic throughout the 1910s can be traced through Futurism, Vorticism and Dada, and through the war diaries of T. E. Hulme and the reflections of Ernst Jünger.

As I have noted, theatricality is a way of confounding the art-life distinction. In aestheticist poetics it is offset by *dreams* and *drugs*, forms of detachment that are also modes of escape from the givenness of daily life. The nineteenth-century aesthete or decadent is captivated by liminal states of consciousness – by reverie, fantasy and hallucination, by mystical visions and trancelike states of mind. However, unlike the Romanticist quest for antirational experience, with its seerlike, crypto-religious bearing, these liminal states pay no obeisance to metaphysical pieties. Propelled by a pure aesthetic hedonism, they provide access points to a self-contained world of the imagination, a nocturnal escape route from the constraints of Victorian conformity. Even more alluring is the dream state, with its quasi-aesthetic properties of suggestion and eerie incongruity ('The dream is an involuntary form of poetry', notes the German Romantic writer Jean Paul).[24] Dreaming, therefore, is an oasis of artificial sensation, granting access to an autonomous realm of endless creative delight, sealed off from the demands of the mundane. The threefold yearning for intensity, for sensation and for the artificial finds fulfillment in aestheticist-decadent oneiromania.

Compulsive dreaming, in the present context, also makes untenable a certain psychological distinction. If *aesthesis* (as we will see) is the basis of aesthetic experience, then its operation is perceptual, the absorption of sensory impressions. Dream experience, by contrast, is a type of imagining, a projection of mental images onto the screen of the mind; from a psychological point of view, it is imagistic rather than sensory.[25] *Aesthesis*, however, does not stop at perception or impression gathering but also convokes sensation, effectively short-circuiting the distinction between the optical (or aural) and the imaginary. This is an important shift when it comes to works that conflate dream experience and impressionistic fervour – two such works, by Wilde and Conrad, are discussed herein – given the questionable implications that sensation has when it comes to the concurrence of violence and aesthetic form.

Gautier is alert to the perilous aspect of oneiromania, alluded to earlier – namely, that terrifying, misshapen nightmares might result, rather than

strange and beautiful dreams. With a suitably baroque flourish, he writes: 'Contrary to the classical style, [decadence] admits of the introduction of shadows, in which move the larvae of superstition, the haggard phantasms of insomnia, the terrors of night, the monstrous dreams that impotence alone stays in their realization'.[26] For sheer sybaritic excess, the optimal state is a kind of volitional delirium, brought on by drug-induced dreaming and/or hallucination. In his study of decadence, Jean Pierrot notes that 'the use of drugs was widely regarded as one of the possible means of escaping from reality in order to transfigure it'.[27] The bible for this escape route is Charles Baudelaire's *Les Paradis Artificiels* (1860), a work that draws distantly on the macabre tales of Edgar Allan Poe and closely, almost to the point of plagiarism, on the confessional writings of Thomas De Quincey. Baudelaire warns against (hashish-induced) solipsism, which he is careful to distinguish from (opium-inspired) solitude – a state more conducive to poetic sensation and to reverie or self-reflection.

For the kind of decadence that revels in dissipation and debauchery, the pharmaceutical escape route has an unrivalled allure. But even the more benign form of aestheticist dreaming is a problematic undertaking, as Wilde's forebear, Walter Pater, acknowledges. Pater pays tribute to the artist and writer William Morris, calling him the 'master of dreams, of sleep and the desire of sleep';[28] yet, in his elucidation of aesthetic poetry, he sounds an ominous note: 'Reverie, illusion, Delirium: they are the three stages of a fatal descent both in the religion and the loves of the Middle Age ... The strangest creations of sleep seem here, by some appalling licence, to cross the limit of the dawn. The English poet too has learned the secret.'[29] Despite Baudelaire's exaltation of solitude, the dream world is seen as dangerously isolating and insular, capable of locking the dreamer into a self-alienating prison.[30] Nevertheless, its passage is inherently and determinedly transgressive, a quality that illuminates the broader context within which decadence is a transitional moment.

CONFRONTING VIOLENT MODERNITY

Aesthetic modernism and its antecedents are embedded in the wider socio-political and technological matrix that is modernity. More than just an epoch or an orientation, modernity has long been viewed as a *project*[31] – which is to say, as a purposive undertaking in which forces of reformation and schematization are brought to bear on specific goals. Max Weber's much earlier account of the disenchantment haunting the modern world explains this project in terms of a rising rational, secular, bureaucratic order,