Raymond Williams

When Was Modernism?

{This lecture was given on 17 March 1987 at the University of Bristol, as one of an annual series founded by a former student at the University and subsequent benefactor. The version printed here is reconstructed from my brief notes and Raymond's even briefer ones. Although he spoke on that occasion in unhesitating, delicate and sinewy prose—the unmistakable and, where necessary, rousing Williams style—his notes are merely composed of jottings and very broad headings ('Metropolis', 'Exiles', '1840s', '1900–1930' etc.). Down the lefthand margin are timings in ten-minute intervals: he finished according to plan exactly at fifty minutes. I cannot hope to have caught Raymond's voice accurately, but the trenchancy and relevance of one of his last public lectures are not in doubt. Postmodernism for him was a strictly ideological compound from an enemy formation, and long in need of this authoritative rebuttal. This was a lecture by the 'Welsh European' given against a currently dominant international ideology.

Fred Inglis}

My title is borrowed from a book by my friend Professor Gwyn Williams: *When Was Wales?* That was a historical questioning of a problematic history. My own inquiry is a historical questioning of what is, in very different ways, a problem, but also a dominant and misleading ideology. 'Modern' began to appear as a term more or less synonymous with 'now' in the late sixteenth century, and in any case used to mark the period off from medieval *and* ancient times. By the time Jane Austen was using it with a characteristically qualified inflection, she could define it (in *Persuasion*) as 'a state of alteration, perhaps of improvement', but her eighteenth-century contemporaries used 'modernize', 'modernism' and 'modernist', without her irony, to indicate updating and improvement. In the nineteenth century it began to take on a more favourable and progressive ring: Ruskin's *Modern Painters* was published in 1846, and Turner became the type of modern painter for his demonstration of the distinctively up-to-date quality of truth-to-nature. Very quickly, however, 'modern' shifted its reference from 'now' to 'just now' or even 'then', and for some time has been a designation always going into the past with which 'contemporary' may be contrasted for its presentness. 'Modernism', as a title for a whole cultural movement and moment, has been retrospective as a general term since the 1950s, thereby stranding the dominant version of 'modern' or even 'absolute modern' between, say, 1890 and

1940. We still habitually use 'modern' of a world between a century and half-a-century old. When we note that in English at least (French usage still retaining some of the meaning for which the term was coined) 'avant-garde' may be indifferently used to refer to Dadaism seventy years after the event or to recent fringe theatre, the confusion both willed and involuntary which leaves our own deadly separate era in anonymity becomes less an intellectual problem and more an ideological perspective. By its point of view, all that is left to us is to become post-moderns.

Determining the process which fixed the moment of modernism is a matter, as so often, of identifying the machinery of selective tradition. If we follow the Romantics' victorious definition of the arts as outriders, heralds, and witnesses of social change, then we may ask why the extraordinary innovations in social realism, the metaphoric control and economy of seeing discovered and refined by Gogol, Flaubert or Dickens from the 1840s on, should not take precedence over the conventionally modernist names of Proust, Kafka or Joyce. The earlier novelists, it is widely acknowledged, make the later work possible; without Dickens, no Joyce. But in excluding the great realists, this version of modernism refuses to see how they devised and organized a whole vocabulary and its structure of figures of speech with which to grasp the unprecedented social forms of the industrial city. By the same token, the Impressionists in the 1860s also defined a new vision and a technique to match in their painting of modern Parisian life, but it is of course only the post-Impressionists and the Cubists who are situated in the tradition.

The same questions can be put to the rest of the literary canon and the answers will seem as arbitrary: the Symbolist poets of the 1880s are superannuated by the Imagists, Surrealists, Futurists, Formalists and others from 1910 onwards. In drama, Ibsen and Strindberg are left behind, and Brecht dominates the period from 1920 to 1950. In each of these oppositions the late-born ideology of modernism selects the later group. In doing so, it aligns the later writers and painters with Freud's discoveries and imputes to them a view of the primacy of the subconscious or unconscious as well as, in both writing and painting, a radical questioning of the processes of representation. The writers are applauded for their denaturalizing of language, their break with the allegedly prior view that language is either a clear, transparent glass or a mirror, and for their making abruptly apparent in the texture of narrative the problematic status of the author and his authority. As the author appears in the text, so does the painter in the painting. The self-reflexive text assumes the centre of the public and aesthetic stage, and in doing so declaratively repudiates the fixed forms, the settled cultural authority of the academies and their bourgeois taste, and the very necessity of market popularity (such as Dickens's or Manet's).

A Selective Appropriation

These are indeed the theoretic contours and specific authors of 'modernism', a highly selected version of the modern which then

offers to appropriate the whole of modernity. We have only to review the names in the real history to see the open ideologizing which permits the selection. At the same time, there is unquestionably a series of breaks in all arts in the late nineteenth century, breaks with forms (the three-decker novel disappears) and with power, especially as manifested in bourgeois censorship—the artist becomes a dandy or an anti-commercial radical, sometimes both.

Any explanation of these changes and their ideological consequences must start from the fact that the late nineteenth century was the occasion for the greatest changes ever seen in the media of cultural production. Photography, cinema, radio, television reproduction and recording all make their decisive advances during the period identified as modernist, and it is in response to these that there arise what in the first instance were formed as defensive cultural groupings, rapidly if partially becoming competitively self-promoting. The 1890s were the earliest moment of the movements, the moment at which the manifesto (in the new magazine) became the badge of self-conscious and self-advertising schools. Futurists, Imagists, Surrealists, Cubists, Vorticists, Formalists and Constructivists all variously announced their arrival with a passionate and scornful vision of the new, and as quickly became fissiparous, friendships breaking across the heresies required in order to prevent innovations becoming fixed as orthodoxies.

The movements are the products, at the first historical level, of changes in public media. These media, the technological investment which mobilized them and the cultural forms which both directed the investment and expressed its preoccupations, arose in the new metropolitan cities, the centres of the also new imperialism, which offered themselves as transnational capitals of an art without frontiers. Paris, Vienna, Berlin, London, New York took on a new silhouette as the eponymous City of Strangers, the most appropriate locale for art made by the restlessly mobile emigré or exile, the internationally anti-bourgeois artist. From Apollinaire and Joyce to Beckett and Ionesco, writers were continuously moving to Paris, Vienna and Berlin, meeting there exiles from the Revolution coming the other way, bringing with them the manifestos of post-revolutionary formation.

Such endless border-crossing at a time when frontiers were starting to become much more strictly policed and when, with the First World War, the passport was instituted, worked to naturalize the thesis of the *non*-natural status of language. The experience of visual and linguistic strangeness, the broken narrative of the journey and its inevitable accompaniment of transient encounters with characters whose self-presentation was bafflingly unfamiliar raised to the level of universal myth this intense, singular narrative of unsettlement, homelessness, solitude and impoverished independence: the lonely writer gazing down on the unknowable city from his shabby apartment. The whole commotion is finally and crucially interpreted and ratified by the City of Emigrés and Exiles itself, New York.

But this version of modernism cannot be seen and grasped in a unified

way, whatever the likenesses of its imagery. Modernism thus defined *divides* politically and simply—and not just between specific movements but even *within* them. In remaining anti-bourgeois, its representatives either choose the formerly aristocratic valuation of art as a sacred realm above money and commerce, or the revolutionary doctrines, promulgated since 1848, of art as the liberating vanguard of popular consciousness. Mayakovsky, Picasso, Silone, Brecht are only some examples of those who moved into direct support of communism, and D'Annunzio, Marinetti, Wyndham Lewis, Ezra Pound of those who moved towards fascism, leaving Eliot and Yeats in Britain and Ireland to make their muffled, nuanced treaty with Anglo-Catholicism and the celtic twilight.

After modernism is canonized, however, by the post-war settlement and its complicit academic endorsements, the presumption arises that since modernism is here, in this specific phase or period, there is nothing beyond it. The marginal or rejected artists become classics of organized teaching and of travelling exhibitions in the great galleries of the metropolitan cities. 'Modernism' is confined to this highly selective field and denied to everything else in an act of pure ideology, whose first, unconscious irony is that, absurdly, it stops history dead. Modernism being the terminus, everything afterwards is counted out of development. It is *after*; stuck in the past.

The Artistic Relations of Production

The ideological victory of this selection is no doubt to be explained by the relations of production of the artists themselves in the centres of metropolitan dominance, living the experience of rapidly mobile emigrés in the migrant quarters of their cities. They were exiles one of another, at a time when this was still not the more general experience of other artists, located as we would expect them to be, at home, but without the organization and promotion of group and city—simultaneously located and divided. The life of the emigré was dominant among the key groups, and they could and did deal with each other. Their self-referentiality, their propinquity and mutual isolation all served to represent the artist as necessarily estranged, and to ratify as canonical the works of radical estrangement. So, to *want* to leave your settlement and settle nowhere like Lawrence or Hemingway, became presented, in another ideological move, as a normal condition.

What quite rapidly happened is that modernism lost its anti-bourgeois stance, and achieved comfortable integration into the new international capitalism. Its attempt at a universal market, trans-frontier and trans-class, turned out to be spurious. Its forms lent themselves to cultural competition and the commercial interplay of obsolescence, with its shifts of schools, styles and fashion so essential to the market. The painfully acquired techniques of significant *dis*connection are relocated, with the help of the special insensitivity of the trained and assured technicists, as the merely technical modes of advertising and the commercial cinema. The isolated, estranged images of alienation and loss, the narrative discontinuities, have become the easy iconography of the commercials, and

the lonely, bitter, sardonic and sceptical hero takes his ready-made place as star of the thriller.

These heartless formulae sharply remind us that the innovations of what is called modernism have become the new but fixed forms of our present moment. If we are to break out of the non-historical fixity of *post*-modernism, then we must search out and counterpose an alternative tradition taken from the neglected works left in the wide margin of the century, a tradition which may address itself not to this by now exploitable because quite inhuman rewriting of the past, but for all our sakes, to a modern future in which community may be imagined again.