THE HISTORY MAN COMETH


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In reviewing Peter Nicholls’s admirable book Modernisms (Annual, 1996), Philip Head put the question ‘How Many Modernisms Does the World Require?’ In a review of Modernism/Modernity’s ‘Wyndham Lewis Number’ (Annual, 1997), I recommended a distinction between ‘observable practices in twentieth century art-works’ (modernism) and ‘vague’ historical concepts (modernity). Both question and distinction seem relevant to recent books, articles and conferences concerned with literature and the arts in this century. The newer emphasis appears as modernity/modernism: Zeitgeist takes precedence over and ‘explains’ modernist literary practices. Since David Trotter, among other reviewing notables, finds enlightenment in Lawrence Rainey’s Institutions of Modernism (1998), it is worth focusing the issue from Rainey’s Introduction: ‘some readers . . . will find too little of the detailed examination of actual works that is sometimes held to be the only important or worthwhile form of critical activity’ (6) – which may help explain the poverty of his comments on H. D.’s Trilogy. His justification becomes a kind of manifesto: ‘I reject the idea that history or theory are acceptable only if they take on the role of humble handmaiden to the aesthetic artifact’. Leaving the handmaid’s tale aside, it is surely the case that literary history and theory depend on quality appraisal of selected ‘artifacts’ – a matter of aesthetic judgment, which is all too lacking of late. Tyrus Miller’s Late Modernism and Douglas Mao’s Solid Objects have stimulating things to say about both modernism and modern cultural history, but their placement of these within recent modernity is partial and their choice of aesthetic works questionable, even where the appraisal is praise-worthy. The History Man is alive, if less Marxian, and thrives – if only because the detritus of modernity offers rich pickings for the graduate schools.

Miller comments: ‘we write the cultural history of the twentieth century, we spin our stories of artists, writers, thinkers, movements, and the works they conjured into life; and we weave these stories into the larger fabric of social and political history’ (4). Hence, in ‘Theorizing Late Modernism’, he seeks to set ‘the literature of these years in its broad cultural and political context’ (5). Mao writes: ‘It is in . . . the ex-post facto theorizing of modernism that went on from the 1930s to the early 1970s – that we can perhaps best begin to understand what happened to Anglo-American literature in the period mainly under consideration . . . beginning in the 1910s and continuing through the 1950s’ (13). He continues: ‘if the term “postmodernism” is bedeviled
by the conflation of a dominant paradigm with the totality of a period, how much more so is ‘modernism’? Quite so – thus, which artists and works, what historical context, paradigm or period? No commentator, I imagine, would wish to dissolve cultural context into pure aesthetic textuality. However, it matters a great deal which texts are chosen and what is said about them in determining historical placement – whether with the help of Adorno or Benjamin or Habermas or Jameson or Baudrillard... or old Uncle Tom Cobley. Miller focuses on texts by Lewis, Djuna Barnes, Beckett and Loy; Mao on texts by Woolf, Lewis, Pound and Wallace Stevens. The selection of the texts, and the appraisal of them determine, to a considerable extent, what might satisfy the History Man as to period and theorisation.

Miller’s late modernism, for instance, becomes distinct from, say, ‘neo-modernism’, ‘thirties’ writing’ or ‘postmodernism’ because his chosen texts manifest ‘seven major areas of continuity’ (62) to demonstrate a ‘general depersonalization and deauthencication of life in modern society’ (42). But suppose he had chosen texts by later Dorothy Richardson, Louis MacNeice, Orwell or early Dylan Thomas – would the seven ‘areas’ hold and evidence a similar ‘life in modern society’? Or suppose he had retained the suggestive slogan ‘late modernism’ but used it to describe later texts – Malcolm Lowry’s Under the Volcano (1947), David Jones’s The Anathemata (1952), Basil Bunting’s Briggflatts (1966) or (even) Geoffrey Hill’s The Triumph of Love (1998) ... ? By the same token, Mao’s modernist object-angst looks rather different if one cites Conrad’s Heart of Darkness (‘We shall have rivets!’), Lawrence’s The Rainbow, H.D.’s early Imagism or Forster’s Passage to India. Virginia Woolf’s ‘alluring fragments of china, odd pieces of scrap iron, and similar treasures’ (26) appear less than exemplary in such expanded company, and Mao’s ambitious attempt to yoke together subject–object binarism, commodification, imperialism and artist-as-producer takes on a different complexion. In general, the type of modernity and the kind of modernism suggested become determined by the specific “aesthetic artifacts” discussed.

Part of the problem, no doubt, is inherent in the nature of the contemporary academic monograph. There are already dozens of books on modernism and an infinity of books on the period loosely denominated as modernity. So the project becomes the selection of a new angle, the choice of a ‘sound-bite’ title to encapsulate it, the careful arrangement of relevant evidence and the deployment of systematic rhetorical emphasis in support. Such thesis-elaboration inevitably invites overall scepticism – was modernism preoccupied with a neo-Coleridgean agon (Carlyle’s evoked ‘sumjed ... omjed’ mumbling on Highgate Hill)? Or was there a ‘late’ modernism – if so, is this it? It is surely a modernist perception that ‘Gutenberg’ discourse is deceptive, best subverted by deconstructive fragmentation or parody. Yet the dissertation-mode still rules the academy, whether in literary history, philosophy or science, and our publishers oblige. What might be hoped for from Miller and Mao is somewhat more rehearsal of alternative scenarios to the modernity–modernism theses they propound.

Nevertheless, both books give fitting prominence to Wyndham Lewis’s work – further evidence of a general revaluation after decades of comparative neglect. Miller, for instance, indicates how ‘Lewis’s comprehensive writing practice embraces several registers and rhetorics, from publicistic harangues and popular journalism to highly erudite discussions of literature, art, and philosophy’ (68). And he ‘discerns in the development of Lewis’s work over the twenties and early thirties a decisive rethinking of the social and political role of the category of form, a category central to the aesthetic ideology of modernism’ (84). He notes Lewis’s satirical portrayal of ‘a happy suburbanism ... shockingly near the mark of the early consumer society of the 1950s

43
and 1960s’ (107). Mao, similarly, writes of ‘the characteristically counterintuitive vigor of a Lewis instigation’ (90); he suggests Lewis was ‘perhaps, modernism’s premier analyst of... ideological tropes’ (100); and he avers, with respect to issues of ‘postcolonialism’, that ‘Lewis’s writing on these matters [was] more instructive rather than less, an important addition to our understanding of the transactions between modernism and empire’ (103). Lewisians will want to read for themselves what these books have to say about Lewis’s centrality.

Miller takes Lewis’s ironism as a key to late modernism. He quotes from _Men without Art_, ‘I am a satirist... I am not a moralist’ (46). He sees the Great War as the experience that provoked in Lewis a sense of the insignificance of individuals and of the mechanical absurdity of bodies. The way to convey this was through a grotesque provocative of wry laughter. Of course, essays like ‘Our Wild Body’ and ‘Inferior Religions’ were not post-war writings; and Lewis’s deployment of externality, irony and hardness (close to T. E. Hulme’s ideas about art) were present from the beginning of his career. However, Miller sees his post-war ‘disinterment’ as decisive in strengthening these tendencies, and as a turning point in the aesthetic mastery of classic modernism. The problem with the latter scenario is that ironic reductionism had always been a major modernist characteristic—Hulme’s poems of ‘wit’, Pound’s ‘Hugh Selwyn Mauberley’, Eliot’s Sweeney quatrains, Joyce’s satiric parody or Woolf’s bitter caricature (Holmes and Bradshaw in _Mrs Dalloway_). Indeed, Lewis’s ironic method could well be seen as an instance of early modernism, before the ‘interior’ style began to prevail. Miller emphasises a somewhat suppressed strand in general modernism but allows his internal History Man to periodise this in a way that is, at the least, contentious.

Bearing in mind Lewis’s later comment on Vorticism, one could almost say that Miller’s late modernism amounts to what _Lewis was doing_, and its wider literary aftermath. For Miller, the key year is 1926; ‘Lewis identifies his “rebirth” with a key event of mass politics, the failed General Strike, which at once expressed the moribund nature of British social institutions and revealed the unreadiness of labor to offer an alternative’ (70). Lewis’s move entailed a rejection of ‘the modernist politics of form’ (86), a ‘restoration of narrative’ (70) and an appropriation of the tropes of emerging ‘media technologies’ (106), culminating in _The Childermass_ (1928) and _The Apes of God_ (1930), where ‘Lewis tears to pieces the modernist text’s organic unity of form and content and presents his own book as a tottering machine assembled out of the wreckage of modernist literature’ (114). Most persuasive here is Lewis’s invention of ‘pseudodialogue’, suggestively connected to the Sitwells’ use of a megaphone in _Façade_ and the development of the ‘Vitaphone process’, and its foreshadowing (as other have noticed) of Beckett’s fatuous verbal routines. Thus is exemplified a ‘deauthenticated world’ (62), the cult of ‘mirthless laughter’ (63—Beckett’s phrase) and the ‘grotesque representation’ (64) which the previous argument has suggested as the norm in the _entre deux guerres_ years.

Miller then proceeds to examine texts by Djuna Barnes (an associate of Beckett), especially the extraordinary _Nightwood_ (1936). He undermines the intent of Eliot’s well-known ‘Preface’ to argue that ‘Barnes’s whole literary corpus’ has ‘a certain “positionless” quality, its generic and categorial uncertainty and its correlative unsettling of literary historical oppositions like modernism and postmodernism’ (124). Barnes, like Lewis, is involved in puppetry (but then so was Thackeray), and is given a place by Miller in what might be termed Prosthetics plc. He proceeds to find analogies, in the next chapter, between Lewis and Beckett, and he convincingly establishes a Lewis–Beckett link with reference to the Russian clowns Bim and Bom. The character Watt is seen to succumb to a ‘loss of autonomy’ similar to that in Lewis’s Pullman and
Satters. Finally, Miller rather tacks on an Epilogue on Mina Loy’s *Insel* — a book scarcely strong enough to illustrate the untenability of the ‘modernist artist-novel’. Overall, the latter half of *Late Modernism* casts some interesting light on *Nighthood, More Kicks Than Pricks* and *Murphy*, in particular. But the source of that light comes largely from ‘windhame’s icingglass’ (*Finnegans Wake*).

Mao’s *Solid Objects* gets under way with a quite thorough consideration of Virginia Woolf’s treatment of things and thingness before developing into a discussion of Lewis’s contrastive treatment. Mao acknowledges the trickiness of Lewis’s work: ‘This . . . strange assortment of negations . . . invites us to consider . . . how Lewis could hold such apparently antithetical positions simultaneously’ (99), and he avoids ‘imputing noxiousness’ by suggesting that ‘“Lewis’s right-wing politics” is more a mythical distillation of contradictory impulses than an entity with real explanatory value’ (*Ibid*). However, he oddly comments that ‘in Lewis’s scene the reader is not an experiencing subject but rather an archetypal object’ — a remark that the tone of his own quotation from Lewis refutes. Altogether, Mao’s apparent penchant for an ‘existentialist’ metaphysic triumphs over his awareness of Lewis as comic satirist. Why, after all, should Lewis ‘offer a resolution to existential crisis’ (137)? Eventually Mao confers a balance of interests — Lewis avoids a scenario ‘in which the subject (or the will, or the self) would congeal into an object or the object dissolve into the subject’, for Lewis would wish both to ‘remain side by side, each in its proper repose’ (139).

In pursuit of this, Lewis employs ‘the comic view’ (137). This is illustrated by Lewis’s witty exposition of Schopenhauer’s idea of Will:

It produces Charlie Chaplin, the League of Nations, wireless, feminism, Rockefeller; it causes daily, millions of women to drift in front of, and swarm inside, gigantic clothes-shops in every great capital, buying silk underwear, cloche-hats, perfumes, vanishing cream, vanity-bags and furs . . . . (quoted on 133)

This is satirically irrefutable in a way the coopted ‘analyses’ of Georg Simmel or Walter Benjamin are not. And it is surely the most arresting way to cast light on the Bloomsbury cult of the object in terms of ‘colour-matching, match-box-making, dressmaking, chair-painting’ (*The Caliph’s Design*, quoted on 90). Mao has a point that Lewis was himself involved in this sort of thing (the Omega and Rebel Art Centre days) — but surely as a means of scraping a living rather than as a committed project. Mao suggests that Lewis shared some assumptions with Woolf, and was involved in a general modernist ambivalence about economic production. And he does well in encapsulating Lewis’s predominant binary schema: ‘rigid, massive, sculpture, shell, cold, polished, resistant, surface, external: dark, unconscious, mist, intestinal, billowing, subterranean, passion’ and ‘stream’ (97) — close, in fact, to the tension in Pound’s *Cantos* between ‘marble’ and ‘ooze’. However, Mao’s drift seems to be in search of an elusive Lewisian ‘philosophy’, defining ‘what the human project is’ (134). He appears happier with the world of Heidegger and Sartre (he is persuasive about a Woolf-Sartre connection) than in the realm of a Swift or a Rowlandson.

The overall architecture of Mao’s book becomes consolidated in substantial studies of Pound and Stevens (with sufficient reference to William Carlos Williams to make one wonder why the outworking of Williams’s key perception — ‘no ideas but in things’ — did not deserve a chapter to itself). Where Miller’s book rather peters out with Loy, *Solid Objects* is a solid text overall, with
some graceful writing. Woolf is seen to demonstrate ‘the young century’s faith in new making (and making new)” (89), Lewis to probe ‘sheer alterity’ (139), Pound to exemplify ‘the guilt of production’ (192) and Stevens to manifest ‘the object world in its modernist moment, a moment of transition from power and inexhaustibility to fragility and diminishment’ (259). Of course, the word ‘moment’ rather betrays the History Man’s passion for that-was-the-year-that-was simplification.

Both these books, then, are situated within a New Historicism whose tendency is to make modernism somehow conformable to an evoked modernity. Their motto might be ‘always historicize!’ This implies that recent modern history is something we can generally agree about – a dubious idea. Yet both Miller and Mao are more tentative than some other commentators. Fredric Jameson, for instance, seems to embody the History Man’s insider knowledge – quite clear about the dynamics of ‘Late Capitalism’ even if he cannot always get his ‘artifacts’ in place (finding ‘unique’ in Doctorow’s Ragtime what was evident in Dos Passos’s USA). While in Rainey’s Institutions some truly fascinating research into the selling of Ulysses and The Waste Land is marred by quasi-sociological rhetoric about ‘cultural production’, such that ‘institutionalization’ is conferred on Pound’s brief use of 34 Queen Anne’s Gate for some lectures on Provençal poetry. Yet even Miller and Mao, I think, allow too much to the History Man’s modernity: the former depicts Auden’s ‘low dishonest decade’ as disintegrative of modernist aesthetics (which missed the notice of a Lowry or a David Jones); the latter rather etches into modernism a subject–object dichotomy more familiar in the Romantics, and highlights it into a modern anxiety of affluence.

In both cases, the History Man’s cause-and-effect prevails when we might now expect the Ecologist’s sense of interactive multirelationality. Peter Conrad’s monumental tome Modern Times: Modern Places (1998) suggests how literature-in-history might now be negotiated, through chapter headings which owe more to icon-selector than printing-press elaboration – ‘Zaum’, ‘Vessels and Voids’, ‘Spring, Sacred and Profane’, ‘Amériques, Amerika’, Admass’, ‘Others’, ‘Keep Going’ . . . This, I suggest, is more in the spirit of Blast and The Apes of God (if not of Time and Western Man). All the same, both Miller and Mao get one big thing right – Wyndham Lewis is central to debates about modernism and modernity in the (‘late’) twentieth century.