



SOME CULTURAL FORCES DRIVING LITERARY MODERNISM

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"on or about December 1910 human character changed." -- Virginia Woolf, "Character in Fiction"

Some of the major issues to which twentieth century literature responded in ways generally known as "Modernism" are:

1) a sense of the loss of 'ontological ground', i.e., a loss of confidence that there exists a reliable, knowable ground of value and identity. A combination of factors contributed to this including:

- the challenges to 19th century science and its confidence in its ability to explain the universe;
- industrialization and the consequent displacement of persons from their previous physical and psychic groundings;
- the association of Christianity with capitalism, and with an oppressive often hypocritical moralism;
- the critical historical study of biblical texts and the consequent challenge to revelation;
- the popularization of evolutionary theory;
- a growing awareness of a variety of cultures which had differing but cogent world-views;
- changes in philosophical thought which suggested that 'reality' was an internal and changeable, not an externally validated, concept, and that what is considered 'real' is based on the desire for power, not on any objective warrant.

("Ontology" is the study of what 'being' is; it is always accompanied by epistemological issues, that is, of questions how we know and what it is to know. Ontological ground is then that which gives us a sense of the surety of being itself.)

2) a sense that our culture has lost its bearings, that there is no center, no cogency, that there is a collapse of values or a bankruptcy [interesting metaphor] of values. As Yeats wrote in "The Second Coming", "Things fall apart ; the centre cannot hold;/ Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world."

3) this loss of faith in a moral center and moral direction is based both in the general loss of a sense of sure ontological ground, and in an equally important recognition that the traditional values have, after all, led only to a horrid war, industrial squalor, the breakdown of traditional rural society, exploitation of other cultures and races, and a society built on power and greed. W.W.I was a gruesome wake-up call.

4) a shift in paradigms [models of how the world works] from the closed, finite, measurable, cause-and-effect universe of 19th century science to an open, relativistic, changing, strange universe, and a (related) shift from an evolutionary, developmental model to a structural, surface/depth model: pretext becomes subtext. Einstein was a *modernist* thinker.

5) the locus of judgment moves from the traditional sites -- consensus, social authority and textual authority -- to individual judgment and phenomenological [lived experience] validation, hence to the locating of meaning (and, in a sense, 'truth') in individual experience.

6) the development of studies and ideas which have as their focus the nature and functioning of the individual: the discipline of psychology; psychotherapy; a growing democratization in politics; in aesthetics, movements such as impressionism and cubism which focus on the process of perception.

7) a discovery that the forces governing behaviour, and particularly the most powerful and formative ones, are hidden: this in the realms of psychology, economics, politics -- Marx, Freud, Nietzsche, etc. This leads to the search for underlying, hidden structures, operational laws and so forth, which motivate behaviour and govern phenomena (structuralism).

8) a move to the mystical and the symbolic as ways of recovering a sense of the holy in experience and of recreating a sustainable ontological ground -- Yeats and the development of symbolic thought, Jung and the concept of universal archetypes, Lawrence with his notions of the creative mystery and blood knowledge, Madame Blavatsky and the Society of the Golden Dawn, Underhill's *Mysticism*, Otto's explorations of the nature of the sacred, and so forth.

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