

Literary Modes of Modernism: Aesthetic Styles as Reflection of Philosophical Worldview

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The trend of ‘-isms’ is perhaps the most prominent in modernism. The profuse art movements of the early twentieth century seem to carry the unruly modernist spirit of breaking away from the contemporary trends of naturalism and also from what the modernists saw as Victorian poetic smugness. But to call them “unruly” would be an error. Because despite being antibourgeois, modernist movement in art was “the culmination of the weakest tendency of the bourgeois epoch” in its attempt to find stability at a level of abstraction removed from society. (Williams, “Forms” 81)

The modernists had an acute consciousness of reacting to an unprecedented historical situation. Raymond Williams sees the development of metropolis as the historical line along which the history of art comes to modernism (“Metropolitan Perceptions” 39). The Romantic subject constituted its subjectivity in opposition with nature and tried to overcome the subject-object dichotomy with metaphors and pathetic fallacy. The modernist consciousness made the dichotomy its subject matter. The new sense of acute alienation produced by an even more technologically advanced urban world seized the artistic minds of the day. The modernists felt a disjunction in the pace of the development of aesthetic forms and material history. Hence, modernism is best understood as a self-conscious ideological movement, rather than a historical one, which sought to interpret the new world and develop aesthetic forms suited to give voice to the new consciousness.

The philosophers as well as the artists of the age were grappling with the flimsiness of the machine world around them. The literary modes of modernism can be seen as an aesthetic response to the same anxiety which backed the philosophic worldview of the time. Here it will be useful to see this philosophic worldview closely.

It is curious that a scientist should stand among the philosophers who catalyzed the spiritual shift of the industrial age. But Darwin with his theory of evolution and natural selection succeeded in removing ‘man’ from the pedestal where Pico della Mirandola made him stand during the Renaissance.

This biological determinism found its social counterpart in Marx’s theory of historical determinism. It instilled a sense of individual helplessness against historical forces. But while Marx gave the model of socialism to bring structural change by working *with* the historical forces, fascism also found several takers among modernists, who preferred going back to the security of the ‘aristocratic’ idyll.

The growing sense of alienation had philosophical ramifications. The uncertainty in the face of the rapid urban development shook the grounds of faith causing crisis in one’s deeper

understanding of his/her place in the universe, or existence. The age grappled with the grim echoes of Nietzsche's short sentence— "God is dead". But the hopeful ones of the age looked positively towards Kierkegaard's idea of "leap of faith" by accepting the crisis and moving beyond ethics and aesthetics, confounding the two.

This focus on one's own state of *being*, or rather *becoming*, ensured that individualism and subjectivism became two strong waves that swept through the time. These received their part-scientific nod from Freud's theory of the unconscious which affirmed the uniqueness of mental makeup of each person. Faltering on the danger line of solipsism, the modernists realized the disturbing truth of the statement made by Conrad's protagonist, Marlow: "We live, as we dream— alone". (Conrad 31)

Carl Jung's concept of the "collective unconscious" can be seen as a major motif of modernist literature which tries to find in the Greek and Roman mythology the archetypal symbols that unite humans with what is essential and eternal underneath the superficial trappings of the modern age in an attempt for "an effective restoration of a metaphysical dimension". (Williams, "Forms" 80).

Existential philosophy moved beyond Enlightenment in looking past the thinking ability as the starting point for metaphysical concerns. It placed at the centre the whole individual, living, feeling, and thinking, surrounded by the absurd world. The "existential attitude" also found the traditional philosophy with its faith in empiricism and rationality as untrue to the concrete experiences of life. The *being* can be defined, but the *becoming* can only be fleetingly captured. Grappling with the state of *becoming* was a major concern of the modernists. Experience and consciousness came further under direct observation through Edmund Husserl's series of papers published on phenomenology from 1913-1930. Phenomenology, as opposed to being a doctrine, was defined as a style of thought that placed the focus on exploring experience and contents of consciousness like perception, memory and signification.

Henri Bergson revolutionized the way one could think of the inner life of a person. The idea that time is measurable assumes that time is immobile and can be grasped in a linear way. This, however, is how science understands time. Time, in the experience of an individual, is in the form of "duration" which one grasps neither as a unity, nor as quantitative multiplicity which can be added up for a sum of whole. One's experiences are always qualitatively heterogeneous and hence incomplete and are only inadequately expressible through a symbol. Thus, consciousness remains an ongoing flux. An example of this interplay of subjective space-time matrix and scientific time is the hourly chiming of the Big Ben in *Mrs Dalloway* while Clarissa goes about her day, reminiscing her childhood as well as youth.

In his essay, "An Introduction to Metaphysics", Bergson gives the example of reconstructing Paris through the combination of several sketches made from different focal angles. And yet the images put together can never come close to the actual experience or the total impression of what Paris is like. Only one who has experienced Paris can approximate the original experience because the sketches are not "real parts" but "mere notes" (28). Intuition, for Bergson, is the way one can know an object absolutely as opposed to 'analysis' which can enable us to know only relatively. In contradiction to the Kantian idea that objective reality can never be grasped and the world can never be known in itself, but as it appears to us, Bergson says that with the help of intuition, one can rise above the multiple limited perceptions and see them as interpretations of the same thing, hence, reach the absolute.

The composite of all these philosophical perspectives reflects the subjective space of a modernist individual, to give voice to which, language itself needed to undergo change. The change at the level of semantics must alter the syntax. Apart from the foregrounding of the subjective self, one has to grapple with the inability to completely grasp one's own truth, complicated as it is by one's own unconscious. Hence, language for the modernists has to resemble brushstrokes (or like "mere *notes*"), assembling the 'truth' the writer wants to convey, rather than claiming to be seamless.

Away from the lengthy descriptions of houses and landscapes that Woolf so vehemently complains about in Arnold Bennett's writing, modernist writing moved increasingly towards interiority. In her essay 'Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown', Woolf dared to make two bold assertions: one, "everyone...is a judge of character"; two, "in or about December, 1910, human character changed" (251). With this she brought attention to the microcosmic world within each person, and made it the appropriate subject matter for literary works. She further differentiates between the real and the life-like: life of the mind is the only real one, and life-like portraits do not achieve anything of importance. Thus, realism, which is life-like, fails to capture the *real* matter.

A good example to see the shift in style would be Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*. Campbell writes, "The Victorian novel had focused on the container to which individuals must accommodate themselves: middle class society, its institutions and constructs." In a noticeable shift, in *Sons and Lovers*, Lawrence "shifts the narrative frame of the novel from the social container to the thing contained, the individuals who create society and give it life." (117) No longer can we see a city from the omniscient narrator's point of view, but through the eyes of one character or another. The writer writes with the faith in his ability to evoke a Bergsonian intuition in the reader.

Modernist fiction also found an adequate aesthetic technique in the method of impressionism. In painting, the style is achieved by using visible brush strokes which merge into one another, so that there is no clear demarcation of objects, and the effect of light adds the dimension of time and change in the painting. Also, the scene is captured from unusual angles of view. In literary works, impressionism works through the focus of the narrative being centred upon the perceptions of the character(s). For example, Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* tells the story from the 'impressionistic' viewpoint of Marlow. He declares, "It is impossible to convey the life-sensation of any given epoch of one's existence—that which makes its truth, its meaning—its subtle and penetrating essence" (30). The narrator says of Marlow's style of storytelling, that the meaning of his story is in the misty halo around it, not in the kernel. The same can be said of Conrad's style of approximating the life-sensation, and leaving the meaning to be deciphered later on, a method named as 'Delayed Decoding' by Cedric Watts. The "horror" of Kurtz, which forms the kernel of the novel is enveloped in darkness and is never spelled out.

The literary style even closer to Bergsonian notion of time, space and intuition is stream of consciousness. A literary counterpart to Bergson's example of sketches of Paris would be the airplane episode in *Mrs Dalloway* where each character looks at the plane and sees it differently. Readers can attempt to grasp the fictional moment in its completeness by assembling the snippets with faith in Aristotle's idea that "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts." The language is also broken down to achieve the effect of the flux of thoughts and prompts from the unconscious. Sentences are sometimes rhythmic, with parenthesis, dashes and semicolons, to imitate the rawness of thought and feeling.

In the early twentieth century the literary market was captured by novels, which had become the symbol of bourgeois class literature. The space for poetry was encroached by

advertising, music, and photography. Poetry was published alongside the jokes, puzzles and cartoon sections of the newspaper back pages. (Brinkman 25)

The modernist poets laid a special emphasis on not just revamping the poetic style, but also on pedestalizing poetry as a genre, a primary agenda of Pound's *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*. Owing to the serious preoccupation with finding a suitable style of articulation for the new consciousness, the poetry of this period has a recurring theme of self-reflexivity. Howard Nemerov considered 250 poems by 121 poets written since the fourteenth century on the theme of creating poetry and what poetry should be, and found that half are by twentieth century poets (34). Each *Quartet* of Eliot devotes some lines to the theme of struggling with language, Pound diligently grinded a modernist language, even editing the poems of his modernist poet friends, and Wallace Stevens, according to Nemerov, may be said to have made it his subject matter, albeit with exaggeration (37).

Content and form, the two poles between which poetry moves, found its transformation in the modernist period in Imagism and free verse. Following the trend of visual arts where the artists try to evoke the landscape as it pressed upon his being, in poetry too, the aim of Pound's Imagism was to not be too "viewy" and skip verbose writing, and present the thoughts with least contamination of excessive words ("Few Don'ts" 96). No sweeps of philosophical revelations or sentimentalism, according to him, qualified for good poetry. The idea was to let poetry create a clamour in the unconscious, and come flowing down the stanza in a manner which is raw, powerful, magnetizing and exhilarating. Pound said that Imagism is not a precursor to Surrealism but the founder of the aesthetic mode that we associate with the latter. By calling 'image' as the "primary pigment of poetry", Pound laid the basis of poetry as "evocative" rather than "descriptive". Archibald MacLeish's poem 'Ars Poetica' would be a good example of the Imagist goals of modernist poetry. He relies on a number of images to explain what a poem should be like, for example, "A poem should be wordless/As the flight of birds," summing up quite effectively, by saying that, "A poem should not mean/But be."

Much of the discussion on free verse began around Imagism. John Livingston Lowes in *Convention and Revolt in Poetry* (1919) spoke of free verse as a serious attempt to readjust the relations of content and form in poetry. He saw free verse as being in a "No Man's Land" between regular verse and prose. He also equated Imagism with free verse.

Affectation in poetry, such as the use of hyphenated double adjectives, or inserting an adjective to balance the metronomic structure of the poem, was discarded as a bygone style. Free verse, as the name suggests, has no set rules. However, more than metrical verse, free verse poetry requires vividness in its pictorial evocations and a succinct phrasing. Chopping up of lines, enjambment, irregular stanza size, and cadence become the formal devices.

The peculiarity of free verse was that it was at once old and new. Milton wrote his *Paradise Lost* in blank verse, Shakespeare also wrote his memorable monologues in the same. Free verse goes a step ahead in breaking the regularity of the metrical pattern. Rhyme made an exception, becomes a tool for accentuating themes of fragmentation in an otherwise non-rhyming poem. Taking prose as the style, the idea was to introduce rhythm strategically to create music. Jeopardizing the metre opens new philosophical vistas, as it releases the poetic power that resides in the thought itself, in its rawness and unevenness. The poetry written in free verse is not a statue cast in a pre-designed mold.

Though begrudging against Walt Whitman, Pound accepted his innovative technique of free verse. In America, free verse became a poetic counterpart for rising individualism and unique

personal imprint. Different poets gave different spins to free verse. American Imagist poet Amy Lowell came up with a form of free verse based upon “unrhymed cadence” and “organic rhythm” which had the words flowing according to the breathing pattern rather than metrical patterns. T.S. Eliot made the metrical structure of his poems more complex using it as a tool for highlighting the content thematically. For example, in the poem ‘A Love Song for J. Alfred Prufrock’, he uses a mixture of rhymed couplet, blank verse and unrhymed verse to develop music according to the mood of the lines. This is in conjunction with his views on free verse published in March 3, 1917, in *The New Statesman* (London) that “vers libre does not exist, for there is only good verse, bad verse, and chaos.”

The form of free verse, especially in America, became the register for political and economic liberalism. It stood for the radical and the unconventional, going as far as being associated with free love. (Warfel 232) While Whitman made this poetic association in a celebratory spirit in *Song of Myself*, the same radicalism of free verse gave itself a stigma in America, where a number of more conservative poets and writers denounced this flourishing avant-garde bohemianism for its radicalism and saw it as a threatening force. The centre of this bohemian culture was the New York City, which after the World War I also became the site of the Harlem Renaissance.

In the beginning of the new century, the electrical bling could not quite show the way through the smog which seemed to envelop the future. What modernism dealt with were the rapidly sliding faces of the world. At the level of thought, modernism observed the growth of a new consciousness and tried to give it a comprehensible artistic expression.

The ‘new’ of modernism can be assessed only when it is seen in the light of what the modernists themselves saw as the eternal in the classics. Modernists yearned for the Hellenic ideal, making frequent references to Greek and Roman myths. But the fragmentary language and fractured sense of self in the literary subjects were reminders that the human civilization could never go back to the classical glory.

Another ideological thrust of the time which impressed upon the modernist aesthetics was that of making a science out of arts. Consequently, we witness the influence of Russian formalism on modernist art criticism. Modernist writers and poets were concerned not just with developing new aesthetic forms but also with the way their works were read and received. For example, the full appreciation of Pound’s Imagism happens when one considers it in the light of his praise for Fenollosa’s ‘Essay on the Chinese Written Character’ which he regards as “the first definite assertion of the applicability of scientific method to literary criticism” (ABC 18). Pound prefers the scientist’s method of direct observation of the concrete object and derides the habit of losing oneself into abstract entities while trying to philosophize. This is the principle upon which Imagism as a style is also founded and calls for a similar reading style.

The new aesthetics had to be self-promoting (which explains the rhetorical force of Pound and Eliot when they write *about* poetry). The restlessness to keep renewing the forms and not let the aesthetic innovations become orthodoxies led to the birth of several schools such as the Imagists, Surrealists, Vorticists, Constructivists, Futurists, Formalists, Cubists, and Expressionists. This modernist experimentation with aesthetic styles also indicates how aesthetics are a major component in bringing out various semantic interpretations: *what is said* depends directly on the component of *how it is said*. Extending this argument, we can conclude that certain aesthetic forms can only be developed in a certain phase of history, because aesthetics are not simply a matter of style left to the personal preference of an author. New aesthetic forms are developed when artists find the older ones failing to be suitable carriers for the contents of their perception.

The common veins through all these ‘-isms’ are an unprecedented push towards establishing the primacy of the unconscious and the belief that meaning can be arrived at only through subjectivism. Also noticeable in all these movements is the desire to *shock* the reader or observer and to give them unexpected combinations to chew on. With such a self-conscious manner of drawing attention to the aesthetics at work, these artists were able to establish the elitism of the literary class. At the same time, these are also the artistic modes designed to capture the remaining hope for unity, albeit aesthetic, in the modern world.

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