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THEORISING LITERARY MODERNISM: READING WITH THE MODERNISTS

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Abstract

The paper seeks to explore modernism as an aesthetic category as it unfolds in an uncertain interwar Europe. In the process, it eschews any time lag or belatedness between the arrival of literary modernism and its subsequent theorisation by later theorists. Modernism, in this paper, emerges as a set of literary and theoretical assumption, as it is developed by its practitioners such T.S Eliot.

***Key Words**: Modernism, Interior Monologue, Art, Autobiographical*

INTRODUCTION

Reviewing Virginia Woolf's *The Voyage Out* (1915), her first novel, E.M. Forster's opening remarks are less about the work per se and more about its author. Published in *Daily News and Leader* on April 8, 1915, the review, appropriately titled "A New Novelist", emphasises on the fact that the author is a woman and therefore, more than anything else, it is her audacity that shines out. According to Forster, "perhaps the first comment to make on *The Voyage Out* is that it is absolutely unafraid, and that its courage springs, not from naiveté, but from education. Few women writers are educated. A gentleman ought not to say such a thing, but it is, unfortunately, true." The aphorism appears as the explanation to a passage from the novel in which one of the men in complains, "Of course, we're always writing about women—abusing them, or jeering at them or worshipping them; but it's never come from

women themselves. I believe we still don't know in the least how they live, or what they feel, or what they do precisely…. They won't tell you. Either they're afraid, or they've got a way of treating men."

Here, I am tempted to draw a few broad inferences which I shall explore in the essay. First, there is a "kind of writing" which can be set aside from the sentimental Victorian novels. However, instead of elaborating the quality that distinguishes it from earlier writings, *The Voyage Out* is negatively defined as that which it is not. In other words, even the practitioners of this new genre of writing are uncertain about its aesthetic principles. The dispute over what characterizes modernism is not restricted to the question of method or epistemology. Occasionally, it is also about nomenclature. For example, May Sinclair, in her essay "The Novels of Richardson", argued that Dorothy Richardson uses stream of consciousness—a claim which Richardson refuted by saying that she would prefer the term interior monologue. These terms, that might have seem interchangeable to critics in the early decades of twentieth century, acquired different connotations when theorists look back at the entire body of work classified as Modernist. While stream of consciousness is now regarded as a more inclusive term that includes all the literary maneuvers that attempt to capture the fleeting consciousness, interior monologue is reserved for those attempts in which the authors do not make an intervention and simply annex the chain of thought however coherent of fracture they may be. How do we decide whether the author is an agent or merely a reporter? Living in the post-structuralist world where the author is being pronounced dead, and literature is being reduced to a set of cultural codes which precipitate as text, is not it safe to say that interior monologue is as contrived as a stream of consciousness? Do we obey the theorist of the modernist aesthetics as we respond to them? How did the modernists decide the qualities that they though best represented modernism?

Second, in so far as modernism is negatively described as not the kind of works that the sentimental, learned, yet uneducated "Queens of the Pen" wrote during Victorian era, it appears aesthetics of the elite, either with capital or with cultural capital, who could "afford" education at Cambridge and host coteries of University wits. Histories of modernism, such as Ernest Hemingway's *A Movable Feast* (1964), show that modernism developed in multi-generic workshops centered on patrons like Gertrude Stein. If such is the exclusiveness of their performance, what are the discourses through which they claimed to represent the consciousness of the entire inter-war Europe? How deep is the misogyny implicit in Forster's quip- "Queens of the Pen"? If the world indeed changed around 1910 and the message of *avant garde* is to "make it new", who are the agents of change? How did they read history in general and literary histories in particular, to decide the quotient of their newness? For the sake of methodological convenience and theorization, I shall primarily look at the essays of Virginia Woolf and her subsequent reception in the last six decades.

Reading history: the art of biography and the autobiography

In 1790, the rioters in France smashed the town clock to herald a new era in the history of man. The broken clock represented a desire to rewrite the history of their time—a history that would sanitize the decadence of feudal economy and represent a new democratic ethos. Soon the triple principles of liberty, equality and fraternity caught the imagination of entire Europe. An event as momentous as the Renaissance, French revolution was believed to transform the very texture of state and social relation. To sum up, revolutionary France became an epitome of the progressive and the human capacity to constantly reinvent itself. However, more than a century later, people felt an urge to destroy the mechanical clock once again. As the grand narratives of progress and civilization shrunk in their own hollowness, the artist in post-1914 world was left with the problem of conceptualising time. With the publication of William

James's *The Principles of Psychology*, (1890) time became an entity to be experienced in mind. Moreover, with the standardisation of the Greenwich meridian and the synchronisation of clocks around the world in order to serve the needs of modern transport and communication systems, the relationship between time and space underwent a change too. Alongside this regulated universality of temporal and spatial measurement, however, both the physical and psychological sciences were paradoxically beginning to reveal its arbitrariness, and the relativity of temporal experience[1]. If time is cognitive and experiential, how does one record history? What innovation does it require in order to capture the ebbs and flows of one's own life? What are the categories through which one can think about one's own life?

Virginia Woolf begins her essay "The Art of Biography" by posing two "ungenerous" propositions. First, she wonders whether biography qualifies as an art. On the one hand, the proposition suggests that biography, and by extension, history seems to have lost its claim to objectivity. On the other hand, the traditional category of beauty and the aesthetic tools through which art speaks to the world no longer seem valid. Therefore, art must redefine itself and expand its contours to admit genres/forms hitherto recognised as non-arts. Second, "why the self that writes a book of prose" became a subject of interest much later than a "self that writes a poem[2]." Here Woolf seems to be referring to "an active projective self" that has

[1] Narrative in the modernist novel typically follows the passage of time as it is experienced within the minds of its characters, rather than the mechanically ordered temporality. It might take hundreds of pages to cover the period of only one day, as in Joyce's *Ulysses*, or, as in Woolf's *Orlando*, far less to move across four hundred years. Similarly personal history can be parenthesized in a few pages, as Woolf does in *To The Lighthouse.*

[2] In "De Quincey's Autobiography" Woolf cites prejudice against prose, even amongst the writers, as the reason behind staggered development of autobiographical tradition in prose. She writes, "Even if he writes as an artist without a practical end in view, still he treats prose as a humble beast of burden which must

already established itself as a subject of study through works like Wordsworth's *The Prelude* (1850). Considering the unmistakable autobiographical strain that one finds in most of her works, Woolf is hinting at a genre of prose wherein the historical/biographical self fuses with the fictional self. In the process, it redefining the way both history and fiction were read. Reviewing the work of biographer Harold Nicolson in "The New *Biography*", Woof put forth her own memorable theory of biography encapsulated in her phrase "granite and rainbow". "Truth" she envisions "as something of granite-like solidity", and "personality as something of rainbow-like intangibility ", and "the aim of biography", she proposes, "is to weld these two into one seamless whole"—a unity that will fracture the neat segregation between fact and fiction. In "Poetry, Fiction and Future" (1927), she goes a step further to suggest that there was a need to formulate a distinct genre that marries prose and poetry. According to Woolf "[Poetry] has always insisted on certain rights, such as rhyme, metre, poetic diction. She has never been used for the common purpose of life. Prose has taken all the dirty work on to her own shoulders; has answered letters, paid bills, written articles, made speeches, served the needs of business men, shopkeepers, lawyers, soldiers, peasants." Tied down to their traditionally sanctioned domains of operation, both poetry and prose fail to express truth as it must be expressed—as "granite and rainbow." For Woolf, it was this aesthetic anarchy that was to be celebrated.

The "Newness" of the New

In *A Room of One's Own* (1929) she famously argues that "fiction is like a spider's web, attached ever so lightly perhaps, but still attached to life at all four corners. Often the

accommodate all sorts of odds and ends; as an impure substance in which dust and twigs and flies find lodgement."

attachment is scarcely perceptible...But when the web is pulled askew, hooked up at the edge, torn in the middle, one remembers that these webs are not spun in mid-air by incorporeal creatures, but are the work of suffering human beings, and are attached to grossly material things, like health and money and the houses we live in." In this passage, Woolf offers a materialist and historicist understanding of literature. As Jane Goldman points out, Woolf seems to be reacting against the divinely ordained poet-prophet who is gifted with what Coleridge describes as the "secondary imagination". By making the poet a part of the suffering pain and describing literature as a mode of reaction or protest, Woolf demystifies the exalted role of a prophet which the romantics appropriated for themselves. Moreover, the idea that a piece of writing is a material object is connected to modernist concern with the self reflexivity of the text and materiality of the words that are produced. Thus, Woolf proposes a theory of literature which is not about "overflow of powerful emotions recollected in tranquillity" but an engagement with the suffering world and registering the variegate experiences that it impresses upon us[3]. Now that the vision is lost, the artist is reduced from a romantic outsider to a suffering commoner whose job is to convey the impressions without worrying about the form. In "Modern Fiction" she describes the process as one in which "the task of the novelist is to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display, with as little mixture of the alien and external as possible." Not only does her formulation discredit Victorian aesthetics, it also makes the audacious claim that "the proper stuff of literature." Just as no aesthetic experiment is forbidden, similarly "every feeling, every thought, every quality of brain and spirit" qualifies as a subject suitable for art. By making the question of suitability, both of

[3] "From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms; and as they fall, as they shape themselves into the life of Monday or Tuesday." (The Modern Fiction).

form and content, inconsequential, Modernism democratizes aesthetic field. Even language, as she describes in "Craftsmanship" (1937), becomes a living organism that is to be celebrated. According to Woolf, "words do not live in dictionaries; they live in the mind . . . And how do they live in the mind? Variously and strangely, much as human beings live, by ranging hither and thither, by falling in love, and mating together. It is true that they are much less bound by ceremony and convention than we are. Royal words mate with commoners. English words marry French words, German words, Indian words, Negro words, if they have a fancy. Indeed, the less we enquire into the past of our dear Mother English the better it will be for that lady's reputation. For she has gone a-roving, a-roving fair maid." Just like the content and the form, Modernist language is characterised by a democratic libertine attitude. This free play of from, content as well as the medium makes Modernism, in spite of the fact that its practitioners are cultural elite, a polyglossic and democratic art. Here also lay its claims to be the representative voice of its age.

For the Modernists, it was essential to define themselves against the Victorians. According to Ford Maddox Ford, "the world of twenty-five years ago" was "rather a dismal place." What made it so depressing was the existence of "those terrible and forbidding things – the Victorian great figures."[4] As Louise B Williams points out, the sense of disillusionment with the simulacra of stability that pervaded Victorian era predates the political crisis beset by the World War I. Citing the adverse reaction that J.M. Synge's *Playboy of the Western World* (January 26, 1907) received at the Abbey Theatre, Williams was forced to concede the fact that something had gone wrong with his aesthetic theory. "In our age", writes Yeats, it is impossible to create, as I had dreamed, an heroic and passionate conception of life worthy of the study of men elsewhere and at other times . . .There was a time when I thought of a noble

[4] Cited in *Modernism and the Ideology of History,* Louise B. Williams

body for all eyes, a soul for subtle understandings, and, to unite these two, Eleusinian rites. Instead, the people cry out for stones and vapour, pedantry and hysteria, rhetoric and sentiment[5]." Seventeen years later, commenting on the career of Conrad, Woolf expresses similar thoughts in the essay "Joseph Conrad" (August 14, 1924). "Conrad would have gained" she writes "both in credit and popularity if he had written what he had to write without this incessant care for appearance[6]." In an age when the very idea of heroism has turned out to be a hollow rhetoric, Conrad's heroes who "are at war with nature but at harmony with men" may secure their place among the "classics." Yet, for Woolf, they do not seem to resonate with the spirit of the epoch. In "Modern Fiction" Woolf distinguishes old-fashioned and outmoded 'materialism' of the Edwardian novelists, such as Arnold Bennett, John Galsworthy and H. G. Wells, and the more modern, 'spiritual' and experimental writing of her Georgian contemporary James Joyce. Much like Conrad, Bennett's writing too is ruled by plot, characterisation. He too is obliged "comedy, tragedy, love interest, and an air of probability embalming the whole so impeccable that if all his figures were to come to life they would find themselves dressed down to the last button of their coats in the fashion of the hour." Such writing, Woolf argues, for its entire obsession with material detail, fails to capture 'life'. According to "to admire and celebrate such men and such deeds, who romantically, whole-heartedly and with the fervour of a lover, one must be possessed of a double vision; one must be at once inside and outside." However, so profound is the contemporary crisis in Europe that even Conrad was forced to change his view of human life in his works such as *The Heart of Darkness* (1899), *Nostromo* (1904) and *The Arrow of Gold*

[5] Ibid.

[6] Woolf writes, "One opens his pages and feels as Helen must have felt when she looked into the glass and realised that, do what she would, she can never pass as a plain woman."

(1919). For Woolf, it is here that Conrad comes closest or even seems to pioneer the Modernist aesthetics. However, as a late Victorian aesthete and morality, "after the middle period was never again able to bring his characters in perfect relationship with their background. He never believed in his later and more sophisticated character as he had believed in his early seamen."Woolf further adds that "in such a crowded world, such terse phrases become less and less appropriate."

The contrast becomes Modernist and Conrad becomes apparent as one contrasts Woolf's assessment of Conrad to that of Joyce in "Modern Fiction". The fleeting interiority that art must strive to portray gets perfected in the work of Joyce. In the essay, she analyses *The Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man* and discusses selections from *Ulysses.* According to Woolf, Joyce is concerned "at all costs to reveal the flickerings of that inmost flame flashes its messages through the brain." As Compared to Joycean attempt to capture the fleeting train of thoughts and the ephemeral impressions, Conrad, even as he comes closer to the modernists, can only be a detached report or an observer of human frailty; one who can only reiterate the need to change the "angle of vision." However, the same contrast also reveals a strange tension that exists between the male practitioners of Modernism and women like Woolf. Just as Forster cited in the introductory section of my essay was conscious of the fact that *The Voyage Out* is the work of a woman, Woolf too is suspicious of Joyce. Although she concedes the fact that, Ulysses is a 'masterpiece' that needs to be admired for "its brilliancy, its sordidity, its incoherence, its sudden lightning flashes of significance", yet she remarks that "the poverty of its author's mind" makes it less noble than the works of Conrad or Thomas Hardy.

In *A Room of One's Own,* Woolf laments that the "I" that represents women's subjectivity appears no more than "a straight dark bar, a shadow shaped something" that although "pervades poetry from cover to cover" but is "absent from the history". The poverty,

therefore, is the reluctance of authors like James Joyce to explore or represent the "I" of a woman. Moreover, as the "I" is reduced to a lifeless shadowy bar, the representation of woman gets tied up to literary tropes and symbols. It is for this reason that Woolf advocates an aesthetic language where a woman can write her body. In other words, let the "I" ricochet through her work. However, since authors like Joyce and Forster seem stricken by "poverty of mind", it is up to the woman writers to speak for fellow women. Both in *Room for One's Own* and *Romance and the Heat* (1923) Woolf argues for a gendered aesthetics. While in the former essay she criticizes diabolical fascist poetry which abrogates the natural principal of creation and pleasure by transplanting art solely to the realm of the politics[7], the latter essay offers a criticism of Dorothy Richardson whom she credits with having invented a technique that manages to portray human emotions with greater effectiveness[8]. For Woolf, Richardson has inaugurated an aesthetic technique that "is a woman's sentence only in the sense that it is used to describe a woman's mind by a writer who is neither proud nor afraid of anything that

[7] Raising concerns about the poisonous concoction of art and politics in the fascist art, Woolf writes "

We may well join in that pious hope, but it is doubtful whether poetry can come out of an incubator. Poetry ought to have a mother as well as a father. The Fascist poem, one may fear, will be a horrid little abortion such as one sees in a glass jar in the museum of some county town." Using a vocabulary associated with pregnancy and birth, Woolf emphasises that just as the incubator is unnatural, the institutional space out of which the fascist art emerges is unnatural.

[8] According to Woolf, Richardson 'has invented, or, if she has not invented, developed and applied to her own uses, a sentence which we might call the psychological sentence of the feminine gender. It is of a more elastic fibre than the old, capable of stretching to the extreme, of suspending the frailest particles, of enveloping the vaguest shapes'. But, acknowledging that men, too, have constructed similar sentences, she points out that the difference lies with content rather than form.

she may discover in the psychology of her sex." As someone for whom author is just another suffering individual and not an active projective Romantic self that often gets imbricated on his art—a condition in which instead of fusing with the art, the personal history of the author become an object of curiosity, Richardson's writing in gendered only in contrast to the prejudiced language of the men. At this juncture, it is important to notice that both Yeats and Woolf seem to have realised it was not just the Victorian morality and aesthetics that had become obsolete, but even the *fin de siècle* projects to restore the lost idealism have proved futile. What then is the appropriate morality and aesthetics?

Replacing a linear progressive time with a circular notion of time, the Modernists went back to the Elizabethans to trace possible categories to understand their present predicaments. Particularly interesting for their cause were the Metaphysical poets. In "The Metaphysical Poets" (1921) Donne concedes the fact that "Not only is it extremely difficult to define metaphysical poetry, but difficult to decide what poets practice it and in which of their verses." Yet, in their capacity to synthesise feeling and thinking—distinct activities that may not come together, and in their ability to collocate mutually contradictory views, the metaphysical poets represented a sensibility that has not dissociated. This capacity to translate intellect into feelings, the Modernists felt, would help them understand the predicament of their own age. In "Donne After Three Centuries", Woolf finds in Donne's genius the ability to organise the "disperse stream of life." For Woolf, the anger and protest that one discerns in Donne's satire paved way for his later poetry. Living in a world which in its complexity echoes the world of the "strange" Elizabethans, Donne's poetry which condenses opposition in the same work of art seems an apt model for representing the Modernist predicament. Further entrenching the relationship between art and society, Woolf adds that "the abrupt heaping of thoughts on thoughts" is symptomatic of a deep rooted anxiety which makes Donne a "rebellion, not merely against his elders, but against something

antipathetic to him in the temper of his age." Thus Donne the poet provides the model of a disenchanted outcast—one who is different from a Romantic Prophet as well as the Victorian artist who truthfully held a mirror against his universe. Moreover, the language in which she describes Donne is remarkable similar to her own assessment of Joyce. For example, in his capacity to portray impressions with fidelity, Donne is valorised as a "bold and active mind that loves to deal with actual things, which struggles to express each shock as it impinges upon his tight stretched senses.

Reading Modernism

During the essay, I tried to map out the different ways through which the modernists were trying to define their project—both in its contrast and sameness to preceding literary histories. In the process, they also suggested various family resemblances and the manner in which one should approach their works. In "How Should One Read a Book?" Woolf begins with an assertion that one's engagement with a piece of work should not be guided by one's perception of the author or any other prejudices. However, she adds that in order to truly appreciate a work of art, the reader must exercise his faculty to discover the numerous impressions and fragments that have come together in the art. "The first process of reading" according to Woolf is "to receive impressions with utmost understanding" and then judge these fleeting impressions until they get reduced to something that is "hard and lasting." In other words, to read Modernist art requires an appreciation of the very process of its composition—condensation and filtering of the myriad impressions that we receive everyday around us. Erich Auerbach's chapter on To the Lighthouse in *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (1946) present with a detailed analysis of a passage from Woolf 's novel, which he examines in terms of point of view, narrative voice, time, interior and exterior consciousness, epistemology and fragmentation—categories through which the Modernists distinguished their art. He identifies her modern literary technique as a new

model for the organisation of thought and language. While on the one hand it is advised to avoid affective and intentional fallacy, on the other hand, we are also being alerted to the gendered character of modernism. Her contemporaries like Wyndham Lewis in "Men Without Art" (1934) derided Woolf's "feminine principle" and Q.D. Leavis attacked her alleged "sex-hostility." Although to analyse the assorted critical attention that Woolf's writings have drawn would be a challenging project in itself, I shall conclude by countering Habermas' insistence that modernity is an unfinished project. The fact that the Modernists could look back at models from the past, decide their own terms of engagement with it, and at the same time, use judgement to look ahead to a future would imply that the project called modernism had a telos which it did achieve.

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