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ROBERT MARTIN ADAMS

What Was Modernism?¹

“The past serves only as a means of knowing the present.
But the present eludes me. *What, after all, is the present?*”
—Henri Focillon, quoted by George Kubler: *The Shape of Time*

SINCE THE IRONIC RESERVATIONS AND SELF-QUESTIONING CAUTIONS that surround the topic of “the modern” are potentially infinite, it’s best to start with a blunt and vigorous citation from Mrs. Woolf, who tells us flatly that on or about December, 1910, human nature changed radically. I think she’s right. Within five years either way of that date a great sequence of new and different works appeared in Western culture, striking the tonic chords of modernism. Ten years before that fulcrum of December, 1910, modernism is not yet; ten years after it is already. The “human nature” that changed is not the substructure and component systems of the animal, but his way of seeing himself as expressed in works of art, literature, music. Naming the great works that inaugurated this period, and thinking, however loosely, about their quality, may lead to the rudiments of a definition.

Specifically, then, Picasso began working on the “*Demoiselles d’Avignon*,” that idyll of a Barcelona whorehouse, in 1906–07; Stravinsky’s “*Sacre du Printemps*” had its riotous premiere in 1913. The first book by Ezra Pound to bear the title *Personae* came out in 1909; J. Alfred Prufrock made his debut (in Chicago, of all places) in 1915. In 1914, Joyce had just finished the *Portrait* and was turning his full attention to *Ulysses*. In 1914 Wyndham Lewis published *Tarr*. Roger Fry’s Post-Impressionist show at the Grafton Galleries (November 1910 to January 1911) was followed in 1913 by the New York Armory show, which introduced Post-Impressionist art to America. D. H. Lawrence took his first steps as a poet and novelist in the years around 1910. From 1910 onwards, F. T. Marinetti was lecturing explosively around Europe on an ill-defined but violent

¹ It dramatizes a point made in the text that not even the title of this essay is “original.” Harry Levin used it long before me in an essay reprinted in *Refractions* (Oxford University Press, 1966). Though my title is “pre-used,” I hope not all my ideas are.

esthetic program that he called "Futurism." It would gain adherents in France, England, and Russia, as well as Italy; the adherents soon faded or wandered, but the movement, despite Marinetti's frequent silliness, had wide repercussions. It was more than a sideshow.

This list could be extended to include names like Bartok, Braque, Musil, Modigliani, Epstein, Kafka, Klee, Kandinsky, and so on almost indefinitely, but already it has given us grounds to talk about modernism's concrete character. Doubtless there was some new spirit in the air, around December of 1910, and very likely it was connected with world-events like the miserable World War that was just around the corner or the unhappy Boer War that was just over the horizon. But these amorphous spirits in the air are very hard to pin down, and it's better to start by noting some specific things that modernism as a style was and wasn't. For example, Marinetti's futurism was loudly and explicitly hostile to the past as such: it wanted works of art as dynamic, efficient, and mechanical as automobiles or airplanes, and furiously repudiated all sorts of nineteenth-century historicism, humanitarianism, and softness. Except perhaps for the art of music, where it produced only a few laughable and sterile cacophonies, futurism had significant reverberations throughout the arts. Brancusi the sculptor was touched by this idea of stripped energy; so, more importantly, was Le Corbusier the architect; and if the movement didn't strongly influence Cubist painting, that was because the Cubists had already embarked on a very similar program of their own. Blok and Mayakovsky in Russia wrote Futurist poetry; Wyndham Lewis in the several issues of *Blast* and in his first novel *Tarr*, produced Vorticist prose which was closely allied to Futurist work in its bold discords, its stark and simplified syntax. Pound's version of Imagism is first cousin to Vorticism, and so in the same family group as Futurism; but here we run suddenly into confusion, because Pound, quite as much as his master Browning, was always fascinated by the past, and among his many styles wrote in a number of deliberately archaic forms and manners.

And this deliberate cultivation of the past seems, as we look around, rather more characteristic of modernism than the direct and violent assault mounted by the Futurists on what they delighted to call *passéisme*. Two root inspirations of Picasso's first and most famous Cubist painting, "Les Demoiselles d'Avignon," were a big Paris exhibit of prehistoric Iberian sculpture and an equally

comprehensive exhibit of primitive African masks. Stravinsky's "Sacre du Printemps" is based on and expressive of the vegetation rites and barbaric dances of ancient Russia. Both works were not only the last word in avant-garde style (for their day); they were more deeply rooted in primitivism than anything Europe had seen for a long time. And so with Eliot and Pound. They were "modern" poets from the beginning, and before long they were to be almost the touchstones of modernism; but all their work was deeply rooted in consciousness of the past. "The Waste Land" revolves around a priest-poet-prophet whose various incarnations include the Cumaean sybil and the ancient blind sexologist from Thebes, Tiresias. Pound's voyages in the *Cantos* took him through a series of events buried far in the past (the classical, the medieval, the Renaissance, the Chinese, the American past). One way or another, they all rhymed or were supposed to rhyme on events of the present; but the sheer volume of them made the *Cantos* look like an historical lumber-room. For Joyce, another of the great modernists, the Dublin episodes of June 16, 1904 were—among other things—but "a spume that played / Upon a ghostly paradigm of things." That paradigm was as old as any literary origin in the Western world; it was Homer's *Odyssey*. Far from repudiating and rejecting the past, as the Futurists demanded, modernism under one major aspect explored and exploited it.

The style of exploitation was new, the materials being exploited very old. The new primitivism sought a more remote past than people had been used to, and made very different applications of it. The polite, polished, Olympian side of the classic past was not what intrigued the modernists, rather it was the primitive, the barbaric, the mystery-side of the ancient world. Evidently they picked up a lot of these materials from the work of anthropologically-minded mythographers like Herr Max Muller, from the so-called "Cambridge anthropologists" led by Frazer, and from the work on archetypes done in the name of psychoanalysis by Jung and his followers—men like Ferenczi and Otto Rank. When Eliot went back to the Grail legend to structure his "Waste Land," he read it as something even more primitive than the medieval legend, he saw it as a vegetation ceremony out of prehistory. Prokofieff filled his "Scythian Suite" with barbaric clangor; the "Classical Symphony" is a twittering joke on Haydn.

What their materials were and where they got them were clearly less important than what the modernists did with them. The nine-

teenth century had crammed itself on classical and medieval pastiches, where the modern poet or painter used myth as a familiar container into which to pour highminded contemporary sentiments. We don't need a better word for this sort of thing than "kitsch." Everyone can think of his favorite example—whether it's Bouguereau or Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema, Lord Leighton or Robert Bridges, Bulwer-Lytton or Arnold Böcklin. But when Pound and Eliot, Stravinsky and Picasso took in hand the antique, they did so in a spirit at once deeper and more ironic than that of traditional neo-classicism. They used the past structurally, not for decorative ends; they incorporated fragments from the past in a structure stridently of the present; they emphasized grotesque disparities as much as harmonies; instead of a smooth surface, either antique or modern, they produced a broken one, which was both. Pound made Sextus Propertius talk of Wordsworth and frigidaire; Eliot's bowler-hatted, brolly-carrying clerk wandered the City streets anxiously inquiring about corpses buried in backyard gardens; Bloom put out the glaring eye of Cyclops by lighting a cigar instead of downing a John Jameson. Behind this change was a new sense of time as cyclical and repetitive, not sequential and developmental. The past wasn't a series of incremental stages on the road to the present, it was a single pattern replicated pointlessly and potentially to infinity. History became a series of all-but-identical arabesques traced on sheets of transparent plastic and lined up behind one another, so that only a slight shift of perspective could transpose any particular story into the Homeric age, the medieval era, the Renaissance, or the "present." Whatever its momentary embodiment, the configuration would always be much the same. A hard and jagged style of disparate elements juxtaposed without nexus or comment, an a-chronological patterning of correspondent themes (like a shape in space, not a sequence in time), these were techniques that admirably suited the translucent vision. This was the first major distinctive style of modernism, and not even one whose first interest is letters can fail to notice how closely it corresponded with the fractured surfaces of cubism, the broken, syncopated rhythms of Schoenberg and Stravinsky, the montage method of the movies.

The Futurist element of modernism was not only (by contrast with what preceded it) abstract and non-representational, perhaps in line with Woringer's thesis that abstract art represents fear, rather than acceptance, of the exterior world: it was, to borrow a

word from José Ortega y Gasset, increasingly “dehumanized.” The marks of this quality are everywhere, and one needn’t labor the point. Fictional heroes, for example, could no longer be interesting because they embodied or exemplified “human nature”: they were verbal patterns at second, third, or 26th hand, and they advertised the fact, as in Giraudoux’s thirty-eighth retelling of the Amphitryon story. They were passive as beanbags, and they were also transparent—passive as in Kafka, transparent as in Gide. Bloom, by the end of the book which is so largely his, has been flattened as thin as a piece of strudel-dough; he is Everyman and Noman, a mountain-range, a heavenly body wandering beyond all astronomical waifs and strays, to the extreme boundary of space, and then returning, not once, but again and again, forever, in eternity, as best our imagination can reach that term. And Humphrey Chimpden Earwicker in the next and greatest book is explicitly described as a “human pest cycling (pist !) and recycling (past !) about the sledgey streets, here he was (pust !) again.” “The Waste Land” has often been described as a miniaturized epic, and so it is; what’s been left out is simply the epic hero and his story. Finally, one doesn’t find much of the human form divine in Arp or Mondrian or in the Cubist works from which they derive. Modern painting, the greater part of it, doesn’t represent human beings or the nature they inhabit; in fact, it doesn’t generally represent at all. “Black on Black” or “Untitled No. 6” are characteristic labels, and they conjure up before us pictures on whose merits we may not agree, but which certainly don’t have much use for the greasy commonplaces of flesh and blood.

Yet there was from the beginning an exception to modernism’s dehumanization; and that was the ancient, inescapable commonplace of sex. Not love, not by any manner of means: not love in the reconciling and humane sense familiar to novel-readers and occasionally to people—nor yet the doomed passion of Wagnerian lovers, though one can’t fail to note the remarkable survival-value of *Liebestod* as a literary theme. Maeterlinck and D’Annunzio were replicating it well into the new century; even Proust can be seen in this line, and so can our late contemporary Nabokov, for whom the grand consuming passion was still possible. Yet in most modernist documents it’s sex, not love, that predominates. Sexual pathology was an important ingredient of both *Ulysses* and “The Waste Land”; the hero of consciousness was also a hero of inhibition, and the so-called stream of consciousness flowed to most interesting

effect when it was turbid or even choked. After Joyce the medium of that stream was assumed to be sex, one major interest lay in its failure or frustration, and we can see the theme being used by Hemingway, Faulkner, and lesser imitators beyond number. Even when the symptom of his condition was called alcoholism, writer's block, or what Auden named "the liar's quinsy," the afflicted hero was characteristic, and his disease involved sterility or impotence.

Complementary, not contradictory, is the kind of therapy accomplished by the priapic heroes of D. H. Lawrence, who find a cure for the brittle, mechanical superficiality of modern life, not merely in sex, but in the dark, primitive impulses of the blood. Sex, for Lawrence, is a kind of cognition, a necessary filling out of the human form and figure. The work of literary art that embodies his feeling throbs with the rhythms and repetitions, the enthusiastic vocabulary of sensuality. Whether sex can convincingly sustain all the psychic burdens that Lawrence and the Lawrentians loaded on that wholly delightful activity may discreetly be doubted. In effect, Lawrence, Miller, and Durrell made a religion of the genitalia to replace other religions (including that of art), which had apparently lost their stimulating effect. The point isn't that the religion of sex amounted to a big operation; as a piece of social pathology, indeed, the less it amounted to, the more significant it is.

For this variety of sex-and-sensuality modernism grows out of the "dehumanization" view of modern art, even while protesting as vigorously as possible against it. Because modern society seems to consist of cutouts and robots going through predetermined mechanical routines, Lawrence proposes that we get under the hard carapace to a vital and tender existence that's available to us all in the life of the instincts, the dark river of the subconscious. And here he chimes on the thought of that very different and apparently much more crustacean man, James Joyce. For Joyce too, there's a vital giant buried within each of us; that's why his title includes as one of its many potentials an imperative—Finnegans, wake up! Within each of us a giant Finn lies buried under mountains of psychic detritus, cultural habit, social conditioning, acquired guilt. As we accept this load, we sleep or die; but if we throw it off, we can be reborn to the life that has always been there inside us. What Joyce and Lawrence, from rather different perspectives, join in seeing as the great enslaver, the brutal jailer of the human animal, is the conscious, rational mind. Even Stephen Dedalus knows this much before the end of *Ulysses*: "In here it is," he says, tapping his

forehead and echoing Blake, “in here it is I must kill the priest and the king.”

As one might anticipate, this anti-intellectualism isn't a simple phenomenon, and it hasn't yet found its historian or even its analyst. Quite obviously the trend owes something to those giant enemies of ideology, Marx and Freud; just as obviously, it includes elements deriving from neither, including an amorphous kind of culture-weariness and nostalgia for barbaric vitality that became very prevalent in the nineties of the last century and continued into this. The Futurists, with their fondness for fistfights and nonsense-syllables chanted at the top of their lungs, manifested this mood as well as anyone. Whether rationally or not, the weight of war, empire, and technology (all of which the Futurists in fact welcomed), the pressures of mass civilization, the exhaustion of religions, and the accumulated inhibitions of artistic artifice, all got mixed together in some minds as hostile to instinctual being. The mood was more anti-civilization than actively primitivist. Somebody like D'Annunzio, who stood up to his knees in esthetic decadence, yet promoted the swashbuckling, blood-and-iron side of fascism, spans much of the gamut. But there are ultra-violet bands beyond D'Annunzio, where hostility to the mind and its works spreads into hostility toward esthetic elitism and the category of art, hostility toward the mental reservation and bad faith implicit in artistic arrangement, hostility toward the very codes of equivalence which constrain our ultimate yawping, fecal Yahoo-sincerity.

But here we pause on the shore of a wide sea of modern irrationalist, anti-rationalist, and absurdist movements to note a couple of curious, half-way phenomena among some of the modernists. There's been a lot of talk about the fact that men like Pound and Eliot, Wyndham Lewis, Céline, and Lawrence all had a special weakness, more or less overt, for authoritarian if not fascist governments. This needn't be put down to irrationalism as such. In some cases at least, these men had an abiding devotion to what they called rationalism, which they thought required an authoritarian and elitist group to embody and defend it. “Reason” in these cases isn't like a quiet room that you can walk into or out of; it's an area that men fight to control, from which you can be dispossessed despite your best intentions. Céline and Lawrence really lived some part of the time in a deliberately cultivated delirium; not so, or at least not so completely, Eliot and Wyndham Lewis. A key document for some of the early modernists, those whom Mr. Kermode

slyly calls palaeo-modernists, was Julien Benda's *Trahison des clercs*. For all that it included a broad streak of anti-intellectualism, modernism was in many respects a learned, a clerkly phenomenon. And this isn't altogether an absurd concatenation: who, after all, has a better right to be anti-intellectual than a clerk?

A related ambiguity of literary modernism that hasn't been much explored is its attitude toward "surfaces," which has amounted to calling into question what we mean by that strangely elusive word. Works that consist of a series of receding congruent outlines obviously don't have any fixed, primary surface; they are deliberately polysemous literature, to be experienced now at this level, now at that, or at all at once, according to the reader's elasticity of mind. Relatively familiar is the trick with literary surfaces that involves fragmenting them and inviting the reader to construct constellations of significant shape across the vacant gaps between them—a kind of structure that defines the strongest areas of work's surface as those where nothing is expressed. Many modernist works destroy trust in a specious surface by filling it with deliberate anomalies and absurdities; or they modulate the narration of an ostensible event into another mode, possibly the tale of the narrative's own generation; or they work into the texture of an ostensible narration subliminal patterns of correspondence that can be seen (by a retrospective rearrangement) to constitute a counter-narration. Still more frequent is the use of unreliable (absurd or contradictory) and therefore unsettling narrators, from whose faltering indications the reader must construct whatever consecutive and coherent shape he can. One of the easiest ways to define a façade as "genuine" is to take another façade away from in front of it; given an antagonist relation, one can play off a fake into a double-fake just as easily as into a counter-fake. All these tricks with surface (and many more in common use) imply an equivocal attitude, at best, toward the reader and his impulse to "understand." In effect, the artist works with and against the reader's logical inertia. What we mean by understanding is simply identifying on some level a surface sustained and consistent enough to support a general idea that has formed in our minds. And modernist works from Pirandello to Beckett are concerned to delay, confuse, and impede, as much as to assist, the reader's definition of such an appropriate surface.

Game-playing is fun, but a very crude consideration of raw materials may tell us more about the real character of modernism.

In architecture, it's particularly clear that modernism brought to the fore new materials used in distinctive new ways, just as the Futurists had proposed. Plate glass, stainless steel, reinforced concrete, even erector-set framing techniques, all came into prominence pretty abruptly, and with results ranging from Taliessin West at one end of the scale to the typical ungainly, shamefaced academic box at the other. In music, modernism brought about increased use, not only of discords and syncopation (particularly as the old distinction between "high" and "low" art faded toward insignificance), but of actual noise as a musical element. When Honneger imitated a locomotive, and Antheil mounted an airplane engine on the concert platform, we were well on our way to John Cage's famous "Four Minutes and Thirty Three Seconds," where random noise is not only incorporated in the performance, but constitutes the whole thing. For painting and sculpture the case is even more apparent. The first effect of modernism was to widen the palette and increase enormously the range of materials that the artist could use. The revival of collage and the importation into painting of sand, cigarette butts, linoleum, hair, straw, mud, or anything else that came to hand—this development is as familiar from jokes as from actual experience. Whatever could be seen in an esthetic way was potentially a work of art. And finally, I think the same sort of thing happened in the verbal arts as well: the range of literary language widened extraordinarily. I'm not thinking simply of the dirty words which crept in modestly with *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, expanded through Henry Miller's trilogy, and became a kind of buried speech-norm in *Last Exit to Brooklyn*. More interesting than this change is the increasing use for literary purposes of contaminated language—clichés and quotations, formulas and phrases out of the linguistic garbage-midden, sufficient to make up an independent, semi-private language of its own.

Radical linguistic innovation naturally came as a particular shock in a country like France, where the standards of literary correctness had long been strict. Anatole France, whose terminal date is 1924, refused to learn any foreign tongue, lest he corrupt the purity of his French idiom; but on the same principle, he might well have refused to learn French itself, since the way Frenchmen really talk is a couple of light-years away from the style in which Anatole France prided himself on writing. When Céline and Vian began writing French of the sort that the truck-driver and the scow-skipper use, they created real shock-waves. Americans and English-

men had to do more than that to ripple the pond, but in fact they widened enormously, not just the vocabulary, but the general verbal resources of the tongue. To cast a novel in the form of an index or a catechism, to investigate the resources of absolute asininity or even idiocy, to cross-breed English with a dozen other tongues, to represent complex synthetic states of mind and the full multiplicity of our emotional subcurrents—all this involved a kind of verbal explosion, to parallel which we have to reach back to the age of Shakespeare and Montaigne. Explosions aren't, to be sure, necessarily great literary events in themselves: classical French drama emerged when the French vocabulary was contracting, not expanding, and is all the better for that. Still, the age of palaeo-modernism was one of expansion, invention, updating, radical refurbishing—down to the roots of the vocabulary. Following an age of avowed decadence, and often describing itself (maybe a bit wishfully) as an age of retrenchment and restraint, the palaeo-modernist era was in fact one of explosive and revolutionary change. Indeed, the difference between palaeo-modernism and neo-modernism may prove in the end too great to be bridged by a couple of half-comic prefixes. Maybe palaeo-modernism will prove to have been the only real modernism, while what succeeded it will prove to have been merely (and momentarily) contemporary.

At any rate, if modernism represented a change at all, that change was worked by palaeo-modernism; and from a short perspective at least, it seems real enough. One odd if forceful proof of its reality is that we've so far been unable to write a coherent history of modern English literature. The old survey-title took us, one writer after another, in decent chronological order, from *Beowulf* to Thomas Hardy; and there's a clear line to be traced there. But to get from Hardy to Eliot we have to go back to Laforgue and Donne. To reach Pound we must consult Lao Tze and Peire Vidal: and in order to get a background for Joyce we have to combine Swift, Flaubert, and Ibsen with a dash of Dante. In cosmic terms, nothing is new under the sun; but modernism gives us a sense of an entire cultural heritage being ploughed up and turned over.

It's much easier, however, to say where and how modernism started than where it ended, or if it has: the central and hardest problem is always the closest, the problem of *now*. We seem neither to have pushed beyond the innovations of modernism nor to have rejected them decisively. Primitivism no longer seems like a spacious new dimension of art, sex as a theme offers no larger per-

spectives than leit-motifs and montage as techniques. A lot of play continues to be made with varieties of illusionism, including the manipulation and disintegration of surfaces: in that sense and perhaps a few others, modernism can be thought of as pushing forward, though its heroic days are certainly over.

Whether we need a new term for the period that has succeeded modernism depends in fact on where we imagine ourselves to be standing—a *locus standi* being exactly what's hardest to achieve in considering the *now*. On the customary loose accounting the middle ages lasted for a thousand gigantic years after the death of Boethius, from 500 to 1500. If we take a perspective anything like that long, the entire subject of modernism disappears from view. What happened in 1910 wasn't a new definition of human nature, and modernism never happened. It was just a tertiary wrinkle or ripple in a movement loosely labelled romanticism that began around 1750 or so. If we think of ourselves as still working through romanticism (protesting against it like all the other romantics before us), then we only have to go back a few years before romanticism to get to the renaissance, of which romanticism as a whole can very well be seen as a stage. Then we have three handsome periods in the history of the west—the classical age (800 B.C. to 500 A.D.), the middle ages (500–1500), and the renaissance, which, as it began about 1500, can reasonably be expected to peter out about 2500, give or take a couple of centuries. At that time we may be ready for the new Dark Ages, of which some romantic pessimists already profess to see multiplying signs.

Should I be sent on a Fulbright to some remote galaxy, this or something like this might be a good first perspective on the history of western culture. It's neat, it's symmetrical, and it divides the subject into three parts, which is always reassuring. For us, however, being who, where, and when we are, it has the slight disadvantage of being altogether useless. All these distinctions of schools and movements over the last century or two are doubtless trivial in the long run—if you run long enough. Futurist and modernist, symbolist and Parnassian, pre-Raphaelite and surrealist, expressionist and impressionist, realist and naturalist and so forth and so on—no doubt they will all iron out with the passage of time, and schoolchildren will be taught exquisitely simple generalities about the first machine age (1750–2400) or something like that. But if only for mnemonic purposes (and I'm sceptical enough to think those the only real purposes of cultural categories), we do

need some scale calculated for the here and now, not for hypothetical inhabitants of Sirius and Betelgeuse.

So modernism we've got, its waves and reverberations have filled our lives, ephemeral as they are, and at the moment, though they've been damped, flattened, attenuated and subjected to frequent counterpressure, I see no sign that they've been supplanted by any other major unit of cultural energy. That, after all, is the only conclusive event that can write "finis" to a cultural era—the arrival, in thunder, of a new cultural era. I haven't heard any rumors of such an event. It would seem that, like ancient geographers, we have here a blank spot on our cultural map, to be filled with amorphous, nondescript creatures. Yet if we can't specify any cultural earthshakers over the past fifty years (since palaeo-modernism started fading into eclectic, harlequin neo-modernism), we may still remark some characteristic strains and pressures of what we may yet someday call "the age of undertow."

For one thing, where modernism has simply pushed ahead, it has exaggerated tendencies which were in it from the beginning, by making symptomatic jokes out of them. Hostility to artifice continues to make itself felt, along with violent dislike of that placatory packaging which makes art as easy to take as placebo pills. Art-forms that consist of holes and trenches dug in the desert, or a twenty-mile canvas fence to the sea, are a way of thumbing one's nose at 59th street and Madison Avenue. One young man has distinguished himself as an arranger of excelsior in piles—the admirer is challenged, as it were, to buy *that*, take it home, and put it in his living room. Akin to this impulse is another which disclaims, so far as possible, any participation of the artist in the arrangement of his materials. Minimalist art and aleatory art (which introduce a deliberate element but undeliberate quantity of disorder and chaos into the art work) are ways of repudiating the artist's role of God over his own creation. One can see this as a natural development from pop art, which deliberately accepted the forms of vulgar life, resizing them or reduplicating them, but often doing as little to them as possible. Andy Warhol, tired of imitating Brillo boxes, soon began acquiring real Brillo boxes, signing his name to them, and sending them to the galleries. Robert Rauschenberg, finding to hand a drawing by De Kooning, erased it, signed the paper, and listed it among his works as an "Erased De Kooning" by Rauschenberg.

Simultaneously, books are being written which consist entirely of

the love-hate romance of the story with the story-teller—in which every ostensible story collapses into the story of the story-teller, and no surface exists which is not potentially and ultimately a phantom of his mind. The self-conscious novel is the mirror image, as it were, of minimalist art: in the one, the artist is nowhere, in the other he is everywhere. And both varieties of elusive game-playing (pretending as they do to delude us on a point where common sense is not to be deluded) bespeak a kind of radical tension between the craftsman and his craft. I think this tension could be traced widely, through Beckett's explicit efforts to murder prose fiction, through parodists and self-parodists, through joky nihilists beyond number. And there seem perfectly sufficient reasons for this state of affairs. By and large, our artistic forms do have long histories: they are mature forms. Yet the pressure on artists to produce something new is unrelenting. The new mass audiences with their new leisure time gulp cultural artifacts at a staggering rate. To take a single instance, movies and television, though simply extensions of the drama, have multiplied a thousandfold the appetite for narrative, and so hastened a thousandfold the wearing-out of dramatic and narrative clichés. Even before the contemporary deluge broke, the pressures of mass society were creating in a few a nostalgia for the void, a fascination with the dark unknown, and thus a hatred of culture and its forms. By now, one of the few formulas for artistic distinction seems to be the repudiation of artistic distinction as a category.

And when even this extreme position has become hackneyed, where do we go? We fracture, we eclectic. Some fall back, declining the gambit entirely; a few push ahead faster and faster. In recent painting particularly, phases and stages and fads and manners seem to succeed one another so fast, that even the competitors are hard put to keep up. I don't think it's just an illusion that artistic periods not only get shorter as we approach the modern era, but cultural classifications get continually hazier and looser. History is moving faster; eclecticism offers us ever-wider fields of choice for parody, pastiche, or imitation; the big alternatives have already been used. So categories multiply as the reasons for having them languish. Of all the empty and meaningless categories, hardly any is inherently as empty and meaningless as "the modern." Like "youth," it is a self-destroying concept; unlike "youth," it has a million and one potential meanings. Nothing is so dated as yesterday's modern, and nothing, however dated in itself, fails to qualify

as “modern” so long as it enjoys the exquisite privilege of having been created yesterday. Collections of so-called modern art thus fall between two stools: I’ve walked through some that seemed to me absolutely petrified—as dead as a collection of dodo-skeletons—and through others that were so determined to be up-to-the-minute, that they were simply trendy. What’s new isn’t to be defined just chronologically. A lot of work pretending to be new is the old stuff covered with a glossy varnish of artificial novelty; a lot of innovation proceeds lockstep down the corridors of prescribed non-conformist conformity; and a lot of apparent novelty is new simply because previous workers in the vineyard had enough sense to see that that particular path wasn’t worth following. Separating what’s really modern from what’s simply contemporary is an exacting speculation, and language doesn’t help with the distinction. More than anywhere else in criticism, we need a rich if not indeed a rational vocabulary to discuss our own times: though we’re poor everywhere, we’re poorest of all here.

In one sense, then, we can say that the “modernist” period has never ended and never will end, though as a perceptible piece of time it has ceased to exist. If “modern” means no more than “born yesterday,” the modern age won’t cease till there are no more todays. So modernism will never end, it will just attenuate and diffuse itself more and more. In *The Shape of Time*, George Kubler says, neatly, “Every new form limits the succeeding innovations in the same series. Every such form is itself one of a finite number of possibilities open in any temporal situation. Hence every innovation reduces the duration of its class” (p. 54). This is true, and very sharply put, but it presupposes a clearly defined class. If your class is infinitely elastic, as “modernism” may become if we don’t tack it down here and there, it may well achieve total comprehensiveness at the cost of total meaninglessness.

According to some of my colleagues, we are already into the post-modernist age—a formula that flatters one with the sense of being an amazingly up-to-date fellow, but also implies an awful degree of terminological desperation. Doesn’t the heedless fellow who dreamed up this formula anticipate the day when we’ll have worked our way into forms like post-post-post-modernist and its inevitable, infinite sequels? The more such patches one sticks on “modernist,” the more obvious its inadequacy as a descriptive term in the first place.

So in answer to the question of my title, “What was modern-

ism?" I'd like to propose a pretty restrictive response. Modernism was an inaccurate and misleading term, applied to a cultural trend most clearly discernible between 1905 and 1925. When it is understood to refer to distinct structural features that some artistic works of this period have in common, it has a real meaning, though it still isn't a very good term. As it departs from that specific meaning, it gets fuzzier and fuzzier, and sometimes it doesn't mean much of anything at all. Still, it has been a prevalent and widely accepted stopgap term, with a loose, emotive tone, and one of the ways to get better terminology is to pick it apart, and see how many different things it has been used to cover. Then perhaps we can get better names for them.