

Modernism

Lecturer: Prof. Leila Bellour

Department of Foreign Languages

Abdelhafid Boussouf University Center of Mila

Introduction

Though modernity brings about evolution, progress, science, and technology, it is also a revolution that throws and seeps away the old-established religion, philosophy, morality, and social relations. Despite its aspiration for perfection, modernity has negative, disappointing and disastrous impingements on the individual's psychological equilibrium. Because of scientific rationalism, abstract intellectualism and materialism, the individual's psyche is crucified on the altar of modernization. The self becomes an empirical reality stripped of any spiritual values. The technological and scientific advancements have left the individual plagued by an infinite sense of loss and deprivation. The self, in modern age, becomes plural, variegated and fragmented.

Because the widely held position by modernists is that the post-war world was in an immense futility and anarchy, modern age's writings are thematically centered on a sterile vision of modern life. M.L. Rosenthal contends that:

Modern poetry as a whole tends to be tragic in its assumption that we are at a cultural dead end, in which myriad values at cross purposes, with modern political values the most virulent of all, are shocking each other to death. The major poetic situation is the struggle of a heroic sensibility, or self, to free itself from the condition of living death imposed by this murderous medicament.¹

Modern poetry conveys the mode of despair, depersonalization, rootlessness, apathy, meaninglessness, isolation and pessimism. Throughout their writings, modernists struggle to overcome their suffering in a world they find absurd. The act of writing becomes a protective shield against the artist's shock, fear and trauma. Hence, modernists attempt a new mode of expression, where reality is submerged in the subjectivity of a single person: the artist. Thus, the work of art can be seen as another version of the author's life. Poetry in the modern age is the mirror, which reflects the psyche's wounds. As May Swenson claims,

“ Modernism ”-Lecturer : Dr. Leila Bellour-Mila University Center

“The experience of poetry is to suppose that there is a moon of the psyche, let us say, whose illuminated half is familiar to our ordinary eye, but which has another sphere which is dark, and poetry can discover this *other side*, that its thrust can take us toward it.”²

Because fragmentation is the common state of being in the modern age, wholeness and order become the artist’s propensity and ultimate aim. Modernist art is an attempt to create order in the chaos of life, to reconstruct a whole out of fragments. To rescue from a hostile and terrible reality, the artist takes refuge in art, which comes to be perceived as a bulwark against the threat of modernity. In their representation of apocalypse, disaster, disintegration and crisis of identity, modernists use a form that is, correspondingly, allusive, fragmentary, complex, and highly innovative. That is, modernists’ artistic sensibility is concomitant with the individual’s experience.

1-Theorising Modernism From the Without: Decadence and Crisis

In spite of the scientific and technological progress it brings about, modernity has always been described as apocalyptic. Indeed, in the modern times, there prevails a Spenglerian¹ vision of Western civilization, and many foresee the imminence of its decline. Europe, in the twentieth century, suffers from a deep mental collapse and neurotic anxiety. Many thinkers even use the metaphor of mind to describe modern civilization. They believe that Europe has a mind and that the crisis of their time is equivalent to a mental collapse. The French philosopher and poet Paul Valéry describes the spiritual crisis of the ravaged Europe as a “mental disorder”. In his view, cultivated Europe was exhibiting “all the familiar effects of anxiety, the disordered enterprises of the brain which runs from the real to the nightmare, and from the nightmare to the real, like a frenzied rat caught in a trap.”²

Indeed, three major factors pave the way for Europe’s apocalypse and shape modern man’s psychological make-up: the First World War, capitalism, and the spiritual crisis. The violence, the horror, and the nausea of human existence can be largely attributed to these three factors.

The First World War smashed up everything and threatened to wipe out the whole world. It scarred the physical and mental landscape of Europe, and left it with a despairing, pessimistic and morbid mood. The war did not only create a pessimistic vision of reality; it was also the ground for neurosis, angst, and madness. The modern man finds it difficult to accept the nausea of human existence.

The philosophers Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, in Manifesto of the Communist Party, show the destructive nature of capitalism. According to them, the power that pushes the industrial world to move forward is destructive in nature. As they put it,

All fixed, fast frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new- formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.³

So, modern civilization is decadent, characterized by the loss of the meaning of existence and mechanical life style. Because of capitalism, the modern city is deprived of the experience of wholeness. This experience is cut into fragments. Technological advancement and scientific progress are associated with the destructive forces of greed and destruction, which dehumanize human existence and turn the modern city into an inferno inhabited by distorted, fragmented and lifeless beings. The modern city becomes an unreal city; “Unreal City,/Under the brown fog of a winter dawn, / A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many, / I had not thought death had undone so many.”⁴

The Machine Age has deprived people of their individuality and uniqueness. The modern city becomes a waste land cursed by its creator, full of dispirited beings. In the midst of such a waste land, the core of modern man erodes with personal suffering and personal decadence. Man becomes lifeless; he despairs of life and wants, like the Sybil, to be dead.

Since the law in the modern age is ‘survival for the richest’, capitalism blows all values and ethics and turns capital into a new Satan from which all evil emanates. According to Bülent Diken, “the essence of capital is its lack of essence. It can thrive on anything including ethics, even turning anti-capitalism into a commodity.”⁵ The capitalist society is devoid of values and affect. Capitalism is, in essence, a dehumanizing power, which determines qualitative differences by ‘how much?’ Money reduces qualities into quantities, subjects into objects. According to the German sociologist George Simmel, “Money, with all its colorlessness and indifference, becomes the common denominator of all values; irreparably, it hollows out the core of things, their individuality, their specific value, and their incomparability.”⁶

The decline of the West owes also to the loss of spiritual values. Modern science has waged a war against the beliefs that have, for centuries, given sense to the lives of people. This cleavage results in 'the death of God'. The critic Jewel Spears Brooker posits that "As an awareness of and response to the falling apart of tradition, Modernism is in essence a religious crisis, because religion is in its essence a resistance to falling."⁷ This religious crisis started when God was executed and science became the new religion of Europe. Alister McGrath couples modern atheism with the excessive science as follows: "the reemergence of atheism as a serious intellectual option dates from the dawn of modernity: Atheism is the religion of the autonomous and rational human being who believes that reason is able to uncover and express the deepest truths of the universe."⁸ Modernists believe that science could sweep away all human problems and misery and elevate the individual above the world. Thus, they view religion as irrational or a sort of madness.

The role that religion has long played is challenged by many thinkers. Darwin's theory of evolution, for instance, denies the existence of God. With the absence of God, human beings are set free to prove that survival is for the fittest. Likewise, the philosopher Frederick Nietzsche rejects Christianity regarding it as a life-denying religion which is suitable only for the slaves. In Beyond Good and Evil, he declares: "The Christian faith, from the beginning, is sacrifice, the sacrifice of all freedom, all pride, all self-confidence of spirit, it is at the same time subjection, self-derision, and self-mutilation. There is cruelty and religious phoenicianism in this faith"⁹. So, for Nietzsche, religion is a dehumanizing force that deprives people of their freedom by oppressing and exploiting them. For him, God is merely a fiction, who proved his ancestors false. As he puts it, "Modern men, with their obtuseness as regards all Christian nomenclature, have no longer the sense for the terribly superlative conception which was implied to an antique taste by the paradox of the formula, 'God on the Cross' "(Nietzsche 74).

With the absence of religion, man becomes an autonomous and self-sufficient being, who needs to look no further than himself in explaining the meaning of life. Agnostic thought prevails, and it is believed that man is free only if he owes his existence to himself. Hence, atheism is taken as a means of escape.

Since the scheme and the fusing flame that has long held social relations and Western civilization flickers, the spiritual life of the West withers, and the individual experiences the death of the spirit. Alienation becomes the defining characteristic of modern man, who dwells in an unbearable loneliness and solitude.

Jessie Weston's legend of the Holy Grail is pertinent to the modernist context; the image of the wounded Fisher King languishing in an arid landscape and awaiting the appearance of the Grail knight resonates with the modernist feelings of disillusionment, sterility and crisis, which are the major aspects of the modern age. Like the Fisher King in From Ritual to Romance¹⁰, the quest of the modern man is to redeem a world ravaged by war, materialism, and atheism. Thus, he is in constant search for the missing parts that once constituted a fertile and glorious culture.

2-Theorising Modernism From the Within: Modern Consciousness and Self

As a natural response to the threat of modernity, the individual suffers from trauma and deep psychic wounds. Man becomes a deformed product of the sterile modern times, psychologically ostracised, leading an alienated existence. The existing relationships between man and his creator, man and his physical world, and man and his inner self are torn in the process of economic development. As the critic J.Hillis Miller, in Poets of Reality, states:

What once was a unity, gathering all together, has exploded into fragments. The isolated ego faces the other dimensions of existence across an empty space. Subject, objects, words, other minds, the supernatural—each of these realms is divorced from the others, and man finds himself one of the 'poor fragments of the broken world'.¹¹

So, as the outer world begins to fall down and vanish, the individual becomes a fragment that connects with nothing else except that he shares this solitude and loneliness with other solitary millions. The social psychologist Joseph G. Keegan describes the alienated man as the one "[whose] basic identity has either vanished or become so nebulous as to be practically nonexistent. We may say that alienation is a condition of psychological existence that is emotionally and motivationally flat and dispirited, devoid of meaningfulness to self as well as to others."¹² In this view, alienation connotes a sense of absurdism and meaninglessness, where the individual feels completely depersonalized, dispossessed from his personality, and detached from the whole reality. Keegan, further, divides alienation into intrapersonal and interpersonal. By interpersonal, he means "detachment from others. Here, the individual elaborates parts of his total self, which others cannot tolerate. He puts social distance between himself and others" (Keegan 55). In the light of this definition, interpersonal alienation involves a lack of interpersonal contact, loneliness, isolation, detachment, and estrangement.

The critic Allen Thiker observes that this alienation is the defining feature of the modern self. He writes:

Nearly every modernist sees the self as a product of loss, as a victim of what the poet Cocteau called, in his version of Oedipus, the infernal machine. [...] Their works all spring from a post romantic matrix in which conflict, loss, and alienation are the essential themes to characterize the self in its relation to a world that always deceives it.¹³

So, in the process of material developments, relations are also torn apart, and the modern man loses ties with anything else beyond himself. The individual becomes a separate entity which cannot fuse with the crowd, and whose mode of being is different.

Modernity brings about a destructive philosophy of love. For modernists, like Joyce, Woolf, and Faulkner, the reality of the modern predicament is the absence of interpersonal intimacy. Because unity and love are interwoven, the absence of love is what prevents unity from being achieved. According to Brooker, love “is one way of overcoming brokenness, of retying or rebinding fragments into a whole” (Mastery and Escape 127). Since the idea of love, in the modern age, becomes problematic, community, both as communion and communication, breaks down.

The absence of interpersonal contacts is also a logical result of atheism and the prevailing agnostic thought. Discussing the role of religion as a linking bond that weaves social relations, Brooker states:

The religious impulse [...] is the impulse to rebind, to transcend fragments, to reunify. To be religious is, first, to be aware of fragmentation, of brokenness, and second, since RE-binding suggests a previous unity, to be religious is to be aware on some level that one lives in a post-lapsarian world, that the condition of brokenness and loneliness is not part of one's world. To be religious, finally, is to be discontent with brokenness and to imagine that it can be transcended (Mastery and Escape 136).

In the absence of the spiritual dimension, the individual becomes a fragment ‘thrown into being’. Even consciousness, that is the cornerstone of the individual, has broken down into

pieces and particles. Hence, the search for religion, or the 'missing abstraction', becomes a quest for unity within and without.

Alienation stems from the prevailing sense of subjectivism or individualism. In the modern age, man redefines him/herself as a subject who is supreme in him/herself; hence, everything else becomes an object including God. To this effect, Miller writes "When God and the creation become objects of consciousness, man becomes a nihilist. Nihilism is the nothingness of consciousness, when consciousness becomes the foundation of everything. Man, the murderer of God [...] wanders through the infinite nothingness of his own ego" (Miller 3). So, man becomes the centre of the universe, the axis around which everything turns.

This dominating view of subjectivism, that is, the individual's conception of him/herself as autonomous and self-sufficient, is a Romantic legacy. The critic and philosopher T.E. Hulme reacts against such legacy as follows:

[M]an, the individual, is an infinite reservoir of possibilities and if you can so rearrange society by the destruction of oppressive order, then these possibilities will have a chance and you will get progress[...] One can define the classical quite clearly as the exact opposite to this. Man is an extraordinarily fixed and limited animal whose nature is absolutely constant. It is only by tradition and reorganization that anything decent can be gotten out of him.¹⁴

If the romantics believe that man is essentially good and perfect, spoiled by the social circumstances and orders, for some modernists like T.S. Eliot and T.E. Hulme, man is intrinsically bad and limited but can be disciplined via order and tradition.

Because God and the real world are erased, modern man finds it difficult to survive and thrive in nothingness. So, the only way out is to escape into the self. Such impulsive inwardness, which cannot be contained within the splitting shell of the ego, is what Keegan describes as intrapersonal alienation. He states:

[It] is self-fragmentation or a disintegration representing a severe self-defeating reaction. [...] Either he does not know the full measure of his selfhood or, if he does, he isolates parts of it. It is as though he were thinking or speaking of a part of himself, the rejected

part, in the third person. If the alienated person appears to be in mental fog, the likelihood is that he unconsciously prefers it that way. If he behaves like an automation, this seems to relieve him of the onus and responsibility of commitment to himself and to his own identity. If he rejects self and attempts to become the other, this is his mode of expressing hate or anger toward the actual self (Keegan 55-6).

According to this view, intrapersonal alienation denotes a state where the self becomes more remote, introspective, and even more precarious. Like the schizophrenic, the introversive person withdraws into him/herself. He turns his/her focus away from the external world into his/her own inner one. Central to intrapersonal alienation, in the quote above, is nihilism, absurdism, and the feeling of self-disgust. The latter pushes the person to align himself with others, or even with inanimate objects. The basic state of the alienated, according to Keegan, is dispossession and fragmentation. This means that the individual cannot even feel 'One' within himself. His self is divided and his personality is torn asunder; he cannot tessellate it into a harmonious whole.

Modern man's alienation is rooted in the inability of people to bring together the different areas of their experience to make a complete whole. Their social, sexual, and religious experiences are fragmentary and not unified. Man, as such, becomes one-dimensional. This state of fragmentation has another terminology in modern philosophy: it is dualism. Indeed, Modernism has its historical roots in the philosophy of René Descartes, which contains a fundamental split between mind and body, subject and object, nature and the spirit, mind and matter. Developed by thinkers like John Lock and Isaac Newton, Cartesian and Cartesian dualism haunted Western thought for at least three centuries. Hence, the modern self is conceived as a pendulum moving between body and mind, matter and spirit, subject and object. If traditional theories of the self emphasize the wholeness and integrity of the individual consciousness, modern philosophy views the totality of the "I" as split and lost in the prison of the soul, trying to thrive and survive in a deeply shattering reality. As the ego fails to achieve unity, the subject feels empty, fluid and without an axis or centre.