

modernism

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introduction:

the spectacle of modernism

Modernism may have disappeared as a living cultural force, but it maintains its provocation for all who try to understand it. To live within our own modernity is to be anxious about our place in time, the future of culture, and the fate of the changes that the modernists sought to achieve.

This book offers a new account of Modernism. Thanks to the work of many scholars over the past two decades, it is now possible to offer a broader and more synthetic history than would have been possible in an earlier generation. In this respect, the present book is as much a tribute to the achievements of my contemporaries as it is the product of my own researches.

Any history, especially a history of Modernism, must begin with the myth of origins. Was there a first modernist? Even to pose the question is to hear the sound of folly. We look back to Edgar Allan Poe and further back to Lord Byron and then back again to Laurence Sterne. François Villon can be a precursor, as can Catullus or Petronius. Any distinguishing mark of Modernism, any sign or signature such as discontinuity, collage, literary self-consciousness, irony, the use of myth, can be traced back to the furthest temporal horizon. To try to identify an elusive beginning or to propose clinching definitions is to play a game with changing rules. Yet even without boundaries and definitions, much needs to be said.

In European and American culture of the past two centuries a sense of rupture and novelty pervaded the collective consciousness. The reasons are familiar: revolutions in France and in America; the age of steam industry; railways; urbanization; class conflict; religious doubt; the spread of empire; the struggle between the sexes. These different dimensions of change followed varying historical pathways but converged and accumulated until the discourse of novelty became inescapable. An act of testimony often appeared in nineteenth-century life: an elderly individual would summon the memory of an entirely different world in childhood. The evocation of the landscape before the railways was one common figure. But the telling event came within the curve of a single life; the vivid contrasts between green and gray, slowness and speed, national unity and class conflict, occurred inside one living memory.

Modernity remains haunted both by a search for novelty and by the recollection of precursors. This double sense creates an abiding instability, a sense of modernity as inescapable but undecidable. Perhaps we are not modern, or not yet modern, even as we feel that we have crossed a threshold in history. Such undecidability is both a condition of our scholarship and the episode itself. As Susan Stanford Friedman has observed, “Modernity is not solely a fixed set of characteristics that might have appeared in a given space and time, such as the European Enlightenment or the twentieth-century avant-garde in the arts. Nor is modernity exclusively the principle of rupture.”¹ Throughout the past two hundred years, we hear a breathless chanting of the word “new” and then the uncertain recall of precedents. We may take it as the fate of modernity that its origins must remain in question and that we can never be sure that it *is* a modernity. Even as we talk incessantly about living through “new times,” the origins of the newness are contested.

In an early essay, “Richard Wagner in Bayreuth (1876),” later published in *Untimely Meditations*, Friedrich Nietzsche unveiled a scene of revolutionary transformation. The theater of Wagner, the mythic musical grandeur of his opera—this, says Nietzsche, was something “altogether new,”

appearing with “no warning signs, no transitional events.”² It pierced the complacency of modern life. It shattered the feeble art and literature that had impersonated a living culture; it united “what was separate, feeble and active” (209). Through his long appreciation Nietzsche exults in the thought that the sleep of culture is coming to an end, that we might escape the complacency of modernity and revive the power of artistic vision. Moreover, what appears within the music will not be contained there: “everything in our modern world is so dependent on everything else that to remove a single nail is to make the whole building tremble and collapse” (209). Because Wagner’s art has achieved the “highest and purest effect” that theater can reach, it will inevitably bring “innovations everywhere, in morality and politics, in education and society” (210). In his most emphatic tones, Nietzsche anticipates the rupture. “For many things the time has come to die out; this new art is a prophet which sees the end approaching for other things than the arts” (199). This rapturous embrace completes an exemplary modernist scene: a revolutionary philosopher recognizes his vision incarnated in revolutionary art. Nietzsche welcomes the creative destruction that will become a rhythm in modernist ambition. Set against a society organized around comfort and respectability, appetite and nostalgia, a true art will violently recover something ancient that has been forgotten, even as it creates something new that has never been anticipated. It will necessarily be out of harmony with its own time. All who attend the Bayreuth Festival, proclaims Nietzsche, “will be felt to be untimely men: their home is not in this age but elsewhere” (198). Even when he turns against Wagner, bitterly regretting the betrayal of vision, Nietzsche remains the partisan of “untimely men” and of radical renewal in the arts that will overturn the bases of culture.

Another performance shook the complacent at nearly the same moment. Henrik Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*, which appeared in 1879, created a notorious sensation in its final sequence. The decision of Nora Helmer to cross the threshold, leaving husband and children behind, was a reverberant act. The shock recurred two years later when *Ghosts* portrayed the mental dissolution of Oswald Alving, the too-young inheritor of his father’s syphilis. Ibsen was writing in a key sharply different from Wagner’s: his plays of the 1870s turn from mythic universality to the precision of the “problem play.” Between Wagnerian allegory and the Ibsenite “topic” stretches a vast distance, but both authors share a contempt for the timid bourgeoisie. Between the strivings of Wagnerian love and the attack of the syphilis bacterium lies the wide terrain of modernist provocation.

But Ibsen and Wagner share something else. Their work confirmed the spectacle of modernity, the advent of successive and arresting artistic events, which fascinated, and often appalled, a rapt audience. Modernism needs to be understood not as an elite craft refined in secret but as a complex exchange between artists and audiences. Through the last half, and especially the last quarter, of the nineteenth century, a large, literate public found itself entreated and defied, encouraged and repulsed. The revulsion of many prepared the pleasure of some. “Of all the artists of the nineteenth century,” wrote one early commentator, “Wagner and Ibsen stand out as the best hated. Byron and Shelley face abuse only in England; Manet was hated in Paris; the controversy over Nietzsche was comparatively local affair. But like Wagner, Ibsen received from all Europe fervent praise and bitter blame.”³ The notoriety of these two artists, spreading so quickly, secured the image of modernism as an epidemic.

Always we need to remember the authority of the middle-class settlement, the entrenchment of bourgeois sensibility. The lure of domesticity, the ethic of respectability, the rise of professionalism, the creation of bureaucracies, all helped to solidify the triumph of routine that Max Weber would soon describe. To secure an income, to manage a household, to beget a family, and, perhaps above all, to achieve the ideal of private *comfort* were pervasive goals, pursued by individuals and families and perpetually ratified by the press and by popular art and literature.

The imagery of snugness became conspicuous in the later nineteenth century: the picture of a cozy interiority held in place by a well-administered social world. The clutter of so many middle-class drawing rooms—the engravings and statuettes, the ivory boxes and lace ruffles—constructed the inner space of home as its own dense universe. Yet the middle-class household knew its vulnerability to the world beyond its walls. The ascendancy of domestic comfort coincided with the rise of mass journalism. The arrival of the daily newspaper or the quarterly journal was itself part of the rhythm of middle-class life. Commentators often worried that domesticity would be unsettled by the avid reading of newspapers, but an appetite for news was one of the essential hungers of the bourgeoisie. Indeed, middle-class readers, then as now, feasted on sensations in the press.

George Bernard Shaw wrote short books about Ibsen and Wagner at the end of the century, as his own career in the theater was still forming. At one point he asks why these late-nineteenth-century writers should create such controversy: What, he wonders, has changed?

Tolstoy and Ibsen together, gifted as they were, were not otherwise gifted or more gifted than Shakespear and Molière. Yet a generation which could read all Shakespear and Molière, Dickens and Dumas, from end to end without the smallest intellectual or ethical perturbation, was unable to get through a play by Ibsen or a novel by Tolstoy without having its intellectual and moral complacency upset, its religious faith shattered, and its notions of right and wrong conduct thrown into confusion and sometimes even reversed.

He immediately adds Wagner, August Strindberg, and Anton Chekhov to the list of agitating artists and then answers his own question by describing a growing seriousness in culture. It is no longer possible to laugh at the world's folly; the craving for amusement now “seems mere cowardice to the strong souls that dare look facts in the face.”⁴

Yet the problem was more complex than Shaw makes out. Late-century artists indeed took on new ambition in their work, but so did their audiences. In a modernizing and disorienting world, one response was a more strenuous commitment to the sanctity of routine. It is insufficient, then, to see the conflict as that between revolutionary art and static bourgeois resistance, a struggle between motion and stasis, change and permanence. The dominant middle-class culture was itself a culture of change, thrusting and ambitious in its industry, its technology, its empire. To preserve the continuities (religious orthodoxy, economic efficiency, public decorum, home comfort, often in combination but sometimes apart) could be a challenge as great as that of the radical artists. The agon of modernism was not a collision between novelty and tradition but a *contest of novelties*, a struggle to define the trajectory of the new.

Still, even in the midst of pervasive change, of transformation everywhere, the new art was seen as a rival and threatening modernity. There was novelty on both sides, yes, but modernist novelty was seen as dangerous and contagious. Madness was the favored metaphor (art as lunacy), but that was only one among a constellation of terms. Bodily disease, insanitary filth, and sexual immorality were metaphors often deployed, as in Clement Scott's infamous description of Ibsen's *Ghosts* as “an open drain, a loathsome sore unbandaged, a dirty act done publicly, or a lazar-house with all its doors and windows open.”⁵ The pursuit of a language of abuse is itself an event in the history of Modernism. Invective has its own modern style, and finding the conclusive dismissal or the definitive caricature became a vocation in its own right. What often haunted the critics was the thought that, within the community of despised artists and their small loyal audience, the “lunatic” utterance was perfectly intelligible—part of an impenetrable language belonging to a community that dared to understand it.

Snugness and shock became intimates within a tight circuit of exchange; the inwardness of home life was interrupted by startling accounts of novelty. The Great Exhibition in London, the series of expositions in Paris, the Jubilees of Queen Victoria, but also the Indian revolt of 1857, the Crimean

and Franco-Prussian Wars, the strikes of newly organized working classes, the lives of the dispossessed on the streets—all these intruded upon the closed world of comfort, producing a cadence of fascination and revulsion. Just as artists depended upon a civil society they often despised, so audiences were drawn to the art that frightened them. The effect was to create tense, unsteady relationships between ambitious artists and a middle-class public. It soon became clear that cultural sensation was not an anomaly; rather, a series of spectacles had assumed the persistence of a counterworld. Alongside the daily rituals of work and leisure were indelible signs of another way of life.

Not only particular works but also individual careers became nodes of enthrallment and contention. Byron served as a precedent for the late-century uproar, the revolutionary artist as the dauntless bear of culture. Thomas Carlyle offered his version of the type in “The Hero as Man of Letters,” where he speaks of new sovereign individuals whose power emanates from the act of writing. The “Man-of-Letters Hero must be regarded as our most important modern person. He, such as he may be, is the soul of all. What he teaches, the whole world will do and make.”⁶ For Carlyle the heroic act was the writer’s creation of a text released into a society reluctant to comprehend it. Indeed, part of the essay’s interest is that it promotes a new idea of culture as distinct from religion and politics, as a separate vocation.

Yet even as Carlyle was composing his essay, the figure of the artist-hero had begun to change its bearing. The figure of the invisible, neglected, but world-transforming writer gave way to a quite different image: the artist as a conspicuous and culture-dividing celebrity. Not Samuel Johnson in the garret but Wagner at Bayreuth and Ibsen as the scandal of Europe—this was the new tableau. Instead of writing that would yield its secrets only over generations, there appeared the relentless immediacy of spectacle.

Byron created Byronism, much as Wagner produced Wagnerians. But the change in the later part of the nineteenth century came when spectacle was no longer a question of a singular eruption but a succession of controversies. Ibsen appeared alongside Wagner, but then Nietzsche, Walt Whitman, and Émile Zola created their own disturbances, until it seemed that the condition of modernity was its susceptibility to the latest defiant artist. Each of these figures appeared as a solitary provocateur, a strongly marked individual who created a distinctive oeuvre, exciting and dividing the public. But a significant turn occurred when the public was no longer concerned only with demonic genius and its angular creations but with the shifting ground of the entire culture. The exclamation “What does Wagner mean?” gave way to the cry “What is happening to our civilization?”

Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* marks a telling moment. Appearing in the crucial decade of the 1880s, it is both a denunciation of the rabble and a hymn to individual preeminence. The recurring chord, as throughout Nietzsche’s mature career, is contempt for the democratic multitude, for the “little people” who “all preach surrender and resignation and prudence and industry and consideration and the long etcetera of the small virtues.”⁷ The chasm between artist and multitude is one of the inciting images of Modernism. No one is more responsible for its prominence than Nietzsche. Yet *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* both repudiates the human mass and calls for transformation. Contempt for the multitude runs parallel to the vision of a new race of Overmen who will have passed beyond the lure of pity and tolerance and who will dance beyond the spirit of gravity. But who are these people? What group or community can withstand Zarathustra’s disdain? How can there be Overmen when there is only one Zarathustra?

Much of the force of the book grows from a tension between the one and the several. Nietzsche can easily enough denounce the many. But because he longs for the radical renewal of humanity, he cannot

give up the picture of a collective change, something far larger than self-renewal. “I am in the middle of my work,” pronounces Zarathustra, “going to my children and returning from them”: for his children’s sake, Zarathustra must perfect himself (161). He also speaks of his yearning toward “the few, the long, the distant” (289), acknowledging that there are always “a few whose hearts long retain their courageous bearing” (179). The antipathy toward the democratic mass is uncompromising, but *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* balances precariously between the “lonesome” prophet-precursor and the “few” with whom he might share a vocation.

Nietzsche’s *Zarathustra* registered an unsteady transition in a developing Modernism. The shock effect of strong individuals was changing into the shock of a collective. The interest of growing audiences in the operas of Wagner and the dramas of Ibsen made radical cultural transformation a living possibility. But it also encouraged alliances among the like-minded. No longer was the model Carlyle’s underappreciated man of letters, destined to exert influence only over time and through the invisible workings of a book. Nietzsche’s early (though temporary) devotion to Wagner and the support that Ibsen received from Georg Brandes and later from George Bernard Shaw suggested how the banner of the new art could unfurl quickly. The stirrings of a collective aesthetic began to consolidate in the second half of the nineteenth century. The short-lived Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood appeared in Britain in the 1850s, generating early controversies—the high dudgeon of critics, the passionate support of admirers—that became characteristic of the avant-garde. Impressionism became a visible movement in the 1870s when Claude Monet, Camille Pissarro, Berthe Morisot, Alfred Sisley and Jean Renoir painted their way to outrage. Other challenges followed quickly.

In the view offered here, the emergence of Modernism was not just the result of provoking artifacts and not just a succession of individual careers. Neither a collection of forms and styles nor an array of geniuses, Modernism was a heterogeneous episode in the history of culture. It depended as much on its enemies as on its proponents, on audiences as much as on artists, on a network of little magazines on the attentions of reviewers in the mainstream press, on patrons as well as on publishers. Had there merely been a parade of audacious works that stirred attention and passed away, that created the tremor of novelty and then subsided, that created a glamour for various nonintersecting careers—in short, had there been a time like the beginning of the current millennium—it would be difficult to justify the term “Modernism.” The decisive event was the emergence of an oppositional culture. It was only when singular disturbances—the spectacle of Wagner, the shock of Ibsen, the scandal of Charles Baudelaire—became connected to one another that modernity recognized Modernism, and modernists became conscious of their historical possibility. There was no Modernism without individually audacious artifacts, but equally there was no Modernism without relationships among artists, their works, and the institutions and audiences that encircled them.

Is the life of the arts a rarefied and disengaged realm of its own? Is it a sphere of contemplation? Are its sensations precious only insofar as they are unique and unassimilable? The terms that I have just been developing suggest that we should turn from viewing the arts in terms of *experience* to recognizing them as a *practice*. Any encounter with an artwork occurs within a social world, a world vastly larger than a momentary contemplation. It takes place within a network of activities: making, exhibiting, publishing, performing, selling, discussing, viewing, debating, studying, quoting, parodying.

This book contains many brief readings of texts and images, but Modernism here is not treated as a set of solitary encounters with formidable artifacts. Art, we might say, is instead a social practice of culture. As one of the practices, it is a self-consciously post-traditional activity whose value is internal to the vocation of practicing it. Modernity comprises a field of great social practices, chief among

them religion, politics, science, and art, each taking on new form in a later age. Modernist art is no more determinate, nor more autonomous, than the other social practices. Its boundaries were insecure, even permeable, its separate identity always in question. An abiding struggle of modernity is the competition among the practices. Each offers a vocation, a conviction, a framework of meaning, a social world. Each vies with the others, and through the course of the past two centuries, right up to our present, their struggles have been ongoing and unresolved. My claim is not that these practices are new—of course not—but that they take on new aspects in an age of revolution and modernization.

Modern art is a perpetually contested practice. It marks out no single zone of value, no single pattern of experience. It is an ill-defined collection of acts and responses—representation and abstraction, engagement and abstention, fascination and detachment, contemplation and critique—th has offered not one value but a region of commitments. In this sense, the emancipatory project of the arts runs in specific parallel to the emancipatory project of politics. Both are fated to engage in conflict, negotiation, rapprochement, and refusal, and each is fated to have the same complex struggle with religion and science.

All these transactions unfold under the banner of the New, which was not itself new in the epoch of Modernism but which took on a strikingly different character in these decades. Reinhart Koselleck has argued that by the year 1800, Europeans had become conscious of living within “new times” (*neue Zeit*). Now the present was experienced not as a stable historical period, the latest in a succession of periods, but as something unprecedented, characterized by the “expected otherness of the future” and the “alteration in the rhythm of temporal experience: acceleration, by means of which one’s own time is distinguished from what went before.” The result was that “lived time was experienced as a rupture, a period of transition in which the new and the unexpected continually happened.”⁸ Koselleck is centrally interested in time, whereas my interest here is on the side of the New, the rise of novelty as an essential category of experience. The word (the concept) is another technology: a generating force in nineteenth- and twentieth-century life. Notably, the omnipresent term began to crowd out other terms—for instance, “original” and “originality.” The two latter words cluster around individually radiant works or radiant individuals, whereas the New tends to describe supra-individual episodes and events, collective fashions and fascinations, or social or institutional events: new imperialism, New Woman. And the art of the period—art in the wide sense—became a magnet for the word.

The discourse of the New was secured over a surprisingly brief period in the 1890s. Here is Joseph Conrad in 1902, when, at a moment of difficulty in his early career, resisting demands from agent and publisher that his novel be completed soon, he insisted that he must take as long as the formidable work demanded. “I am *modern*, and I would rather recall Wagner the musician and Rodin the Sculptor who both had to starve a little in their day—and Whistler the painter who made Ruskin the critic foam at the mouth with scorn and indignation. They too have arrived. They had to suffer for being ‘new.’”⁹ The use of the word “modern” here, as well as “new,” is illuminating. At a moment of emergency, Conrad reaches for these terms. He identifies them as a feature of his vocation and as events in the world, events specified by proper names (Wagner, Rodin, Whistler) that point to a historical shift.

In modernist studies, we need to engage the extension of the field; we need to be theoretically aware; and we need a subtle understanding of relations between texts and contexts. Within the limits of my expertise and stamina, I aim toward these goals. No book on Modernism can ever be ambitious enough; there will always be much more to say and to write. I am convinced that we have reached a moment when many self-contained and specialized studies can be brought together, and my hope is to stimulate more synthetic thinking. But this is not to say that we should aim toward a new coherence

for Modernism. The varying pace of change in nations and regions, the uneven development in different media, modes, and genres, the sheer diversity of artifacts, and the contradictions in the self-understanding of individuals and movements all need to be respected. Rather than presenting an argument for an encompassing framework or a set of governing techniques, the book has an emphasis on intersections and transitions, moments and phases, continuities and interruptions.

No study can reach as far as it should geographically. While my aim in this book is to represent the life of Modernism within transatlantic and cross-Channel perspectives, important texts and episodes are inevitably left for other scholars to engage. I have stretched my arms as wide as my training, my reading, and my energy allow, but my eyes can see beyond the waggle of my fingers on these keys. In the first chapter I propose a new history of the avant-garde up to the moment of the First World War. There follow three chapters on each of the major genres within the context of social and intellectual life, a retelling of the crucial decades from the perspectives of different affiliations and legacies. In a fifth chapter I consider the circumstances of Modernism after the war, and the book ends with reflections on the afterhistory of the movement. A guiding assumption is that the period before 1914 requires a far more sustained encounter, because here, rather than in the canonical works of the 1920s, is where the history and the meanings of Modernism stand most in need of revision. The synthesis of [chapter 5](#) depends on the more patient acts of recovery in the chapters that precede it. I also assume that any useful new history must be comparative (from Baudelaire to Stein, from Dada to Joyce, from Russian Ego-Futurism to the Harlem Renaissance) and contextual, and that it must offer both readings of individual works and synthetic judgments, ambitious and skeptical.

the avant-garde in modernism

The account of the avant-garde here builds upon assumptions laid out in the introduction, above all the conviction that the tumultuous events of cultural modernity appeared not merely as a succession of disturbing artifacts or critical provocations but as constituents of an oppositional social milieu, as a radically alternative practice that presented a counterhistory for modernity. In this view, the telling events were not the text, the painting, the film, or the quartet, no matter how extreme, but the artifact as emblems of a widening counterworld. The growing perception, as conspicuous in the dominant press as in the avant-garde journals, was that these formidable artifacts exemplified rival forms of life, other styles of thinking and feeling.

EXPERIMENT AND ANTIPATHY: ART, POLITICS, AND THE CONFLICT OF CULTURES

The dislike of the new art, so marked in the epoch of Modernism, is not surprising, but the extent of the revulsion and the fear that civilization was at stake continue to startle. Enemies of experimental culture were numerous and stubborn; their charges—of madness and insurrection—were extravagant. The background to the furor lies first of all in the political struggles of the nineteenth century. From the middle of the century a subversive art often appeared as a reflection of revolutionary politics, with the small sect of embattled artists, no matter what their stated views, seen as comrades of anarchists, socialists, feminists, vegetarians. In 1871, at the Paris Commune, artists stood alongside workers at the barricades. Out of the violent events of these months, including the bloody catastrophe at its end, came a multitude of artworks, especially paintings and engravings, that secured a connection between art and revolutionary politics. The political desire to transform society met the aesthetic desire to *represent* and to *circulate* the signs of transformation. For many figures of the period, the Paris Commune took on the aspect of a glimpsed utopia; over succeeding decades it lingered as an image of the union of aesthetics and politics. But even in the absence of overt alliances between artists and revolutionaries, even, indeed, when artists disdained the aims of politics, the threat of social insurrection was part of the connotation of new aesthetic forms. The fear of the revolutionary political sect was quickly displaced by the fear of the radical artist. If politics seemed a more urgent threat, art was often taken as the determinative index of crisis.

On the side of the artists, the connection to insurrection was more uncertain than their critics suggested. A rejection of the prevailing order often became opposition to the entire field of social and political relations, as well as the dominating bourgeoisie. Revolutionary politics could appear as tainted as the bourgeois alternative. An early expression of this attitude appeared in Symbolism, which played a leading role in the history to follow. On one side, symbolist poets, critics, and dramatists repudiated the coarse materiality of everyday social life, progressive or reactionary; on the other side, they pursued an aesthetic vision—the “ideal” or “super-sensible” world—available only to initiates. The symbolist salon with its select company and its obscure ceremonies may seem to stand as far as possible from political engagement. But late-nineteenth-century realism also frequently separated itself from mass politics even as it identified itself with social liberation. The realist estrangement was not in the name of the invisible truths of the symbolists but in blunt refusal of democratic judgment and insight. Even Ibsen, in his most socially committed phase, defended the preeminence of “that minority which leads the van and pushes on to points the majority has not yet reached.”¹ And Shaw, Ibsen’s most eager expositor, put the claim still more harshly: “If ‘Man’ mean

this majority, then 'Man' has made no progress; he has, on the contrary, resisted it. ... The majority of men at present in Europe have no business to be alive; and no serious progress will be made until we address ourselves earnestly and scientifically to the task of producing trustworthy human material for society. In short, it is necessary to breed a race of men in whom the life-giving impulses predominate."² The artist as "enemy of the people" appears sometimes in the guise of a fastidious aristocrat, a dandy, a relic of fine responsiveness; but at least as often, as here in Shaw, the artist is portrayed as a portent of the future, an Overman, who opens possibilities without precedent. Through the 1880s, Nietzsche offered both the philosophic justification and the imagery for the last figure. But for all his importance, Nietzsche belongs within a wider field of modernizing pressures.

The emergence of modernist art as "one of the practices"—I have proposed this phrase as a way to place aesthetic activity within a network of activities: making, exhibiting, reading, debating, viewing, reviewing.³ Acknowledging that such networks had no determinate origin, we can nevertheless argue that by the last third of the nineteenth century a recognizably distinct artworld had appeared, with a web of practices separate from politics and religion. The crucial event was not an inward turning, a cult of ornamental form and a narrowing to an initiated elite, although contraction was indeed a tendency. More significant was the establishment of art as the practice of a broadening subculture.⁴ The career of Gustave Flaubert was a paradigm and a lingering memory. Despite his famous agonies ("It's pleasure and torture combined. And nothing that I write is what I want to write"), Flaubert understood his labor as fully justified.⁵ What justifies the work is not only the satisfaction of having wrought an artifact but the conviction that it will be sanctioned by artistic comrades, that it will be published and reviewed, and that it will exert a force, however indeterminate, upon society. Flaubert was sustained by the thought of the encounter between his books and the world.

The growth of art as a self-conscious practice rarely implied indifference to the social realm. Rather, it suggested that aesthetic labor had a distinctive, not an autonomous, character. Its formal features aside, what gave it distinctiveness, I argue here, was the presence of an artworld as complex as the political culture with which it vied. Moreover, as I have suggested, it need not have vied with politics. Much like the career of Flaubert, the events of the Paris Commune hung over later Modernism as a memory. For a period of months in the French capital, it seemed possible to invent new social forms; it also seemed that two great social practices could converge. We need only think ahead to the connection between Modernism and the Russian Revolution, or between Dadaism and postwar political insurgency, or between Bertolt Brecht and revolutionary theater, to realize that the period 1870–1940 saw recurrent episodes of intensely politicized art. But it was the radical undecidability of the tie between aesthetics and politics that became an abiding mark of Modernism. Social transformation and the transformation of art were concurrent possibilities: they knew one another; the dialogues between them were as telling as their separate monologues. When Shaw offered a view of Ibsen's work as part of a revolutionary social movement and described him as a Socialist, the *Daily Chronicle* printed an interview purporting to show Ibsen renouncing the political affiliation. There followed a revealing letter from Ibsen himself.

Where the correspondent repeats my assertion that I do not belong to the Social-Democratic party, I wish that he had not omitted what I expressly added, namely, that I never have belonged, and probably never shall belong, to any party whatever. I may add here that it has become an absolute necessity to me to work quite independently and to shape my own course. What the correspondent writes about my surprise at seeing my name put forward by Socialistic agitators as that of a supporter of their dogmas is particularly liable to be misunderstood. What I really said was that I was surprised that I, who had made it my chief life-task to depict human characters and human destinies, should, without conscious or direct intention, have arrived in several matters at the same conclusions as the social-democratic moral philosophers had arrived at by scientific processes.⁶

The incident highlights the uncertain boundaries between modernizing art and modern politics. In

much writing on the subject, social urgency is seen as making demands on an uncommitted art. But demands come from both sides. Even as activists in the midst of political struggle called on art to make common cause, so artists demanded that politics recover its radical inspiration. Modern politics has followed an arc of hope and disenchantment, and in the periods of disenchantment—after the revolutions of 1848, the Paris Commune, the Russian Revolution, the First World War—it was art that often assailed compromise, convention, and weak will and that summoned politics back to its radical vision.

Ibsen speaks of his surprise that his independent course as a dramatist converged with revolutionary politics “in several matters.” We can take this as a sign of the separation of these two great modern practices: their separation, but also their competition and intense mutual consciousness. At the end of the nineteenth century Ibsen saw his art as at once separate from politics (he did not belong “to any party whatever”) and, at the deepest level, concerned with the same questions: “human characters and human destinies.” The correspondent for the *Daily Chronicle* wanted to fan the coals of competition, but Ibsen refused the invitation; at the same time he defiantly held to the integrity of his vocation.

During times of political impasse and disorientation, as in the last third of the nineteenth century, newly confident artists saw themselves assuming the mantle of radicalism. Like the political revolutionaries, they deplored the complacency of the public and the widespread blinkered surrender to cliché and fantasy. As long as the political struggle remained in deadlock, artists could claim the central role in rousing a dormant modernity. Ibsen accepted it as his task “to awaken individuals to freedom and independence—and as many of them as possible.”⁷

Such independent radicalism of the arts found one epitome in Stéphane Mallarmé’s notorious utterance “Let man be democratic; the artist must separate and remain an aristocrat.” Art, he writes, “is a mystery accessible to the very few.”⁸ Here appears a view of the artist as the only living relic of hierarchical society, the one who sustains high values within a leveling age. The dandy is related to this figure of the aristocratic artist, who caresses difference, even eccentricity, in a bid to preserve a threatened zone of culture. Raymond Williams persuasively sees the artist-aristocrat as one of the roles that will remain continually available to modernists.⁹ Yet we need to distinguish this rearguard gesture—the effort to preserve old values and old mysteries—from another lineage of oppositionalism, exemplified in the career of Arthur Rimbaud. The life (and legend) of Rimbaud is that of the modernist who leaps into culture without warning, who produces unprecedented verse that breaks long-standing conventions, and who embodies a principle of artistic/sexual/political radicalism.

For Rimbaud the crucial gesture was not to withdraw in order to preserve threatened values; it was to enter the world in order to break through. His poetic seer is precisely not one who tends the ancient mysteries; the seer is a thief of novelty, and he steals by submitting to the most strenuous psychic regimen. “The poet makes himself a *seer* by a long, involved, and logical *derangement of all the senses*. Every kind of love, of suffering, of madness; he searches himself, he exhausts every possible poison, so that only the essence remains. He undergoes unspeakable tortures that require complete faith and superhuman strength, rendering him the ultimate Invalid among men, the master criminal, the first among the damned, and the supreme Savant! For he arrives at the *unknown!*” Again: “The poet is really a thief of fire.” This dramatic rendering of the artist aligns with Nietzsche’s portrait of the Overman, and such images—vigorous, sensuous, unrepentant, unconstrained—stand against the stately ceremonies of Mallarméan aristocracy. Marjorie Perloff has located a root division in modernist poetry that begins with the late-nineteenth-century struggle between the open forms of

Rimbaud and the exquisite music sought by Mallarmé.¹⁰ This contrast will return in the discussion of the modernist lyric. At the moment, though, the careers of Mallarmé and Rimbaud open to another distinction.

From one historical perspective, the avant-garde has always seemed an affair of elites. Mallarmé, for instance, has been taken as a paradigm of the refined artist with rarefied sensibilities, whereas part of the legend of Rimbaud is that of the poet who came from nowhere. Living far from privileged metropolitan circles, he read the poems that came to him and invented the terms of his own transformation. Granted, Rimbaud sought out Paul Verlaine and made his way to Paris; granted, too, his work became indispensable to the revolutionary generation in the capital. Yet it is also true that he soon left Paris, with its select company of published poets and its emerging avant-garde, that he prized his independence from even the most advanced movements, and that his sense of extremity brought him to abandon the making of art. The example of Rimbaud was a challenge to the milieu of the Parisian salons—and continues to challenge a view of Modernism as exclusively the production of metropolitan elites.

From the 1880s on, the sheer proliferation of forms, movements, manifestos, and experimental works indicated an openness to novelty that was itself a form of social insurgency. Despite the tendencies toward closed circles of aesthetic initiates, the new conditions defied insularity and created a rapid traffic in artistic provocation. Aspiring artists came from many places and conditions; they were women as well as men, provincials as well as metropolitans. Certain individuals and groups may have perpetuated attitudes of aristocratic disdain, but no one was able to police the boundaries of innovation. From the 1880s until the First World War, the life of public culture was wider than the intentions of any artist; it was an ongoing eruption whose leading effect was an expansive field for experiment. Everywhere you looked a new magazine was in sight, or a shocking image, or a poem that would not scan.

CHANGING FACES OF PROVOCATION-CONCEPT, IMAGE, WORD

In 1913, in a new edition of *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*, and earlier, in a preface to *Major Barbara*, Shaw evokes the international character of the shock effect. He notes that after he published his book on Ibsen in 1891, a German reader announced that all his ideas came from Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*. "That was the first I heard of Nietzsche," rejoins Shaw. "I mention this fact, not with the ridiculous object of vindicating my 'originality' in nineteenth century fashion, but because I attach great importance to the evidence that the movement voiced by Schopenhauer, Wagner, Ibsen, Nietzsche, and Strindberg, was a world movement, and would have found expression if every one of these writers had perished in his cradle.... The movement is alive today in the philosophy of Bergson and the plays of Gorki, Tchekov, and the post-Ibsen English drama."¹¹

It is important to recover the force of this moment. The names in Shaw's list are all familiar, but now, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, none of them stands as a central representative of Modernism. They characteristically appear instead under the heading of "precursor" or "context." But Shaw's remarks remind us, first of all, that Modernism has become circumscribed as a history of techniques, a species of formalism in which the figures he names here are typically set aside. Second and more important, these remarks show that a sense of transformative change preceded the works of artists now canonically marked as high modernist. Through the first decade of the twentieth century, sensations and tremors were associated with each of the artists mentioned by Shaw. His partiality aside, we can agree that the succession of texts—works of philosophy as well as works of art—created the perception of a "world movement," though nothing as coherent as a "program" or a "zeitgeist."

The differences among the figures are as striking as their similarities: a long passage separates Wagner from Anton Chekhov and Nietzsche from Henri Bergson. Still, the artists shared an adversarial temper; they resisted the complacency of official culture that dominated the publishing industry, the venues of performance, and the pages of the mass circulation journals and newspapers. Most significantly, their challenge was fundamentally *discursive*, the challenge of propositions, ideas, and theories. Even in the midst of the sensuous and sometimes overwrought artifacts of August Strindberg or Wagner, or within the subtle game of perspectives in Chekhov, or in the complex rhetoric of Nietzsche, the discursive “idea” remains prominent. The discussion play of Ibsen was a vivid paradigm. But the works of all those named by Shaw initiated a play of ideas, and there can be no doubt that audiences engaged with the discursive, ideological incitement before all else. What the plays “proposed” and “argued” was what attracted the rapt attention and the splenetic rebuttal. Elsewhere in *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*, Shaw makes the brazen claim that “modern European literature and music now form a Bible far surpassing in importance to us the ancient Hebrew Bible that has served us so long. ... There comes a time when the formula ‘Also sprach Zarathustra’ succeeds to the formula ‘Thus saith the Lord,’ and when the parable of the doll’s house is more to our purpose than the parable of the prodigal son” (236). Modern culture is a scripture. It is biblical in its force and its authority—or, according to Shaw, it should be. Its lessons are parables open to committed interpretation. The new culture is portrayed as a usurping discourse, which achieves its power by generating more discourse.

In the narratives to be developed here, Shaw’s cohort of revolutionary figures deserves prominence because we need more acknowledgment of a “philosophic” modernity that challenged the self-understanding of the greater public. Those resonant late-nineteenth-century ideas—atheism, socialism, the war between the sexes—were more than fashionable subjects of conversation: they were sources of instability and instruments of change. By any fair reckoning, the metropolitan cultures of Europe and North America endured a crisis of ideology in the last decades of the nineteenth century. The public discourse was rife with signs of anxiety; to see the signs as superficial or inconsequential is to miss the role of legitimating propositions within modernization. Richard Rorty has developed the notion of a “final vocabulary”: the “set of words which [people] employ to justify their actions, their beliefs, and their lives.” This vocabulary is “final,” suggests Rorty, “in the sense that if doubt is cast on the worth of these words, their user has no noncircular argumentative recourse. Those words are as far as he can go with language; beyond them there is only helpless passivity or a resort to force.”¹² At the end of the nineteenth century many metropolitan citizens had their final vocabulary cast into question and struggled to preserve the arguments, concepts, and words validating their lives.

Yet the challenge, despite all its disruption, belonged to a recognizable current of public conversation. The debates over Charles Darwin and evolution or Ibsen and marriage epitomize the culture of metaphysical crisis. A threatening proposition is advanced, and a counterargument is proposed; experts and authorities weigh in on both sides. The dangerous thought is at the same time a rich journalistic opportunity; indeed, the convergence between the shocking theory and the apparatus of the media was speedily achieved. In this respect, *discursive Modernism* was at once unsettling and continuous with the circuitry of intellectual exchange. The challenges to religious faith, to marriage, and to bourgeois respectability were substantial and far-reaching. But they were also assimilable to the protocols of public conversation.

The art that came out of the Paris Commune—the paintings, illustrations, and engravings—remained within a broadly realist tradition. The most ambitious pieces memorialized the events of the political struggle, reproducing momentous scenes soon after they occurred. Alongside the large canvases came the plentiful ephemera, including images in the press that offered the aura of

authenticity.¹³ To sustain reference to historical reality was at once the motive and the effect of these pieces. We should connect the engaged realism that came out of the Commune with the range of realisms and Naturalisms that became controversial at the end of the nineteenth century. As Ibsen recorded: “The world events around us are taking up a great deal of my thoughts. The old illusory France has been smashed to bits, and when the new, *de facto* Prussia is also smashed, we shall enter the age that is dawning with one leap. Oh, how our ideas will come crashing down around us! ... What we really need is a revolt of the human spirit.”¹⁴ The socially charged incidents at Paris and elsewhere nourished an increasingly militant art. Tones and techniques varied, but they converged in the staging of evocative representations designed to provoke agitated conversation. A discursive Modernism of ideas and theories most often appeared within the conventions of an aesthetic realism that needs to be preserved in any full account of the period.¹⁵

At this point, however, a notable development must be registered, namely, a different style of provocation, which takes on a double aspect—first as what we may call the *transgressive tableau*. When the paintings of Gustav Klimt began to appear in the 1890s, when Zola described the naked Nana, or, for that matter, when Thomas Hardy’s Angel Clare carried milkmaids across the muddy lane, the reaction was not to an insurgent idea but to an unacceptable image. Swinburne, in repudiating Zola, spoke of details that “might have turned the stomach of Dean Swift” and scenes that newspapers would consider “too revolting for publication in our columns.”¹⁶ The issue was not censorship. Even though some editors declined to publish risky work, the texts remained available to those keen to find them. Hardy, for instance, took out passages too delicate for the *Graphic* and published them instead in the *National Observer* and the *Fortnightly Review*. In the case of Zola’s, Huysmans’s, and others’ “dirty” French books, enterprising English readers could find copies either just across the Channel or in the hands of friends. The striking part of the controversies is that they cast the challenge of these books in such intimate (domestic and personal) terms. Beyond the question of what beliefs to hold was the question of what images to permit within one’s mental theater. The private, even involuntary, character of imagination now became part of the cultural risk. The fear was of an apparition that would unsteady the work of reason: if there was no control over what could be represented in print, then the anarchy of fantasy seemed limitless. The problem was typically put in terms of the vulnerability of the young and the female, but in Britain and the United States the anxiety was more radical: it was a concern about the contagion of imagery. Once pictures from the sewer began to multiply, how would a tainted imagination ever come back to health?

The second aspect of provocation, equally liable to arouse public sensation but perhaps even more pointed, was the taboo word. The word “syphilis,” which hovered over *Ghosts*, the word “shift” (referring to a woman’s underwear) in J. M. Synge’s *The Playboy of the Western World*, the insolent coinage “merdre” (a misspelled “shit”) at the opening of Alfred Jarry’s *Ubu roi*, even the word “pure” applied to Hardy’s Tess—each became a node of contestation. A brief sound, a terse inscription, the single transgressive word, was enough to excite scandal. But the paradox of the word-as-taboo is that it resisted the circulation that it provoked. Particularly with sexual epithets, appearing or intimated in “French novels,” there was a frantic comedy, a mix of indignation and silence. The words could not be repeated, which would compound the insult, but expressing proper outrage required that they somehow be indicated—indicated but not uttered.

Sigmund Freud, too, soon encountered the paradoxes of speech and silence. Psychoanalysis relied on letting patients find the names for repressed desires and objects; it also relied on speaking those names within its founding texts. In *Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria*, the case known as “Dora,” Freud anticipates the reaction to his plain speaking; he notes that “in this case history ...

sexual questions will be discussed with all possible frankness, the organs and functions of sexual life will be called by their proper names, and the pure-minded reader can convince himself from my description that I have not hesitated to converse upon such subjects in such language even with a young woman.”¹⁷ Freud denies that the charged words create any sexual excitement, but he knows that the concern exists, that people fear the indelible stain caused by a word (as by an image)—and they fear that its very sound can be a lure to danger. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Oscar Wilde plays waggishly with the Victorian obsession with that respectable adjective. As the name for all that is good, respectable, and marriageable, as, indeed, the required name of Gwendolen’s husband, “Earnest” is a parodic reversal of the taboo word. It can be recited tirelessly, in a chorus of affirmation and in a refuge from filthy speech. But an effect of the play’s comedy is to suggest that the overly moralized investment in the word “earnest” mirrors the secret of the wanton word, the dissolute phrase.

This movement from the *brazen idea* to the *transgressive tableau* or the *scandalous word* registers a significant change in the development of a modernism. Confronted with poetry like this—

C’est elle, la petite morte, derrière les rosiers.—La jeune maman trépassée descend le perron—La calèche du cousin crie sur le sable—Le petit frère—(il est aux Indes!) là, devant le couchant, sur le p d’œillets

(*Rimbaud, Illuminations*)¹⁸

(There she is, the little dead girl, behind the rose bushes.—The young dead mother descends the flight of steps—The cousin’s carriage cries on the sand—The little brother—(he’s in India!), there, before the sunset, in the meadow of carnations)

—or a stage direction like this, “The fountain sobs strangely and expires” (Maurice Maeterlinck, *Princess Maleine*),¹⁹ or Gustav Klimt’s poster for the first show of Secessionist artists in 1898, a common response was to feel that a dangerous threshold had been crossed (fig. 1). Havelock Ellis, who translated *Germinal* in the early 1890s, recalled that the “accredited critics of the day could find no condemnation severe enough for Zola. Brunetière attacked him perpetually with a fury that seemed inexhaustible; Schérer could not even bear to hear his name mentioned; Anatole France, though he lived to relent, thought it would have been better if he had never been born.”²⁰ Here we read the distinctive rhetoric of the outraged, who trade in images of purging and extinction.

The problem of art in modernity is often cast in terms of significance, as in the recurrent disputes over whether a work had *meaning*. And yet for most works the question of meaning never arose. Symphonic music, for instance, was not typically valued because of its “meanings”; the novels of Dickens and the paintings of Frith were enjoyed and discussed, but not usually in terms of what they meant—which was most often taken for granted. The question of meaning and unmeaning always belongs within a wider context; and with a great many artifacts, including music and popular fiction, the chatter they stir is not an act of interpretation but a much more heterogeneous activity of exchanging enthusiasms, filling in contexts (including biographical contexts), noticing details, making associations, ruminating without a directed goal. What sustains the social practice of art is miscellaneous and inconclusive talk. To say that a work lacks meaning is often just to say that we cannot assimilate it to our ongoing dialogue of art-speech; we cannot put it into conversational play. Not meaning alone, not even meaning especially, but a whole range of interests are put in jeopardy if silence greets a work. Points of comparison are lacking; it stirs too few associations; it fails to enter the improvised circuit of exchange. The key event, then, occurring repeatedly at the end of the

nineteenth century, was the *interruption of discourse*, a break in the continuity of thought, that we can reasonably regard as a fracture in the coherence of culture. In the face of certain objects, the public no longer knew how to conduct its discourse. Reviewers kept writing, but they often talked about not knowing what to say.

A culture of opposition that breaks the continuity of public discourse—this is one useful way of characterizing the late-nineteenth-century practice of Modernism. Although this moment has precedents, it has its own distinction. Modernism, it is true, is scarcely conceivable without the discontinuities of class society. Karl Marx wrote in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, “As long as the rule of the bourgeois class had not been organized completely, as long as it had not acquired its pure political expression, the antagonism of the other classes, likewise, could not appear in its pure form.”²¹ The divisions of class society set a framework for conflict in culture. At the point of social division is where the practices of art and politics intersect and where an invitation to alliance is historically conditioned. The despised artists and the oppressed classes could, and sometimes did, see themselves as merely occupying different places within the same struggle. But cultural revolt, in its specificity, had an unsettled correlation with social struggle. The break with public discourse—the recourse to scandalous speech and transgressive tableaux—was not only a refusal of bourgeois respectability; it was also a challenge to the reasoned speech of revolutionaries. The conjunction of oppositional culture and discontinuous discourse placed an emancipatory Modernism in an unstable relationship with liberationist politics.

THE SYMBOLIST AVANT-GARDE: DREAM AND DEPORTMENT

After such stirrings as the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood in Britain and the impressionists in France, the historically defining event was the appearance of Symbolism in the 1880s. This is when the more radical artistic techniques and the new publishing initiatives assumed a shape that would appear around the world in countless iterations. Symbolism was a many-sided episode; even its name, the outcome of flurried negotiation, was always on the point of being lost under the rubric of “decadence.” The manifestos of Jean Moréas in the mid-1880s, Verlaine’s edition of contemporaries in *Les Poètes maudits*, and the publication of Joris-Karl Huysmans’s *À Rebours*—these sharply different texts forced the perception of a growing, indeterminate cultural eruption. As one historian of the movement has put it, “Never was there a year like 1886 for the appearance of new talents, for the ferment of activity in poetic circles, for the founding of new magazines, and for the creation of new manners in expression.”²² It was the year, for instance, when free verse became a widely visible technique. For all of the inner contradictions of Symbolism, its practitioners established a matrix of confrontation that became nearly definitive of the avant-garde: a few leading ideas, some exemplary works, and the public gestures of collective identity.

As has often been observed, many of the defining works of Symbolism appeared before the movement had a name, indeed, before it knew itself as a movement. Rimbaud’s *Une Saison en enfer* and major poems of Mallarmé and Verlaine were published in the 1870s. But only in the flurry of the next decade did the terms of defiance emerge. Two leading ideas, the “symbolic” and the “accursed,” the first from Moréas and the second from Verlaine, vigorously converged. Around the notion of the symbol clustered images of the “ideal,” an abstraction that was still compelling enough to be a rallying cry. It worked as a point of resistance both to Naturalism and to the Parnassians. The ideal was opposed to documentary literature—indeed, to all art that took constation of the real as its motive. At the same time it was opposed to the formalism of the Parnassians, the enshrinement of craft and verbal precision. In 1894, Gustave Kahn described Symbolism as “antinaturalism,

antiprosaism in poetry, a search for freedom in the efforts in art, in reaction against the regimentation of the Parnasse and the naturalists.”²³ Within the triad of terms (Naturalism, Parnassian formalism, Symbolism), the symbol marks out an indeterminate space, neither real nor merely formal, beyond the reach of all such “regimentation.” Though defined negatively, it comes to imply a positive realm of beauty, significance, and ultimate value.

Mallarmé’s celebrated aphorism “To *name* the object is to destroy three-quarters of the enjoyment of the poem” was an influential dictum and an epitome; it also suggests the double extremity of this moment.²⁴ As Naturalism became more visible and insistent, with its claim that no social fact is too sordid for representation and no taboo too coarse to be named, Symbolism pursued the opposing vision: a refusal of reference and specificity. The conflict between the two unfolded within the new condition of “manifesto culture,” that is, at a time when a distinctive type of document—the short public assertion of shared values, promulgated in extravagant rhetoric—was becoming an indispensable aspect of art. The manifesto, whether naturalist or symbolist, should be seen as partly a defense against attacks and partly an attempt at self-comprehension. But from the moment of conflict between Naturalism and Symbolism in the 1880s, a recognizable dialectic governed the critical exchange.

First, the artists saw themselves as belonging to movements, to larger-than-individual pursuits guided by articulated principles. Naturalism was not merely a collection of works by Zola and the Goncourt brothers, Edmond and Jules, but a mode of aesthetic practice that could be summarized in essays, prefaces, and epigrams and embraced by others. So, too, with Symbolism, which was identified through certain resonant poems by Moréas, Verlaine, and, above all, Mallarmé, but which also offered memorable utterances that could be accepted as a code of ongoing practice. Second, the groups became conscious not just of themselves but of one another. What was made visible in the 1880s became pervasive in the decades to follow: artistic movements set in opposition both to the dominant culture and to rival movements. The analogy with revolutionary political factions is clear, and as with political factions, the dialectic drove toward extreme positions. Why this was the case is more difficult to say. Some of the reasons are undramatic: the glamour of the absolute and the appeal of conceptual purity. But part of the explanation must be that modernity itself appeared extreme and seemed to require extreme responses. The effect of a rapidly modernizing social world (Darwin, railroads, revolution—many examples will serve) no doubt encouraged the aesthetics of ultimacy.

Symbolism played a crucial role in the dialectic of extremity. As I argue in this chapter, the challenge of Naturalism, even at its most radical, remained intelligible and therefore open to familiar styles of rebuttal and critique. But the symbolists changed the terms of contention. The goal, as Mallarmé put it, was “to paint not the thing, but the effect the thing produces.”²⁵ But how do you paint an effect? The provocation of Symbolism began, but did not end, with the break between language and the world, with the turn away from reference and toward internal relationships among words. At least as challenging was the labor of “suggestion.” René Wellek has described symbolist poetry as “poetry of the predicate”: “It speaks of something or somebody, but the subject, the person or the thing, remains hidden.”²⁶ But even this formulation mutes the challenge. In many symbolist poems, the problem is not that something is hidden but that there is no “thing” to be identified. “Suggestion” was not simply an indirect approach to content. It was a wholesale break with the idea of determinate reference; in place of such reference was the evocation of “mystery” or “atmosphere.” The turn of symbolist lyrics toward musical forms reflected the evocative indeterminacy of music, as well as a care for aural textures. The initiated delight of some and the angry bewilderment of many others became typical reactions to the avant-garde. Symbolism offered its first distinctly modernist

incarnation.

Here, though, we need an enlarged sense of the practice of symbolist poets, critics, and readers. Two remarkable poetic artifacts—Mallarmé's "Hérodiade" and "L'Après-midi d'un faune"—helped to shape a literary movement, but they did not limit its reach. Precisely because the poems worked through evocation and aimed beyond words toward the effect of words, the works could be completed only through the lives of their readers. Symbolism divided its fascination between the flawless crystalline work and the misty associations stirring beyond it. "Words," as Arthur Symons would write, "are of value only as a notation of the free breath of the spirit." That is, the movement saw both the creation of formidable artifacts and the begetting of attitudes, predilections, sensibilities. A memorable description of Mallarmé—"a little bit of priest, a little bit of dancer" ("un peu de prêtre, un peu de danseuse")—captures the importance of personal style, of physical bearing. Symbolism can be preserved only partly through its texts and forms, since it was equally a matter of forms of life.²⁷

In this regard, the significance of Huysmans's *À Rebours* (1884) is difficult to overstate. The book is nothing like a tract of Symbolism; it was more important for confirming the movement's possibility than for defining its terms. Its publication has been taken as one of the precipitating causes of the new aesthetic and as the reason for Mallarmé's rise to fame. But these effects appear only through the presentation of a character for whom the form and style of a life is the single object, an object requiring infinite care, taste, time, and wealth. Even as *À Rebours* devotes itself to exquisite artifacts it pursues Duc Jean Des Esseintes himself as an exquisite object. Why not take one's own life as the object of art? This is the question that Walter Pater had carefully insinuated into British consciousness. Within *À Rebours* this question takes on its most prominent and extravagant aspect.

Early in the work Des Esseintes seeks to prove that ingenuity and persistence can create "imaginary pleasures similar in all respects to the pleasures of reality": "The main thing is to know how to set about it, to be able to concentrate your attention on a single detail, to forget yourself sufficiently to bring about the desired hallucination and so substitute the vision of a reality for the reality itself."²⁸ This theory of artifice has a vivid career in the fin de siècle, but Des Esseintes goes further in the pursuit of the exact sensation and the ideal mental state. At the beginning of the fifth chapter we learn of his search for images that will blot out sordid contemporary society in favor of "erudite fancies, complicated nightmares, suave and sinister visions" (50). The state of mind of the viewer becomes an artifact as complex as any other; indeed, it could be the supreme artifact. Late in the novel Des Esseintes realizes that in order to attract him:

a book had to have that quality of strangeness that Edgar Allan Poe called for; but he was inclined to venture further along this road, and to insist on Byzantine flowers of thought and deliquescent complexities of style; he demanded a disquieting vagueness that would give him scope for dreaming until he decided to make it still vaguer or more definite, according to the way he felt at the time. He wanted, in short, a work of art both for what it was in itself and for what it allowed him to bestow on it; he wanted to go along with it and on it, as if supported by a friend or carried by a vehicle, into a sphere where sublimated sensations would arouse within him an unexpected commotion, the causes of which he would strive patiently and even vainly to analyse. (165)

The more extravagantly Des Esseintes seeks to extend the life of sensation, the greater the risk that the work will dissolve among the sensations. As if in acknowledgment of the risk, Des Esseintes holds to the value of the work "in itself" even as he recruits value as a stimulus. But the whole of *À Rebours* serves to tease out the possibility that the *experience of aesthesis* might come to replace the *aesthetic object* and that painting, literature, and music might become no more important than other stimulants. Des Esseintes experiments with perfumes—"pure spirits and extracts" and "compound scents"—aspiring to an arrangement of smells so subtle that it would give the satisfaction of a work of art (105). He plays as well with the tastes of liqueurs, linking each with a musical instrument, until he ca

transfer “specific pieces of music to his palate, following the composer step by step, rendering his intentions, his effects, his shades of expression, by mixing or contrasting related liqueurs, by subtle approximations and cunning combinations” (46). At times he goes still further, inventing his own music on the palate.

To arrange sensations into an aesthetic dream-state, to live in a state of perpetual responsiveness, compose oneself into a work of art—these practices of the symbolist vocation become questions of reverie and sensation, of conversational habit, of dress. The effect of *À Rebours*, as well as an effect of Pater’s writings, was to promote new styles of life, as well as new works and new opinions. The practice of metropolitan experience was also part of the symbolist avant-garde.

When Des Esseintes constructs his palace of sensation, he describes himself as “exhausted by life and expecting nothing more from it.” Like a monk, “he was overwhelmed by an immense weariness” (63), and from Verlaine’s poetry he achieves “a languor made more pronounced by the vagueness of the words that were guessed at rather than heard” (71). The cultivation of a swooning lethargy, a weary torpor as one drifted along the currents of sensation, became pervasive among the symbolist generation. Mallarmé’s faun is a poetic epitome. He contemplates the surge of passion, “purple and already ripe,” but turns immediately away from the exciting image.

Sans plus il faut dormir en l’oubli du blasphème,
Sur le sable altéré gisant et comme j’aime
Ouvrir ma bouche à l’astre efficace des vins!

(enough! on the thirsty sand, forgetful of
the outrage, I must sleep, and as I love
open my mouth to the powerful star of wine!)²⁹

The faun sinks back from desire into languor, a gesture that becomes a bodily signature in the later 1880s and 1890s. In the poem’s final line, he bids the nymphs farewell in a last exhalation: “I shall see the shades you become” (54–55). The arrival at luminous reverie—as the dozing faun watches images flit across the brain—exemplifies the symbolist state. Physical activity suspended, the faun prepares to be moved by what will appear in his dream. It is as if the subject has detached itself not only from surrounding events but also from its own sensations. This is what Huysmans’s *Des Esseintes* also achieves after his patient and fastidious arrangement of colors, tastes, scents, or lines of poetry: a release into weary passivity, a swooning lassitude that allows him to surrender to the processions of imagination.

Although the new movement resisted the name “decadent” in favor of “symbolist,” the public and the critics saw these figures under the “double name of decadents and symbolists,” as Kenneth Corne has pointed out.³⁰ The struggle over the proper name marked a turn in the politics of culture, suggesting the diversity of cultural vocations now in contention. Whether the poetry was an index of decline or of long-delayed renewal, this polemic was sustained as long as the movement itself. Where “Symbolism” suggested a coherent method along the lines of “Naturalism,” the tag “decadence” was open to censure, which came quickly. Huysmans, in turn, denounced the society that repudiated him, describing it as a grotesque combination of “idiotic sentimentality” and “ruthless commercialism.” He praised Mallarmé for completing the work of decadence “in the most consummate and exquisite fashion.”³¹ The success of *À Rebours* was a milestone in the formation of Symbolism, which could be seen, by both partisans and opponents, as the beautiful efflorescence of decay.³² Soon Arthur Symonds introduced the symbolist poets to the English-speaking world along these very lines: as the blazing symptom of the end. Both writers emphasized, and celebrated, the lure of sensation and passivity.

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