

Rite of Spring—"Be Modern! Be Frightening!"

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The unifying cultural idiom of the twentieth century was Modernism. A century ago this May a riot took place at the Paris premier of Stravinsky's "the Rite of Spring." Stravinsky aimed to provoke. The avant-garde was well represented, but so were traditionalists defending what they saw as an affront to Romantic tradition. The tumult began as the curtain rose to the unfamiliar disconcerting sound of a bassoon being played as no bassoon had ever been played before. Dancers in box-like peasant costumes began repetitively stamping and lurching back and forth on the open stage. The contentious audience was so noisy that they actually drowned out some of Stravinsky's score. In Rite of Spring, as critic Thomas Kelly put it, "The pagans on-stage made pagans of the audience." Stravinsky's initial title was *The Victim*. "The Rite of Spring marks the onset of Twentieth Century music with savage rhythms, absence of melody, and barbaric energy." Vaslav Nijinsky might have been a great dancer, but as a novice choreographer he was brutal, frantically calling on the troop to make ever more risky moves. Complained one dancer: "With every leap we landed heavily enough to jar every organ in us."

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So what was modernism? And was it revolutionary, leftist or rightist, fascistic or anti-political?

Modernism never generated a clear political consequence. In the 1930s in the US and England, Modernism was identified with the left. In Germany and Italy in the 1930s Modernism was linked with the right. Fascism is to some extent a linking of right-wing traditions with Modernism. Modernism appealed to America's 60s generation for its avant garde breaking of boundaries, generational conflict, and sexual liberation.

Modernism was not committed to the separation of the male and the female on moral, biological or psychological grounds as the Victorians had been. Modernism was sympathetic toward feminism and homosexuality and expressed an interest in the androgynous and the bisexual. Modernism moved on all fronts to break down polarities. It preferred the unfinished and the splintered.

Unlike the other cultural revolutions, such as the Reformation, the Enlightenment, or Romanticism, which turned into political revolutions, Modernism failed to develop a distinctive political ideology. The Reformation fashioned the modern state; the Enlightenment fostered liberalism and reform. Romanticism polarized - it created Marxism on the left and conservative nationalism on the right. We are still working at extricating ourselves from the ideological outcomes of Romanticism. Romanticism created coherent political and social theories that boxed us in. Modernism busted the box, and generated ambiguities and ambivalence. Historians, who tend to focus on political and economic forces, have tended to treat modernism as peripheral, since it has not had the same kind of direct impact on politics. The Bolsheviks came to power with a modernist idiom

and poster culture, but very quickly in the Civil War banished modernism in favor of Soviet Realism.

Stravinsky was a member of the Czarist elite; he was irritated in private for people thinking he looked like a Jew, and adopted the rightist politics of the Russian exiles. In 1930 and 1935 Stravinsky had audiences with Mussolini and praised him to the rooftops. On the eve of his first audience with Mussolini, Stravinsky declared to Italian journalists: “I don’t believe anyone venerates Mussolini more than I. To me, he is the one man who counts in the whole world. I have traveled a great deal: I know many exalted personages, and my artist’s mind does not shrink from political and social issues. Well, after having seen so many events and so many more or less representative men, I have an overpowering urge to render homage to your Duce. He is the savior of Italy and --let us hope—of Europe.”

Stravinsky reacted to the consolidation of the Soviet Union in the 1920s by swearing off modernism. He had become an anti-modernist. Russian in his Swiss retreat, a White Russian émigré seeking distance from his aesthetic radicalism, Stravinsky remained a lifelong monarchist and modernist apostate. In the 1930s he took French citizenship, then finally American citizenship in the 1950s. Despite his anti-Semitism, he ended up with a Jewish son-in-law. “Modernists Have Ruined Modern Music” screamed the headline over an interview Stravinsky gave the journal *Musical America*. The composer now upheld the banner of neoclassicism. Stravinsky was hailed in his circle as “the dictator of the reaction against the anarchy into which modernism degenerated.”

Modernism is one of the four great cultural revolutions in Western civilization since 1500. By cultural revolution I mean an upheaval in consciousness, values and ideology. The Reformation, the first of these,

generated Protestantism and reshaped Catholicism. The Enlightenment followed by spreading liberalism and reform, while Romanticism in its prime between 1790 and 1850 elevated the hero in history and promoted the great cause. The individual was enhanced by attaching itself to an irresistible force outside itself, such as art, history, the nation, or the beloved.

The key aspect of Modernism was its revolt against the constraints of Victorianism. To understand Modernism one needs to understand the character of Victorian culture. I will confine myself to six points of difference.

1) The Victorians loved biographies, long, detailed ones, with clear meandering plots, but usually blind to psychological factors. Modernism favored random access, assuming that no sense of sequence could be imposed on something. One may not be able to follow the plot of a story, but one would appreciate the angst of the dancer or character. Victorians were obsessed by history. To understand contemporary politics it was thought necessary to understand the political life of the middle ages and earlier pre-history periods. Nineteenth-century Germany, for example, could only be understood by tracing the nation's development from its existence in the forests under the barbarian chieftains. It is difficult for us to grasp the Victorian addiction to history. History wasn't just some questions on the FCAT or one of the not "useful" non-STEM majors. To understand England in 1870, people felt it was vital to know English history in 1215. After the Bible the most popular book in England was Thomas Macaulay's *History of England*, which never got past 1695.

Victorians took comfort in history; the direction was progress. For Victorians, narrative was central. Their novels and performances told

stories. Modernists no longer believed in objectifying history. In the modernist novel we may not comprehend what is happening after reading 10 pages, but we will have a close perception of someone's consciousness.

Modernism was anti-historicist. It explored the vagueries and mysteries hidden in the psyche. It did not believe the truth lay in telling an evolutionary story. In the primitive and myth they might find an unmitigated access to the psyche. The essence of life was situated somewhere in myth, in a time before the corruption of civilization, before history. Modernism cared little for history; in fact it was hostile to it. Pessimistically viewed it as a nightmare. To grasp the Russian soul was to rediscover Slavic paganism. The virgin could be understood as dancing in a frenzy of vitalism until she dies, but in the ballet she is constantly surrounded, trapped as a victim. The “dance of death” in the Rite of Spring foreshadowed the dance of death in the trenches. Replacing the solitary victim of the virgin Chosen One, a European generation is victimized and massacred. Modris Eksteins’ *Rites of Spring. The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age* (1989) traces the plunge into the abyss back to the Ballet Rus, to Diaghilev, Nijinsky and Stravinsky and the Russian exiles, connecting their nostalgic utopianism to the barbaric futuristic utopianism that follows the war. Russian émigré thought was tinged with anti-Semitism and identified with Mussolini and Italian fascism as the force to cleanse society. Futurism had been strong in both Russia and Italy.

Modernism, like fascism, embraced the fast-moving technological world of trains, machines, movement and action. Modernism can be seen as an effort to address the cultural consequences of a new technological world and mass culture, perhaps modernism also licensed the future brutality and sadism of fascism. Modernism favored random access, assuming that no

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2) Victorians tended to focus on the big picture. The answers came in large generalizations and devising comprehensive systems: such as, Darwinism or Marxism. The Victorians thought that big was better. In the sciences one operated on the macro level- the purpose of science was to propound universal laws. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century the big answers were found under the microscope. Small was more and beautiful. The pivotal science of the twentieth century was sub-atomic particle physics. Today it is genetics, mapping the genome. In modernism focus is on the minute particle. In modernist writing the emphasis is on the precise and exact word and on the concrete image. We dissect the hidden intentions of an author from their word selection as much as the story itself.

3) Victorians claimed to embrace a rigid moral code with its strict sense of what was right and wrong, correct and incorrect; they believed in a righteous imposition of their code through institutional power- ethics derived from the Bible. The code was set down by authority. What served the interest of pastors, fathers, lawyers, generals, and businessmen was given absolute moral sanctions. We still do not know if Victorian sexual practices were very different from our own, but their way of talking about sex was quite different. Modernism had greater openness with regard to sexuality. Stravinsky introduces sexuality, sexuality and death combined, in the ballet. Modernism produced a new frankness and an inclination to what the Victorians would call vulgar or dirty talk. At first Modernists were very self-conscious about this new sexual frankness. Virginia Woolf made using the word 'semen' at one of her early Bloombury parties an earth-shattering

event. By the 1920s intellectuals talked about sex as familiarly as Victorians conversed about God. It is conventional to say that modernism represented a relativistic rebellion against the puritanical ethics of the nineteenth century. The nineteenth century was geared to maintain the nuclear family. Modernism weakened the family by giving new authenticity to individualism and to the individual search for values. It also put more value on culture than the family, it created in the avant-garde a kind of cultural solidarity that replaced family solidarity.

4) The Victorians inclined to simplification and popularization. The nineteenth century believed that thought should not be esoteric, that it should not be the realm of professionals and scholars. The Victorians also felt a missionary calling to spread higher culture as far as possible in the middle class and among the more reliable and sober working class. They believed art and literature should be accessible to the educated middle class. Novelists, scientists all addressed broad audiences. Culturally the Victorians tended toward democracy and away from elitism.

A modernist novel is much harder to read than a Victorian one. Authors and choreographers do not have to provide us with clear narratives. Modernism believed in complexity and difficulty. It was elitist to the present, at best democratic in the future. It enjoyed thinking of itself, its audience as a vanguard. The Rite of Spring was the early rallying point for this international avant garde. To appreciate Modernist art would require greater and greater sophistication, learning, intense application. Modernists addressed narrow, highly selective, learned and professional audiences. In any given area, Modernism was not accessible to the naive and unprepared person, to the common man. Journals of physics or any other discipline are now written for specialists, with its own terminology, its own college major.

Modernists on the political left would have problems reconciling their elitism with their political democracy.

5) The Victorians produced popular theater, light opera, the waltz. The purpose of the modernist novel and theater was the discovery of what Proust called "a different self." The aim is not to tell a story, expound a moral; it is to achieve a breakthrough to a different self. The self sought is different from the ordinary familial and social being known in everyday life. The conviction of modernism is that humanity is most authentic, truly human when it is involved in art, whether literary, visual or performing arts. In the 19th century humanity achieved its highest and purest nature in moral action. The modernists replaced the moral with the aesthetic. The burden of the modernist production is to achieve something deeper, more mythic, a higher level of humanity than can be experienced in ordinary life. The ballet does contain a story, but it serves as a vehicle for the exploration of sensibility, which helps the reader to discover himself. The production is meant to communicate confusion, hesitations and partial perception of fragmented individual experience. At the opening performance, the choreographer was shouting out the moves, since the dancers could hardly hear. The audience may not have understood the big picture, hearing neither the directions nor the music, but they saw the perspiration pour off the dancers' bodies. Modernism brings the viewer close up, immersing us in the surface of things.

6) Finally, Victorians were generally optimistic or at least transcendental. Modernism tended toward pessimism and despair. The favorite settings for modernism are taverns, brothels, or as in Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain*, a hospital where people are dying of a terminal illness. Modernism dwelled on frustration and disappointment- the difficulty

of achieving ambition, fulfilling love and even of communicating. It zeroed in on stress, sweat, on loneliness, alienation and defeat. In its pessimism Modernism was also an ode to primitivism, a call to sacrifice and death, willing to court the prospect of war and leaving open the cultural avenues to fascism.

In June 1929, Diaghilev, with only a month to live, wrote ecstatically that a review in *The Times of London* “declared that ‘the Rite of Spring’ would be for the 20<sup>th</sup> century what Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony was for the 19<sup>th</sup>!” As Beethoven reflected the impact of the great man in history, Napoleon and the sweep of the French Revolution, so too the Rite of Spring invoked the primitive past on the eve of the great collapse. The world war and the Russian revolution that followed immediately created the conditions that spawned fascism: defiant militarism, anti-communism, national humiliation, and a civil war psychosis. The Rite of Spring proclaimed a new modern age where the energy of life and death reached tremendous heights and horrendous depths.