

# Modernism and the sense of history

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The poet . . . is not likely to know what is to be done unless he lives in *what is not merely the present, but the present moment of the past*, unless he is conscious, not of what is dead, but of what is already living.<sup>1</sup>

– T. S. Eliot

Whoever has approved this idea of order . . . will not find it preposterous that the past should be *altered* by the present as much as the present is directed by the past.<sup>2</sup>

– T. S. Eliot

When, however, one's existence is inauthentically historical, it is loaded down with the legacy of a 'past' which has become unrecognizable, and it seeks the modern (*Die uneigentlich geschichtliche Existenz dagegen sucht, beladen mit der ihr selbst unkenntlich gewordenen Hinterlassenschaft der 'Vergangenheit', das Moderne*).<sup>3</sup>

– Martin Heidegger

Many years ago my professor of philosophy, Lewis White Beck, told me that when two equally intelligent and sincere philosophers are unable to resolve differences of opinion on some matter of genuinely philosophical concern, it is more likely that it is because they share a common error or false enabling proposition than that they are doing philosophy badly. I want to suggest that this may have been true of many of those modernists and antimodernists I will be considering. Moreover, I want to suggest that one error or false enabling proposition that they may have shared is to be found in the conception of history and the historical or historicity in general which lay at the basis of many of their disagreements over the nature of time, temporality, the past, tradition, heritage, culture, civilization, and just about everything else that is implied in the label 'modernist.'

<sup>1</sup> T. S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', *Selected Essays*, New York: Harcourt, Brace, & Co, 1964, 11. Italics added.

<sup>2</sup> T. S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', 5. Italics added.

<sup>3</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1986, 391, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson as *Being and Time*, New York: Harper & Row, 1962, 444.

As we all know, the term 'history' had come, by the beginning of the twentieth century, to be synonymous with 'reality,' so much so that the phrase 'historical reality' had become a pleonasm. Indeed, the relation between 'history' and 'realism' had become so intimate by the end of the nineteenth century that, insofar as 'modernism' appeared to wish to succeed 'realism' as the content of 'serious' literature, it had come to seem to wish to succeed 'history' itself. In any event, any discussion of modernism and its others cannot not take account of its problematization of 'history.'

I take modernism to be a *cultural* movement which crystallized sometime between 1910 and 1930 as a *response* to (rather than as only an expression of) the process of modernization that sought to rationalize and thereby demystify the world, destroy superstition and religion, demythify politics, and make the world safe for capitalism. I stress that, for me, cultural modernism is a *response* to modernization – positive or negative, as the case may be – in the domain of the symbolic, in which the aim is to set up an alternative 'imaginary relation to the real conditions of existence' (Althusser) to those prevailing during the nineteenth century in European society. In this sense, modernism in general can be seen as a vision of reality which presumes the necessity of a radical revision of what is meant by 'history.'

Modernism has a number of features that appear in different representatives but which are more in the nature of family resemblances than uniform attributes shared by all. In the arts and thought, modernism is characterized in general by belief in the autonomy of the aesthetic vis-à-vis other faculties and domains of cultural production and the breakdown of the distinction between art and non-art. In effect, for a genuine modernist, everything made (or in natural processes, seeming to have been fashioned) can be treated as art or have a place in the art world. In poetry, modernism seems driven by belief in the debility of the subject, the impersonal nature of poetic language, and the possibility of automatism in literary writing. These tendencies can be regarded as pathological only on the basis of a belief in the dogmas of a nineteenth century belief in art as mimesis. Frederic Jameson suggests that modernity, and indeed modernism as well, can be seen as 'tropes' that are 'useful for generating alternate historical narratives, despite the charge of ideology [they] necessarily continue to bear.' Jameson continues: 'As for the ontology of the present, however, it is best to accustom oneself to thinking of "the modern" as a one-dimensional concept (or pseudo-concept) *which has nothing of historicity or futurity about it.*'<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Frederic Jameson, *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present*, London and New York: Verso, 2002, 214-15. Jameson distinguishes between 'modern', 'modernity', and 'modernism' as 'tropes', useful for generating different narratives of the past and the same terms considered as names of 'ideologies' aimed to discourage 'utopian' expectations about the future.

This statement stands in vivid contrast to the view of Clement Greenberg, the virtual inventor of American modernism, who held that:

Contrary to the common notion, Modernism or the avant-garde didn't make its entrance by breaking with the past. Far from it. Nor did it have such a thing as a program, nor has it really ever had one – again, contrary to the common notion. Nor was it an affair of ideas or theories or ideology. It's been in the nature, rather, of an attitude and an orientation: an attitude and orientation to standards and levels: standards and levels of aesthetic quality in the first and also the last place. And where did the Modernists get their standards and levels from? From the past, that is, the best of the past. But not so much from particular models in the past – though from these too – as from a generalized feeling and apprehending, a kind of distilling and extracting of aesthetic quality as shown by the best of the past. And it wasn't a question of imitating but one of emulating – just as it had been for the Renaissance with respect to antiquity. It's true that Baudelaire and Manet talked much more about having to be modern, about reflecting life in their time, than about matching the best of the past. But the need and the ambition to do so show through in what they actually did, and in enough of what they were recorded as saying. Being modern was a means of living up to the past.<sup>5</sup>

Some historians (H. Stuart Hughes in particular) regard modernism as a creation of 'the generation of 1890.' On the evidence available, it can be stated with relative certainty that the generation of 1890 consisted in large part of progeny of both genders who felt that their fathers had squandered their legacies and who felt that they had been 'passed over' (preterited) and deprived of their heritage, left with promises and contracts unfulfilled, and fed on doctrines and ideals which bore little relevance to the world they inhabited. (Yeats writes in 'Meditations in Time of Civil War': 'We have fed the heart on fantasies, the heart's grown brutal on the fare.') The carnage of World War I confirmed the justice of this sense of loss and betrayal and generated a kind of performative existentialism which emphasized the necessity of a kind of decisionism, but without sufficient guidance from inherited ideals to inspire the kind of 'resoluteness' (*Entschlossenheit*) that the postwar years, in Germany, France, Britain, Central and Eastern Europe, and even the Americas, required.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Clement Greenberg, 'Modern and Postmodern' in Robert C. Morgan, ed, *Clement Greenberg: Late Writings*, Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2003, 27.

<sup>6</sup> Clement Greenberg wrote:

What can be safely called Modernism emerged in the middle of the last century. And rather locally, in France, with Baudelaire in literature and Manet in painting, and maybe with Flaubert, too, in prose fiction. (It was a while later, and not so locally, that Modernism appeared in music and architecture, but it was in France

In this essay, I want to reconsider the relationship presumed to have existed between twentieth century cultural modernism and the modern (sense of) history. It is commonplace of current critical theory that cultural modernism was fixated on the new and the novel, repudiated tradition, valued the present and future at the expense of the past, and therefore rejected 'history' and knowledge of the past as essentially worthless.<sup>7</sup> This is a view held on the Left but also on the Right: on the Left, modernism is supposed to be hostile to history, on the Right, it is supposed to be hostile to tradition. Actually, modernist modernism, modernism *an Sich*, as we might say, is opposed to both history and tradition. And that is why, although some modernists attempted to revise received notions of both history and tradition, the more radical modernists of the first generation (Eliot, Pound, Joyce, Proust, Kafka, Woolf in literature, and Heidegger, Benjamin, Gentile, Theodor Lessing, Spengler, Collingwood in philosophy) sought to dissociate history and tradition from Newtonian conceptions of time and temporality, and to envision a post-historical temporality as a necessary precondition for the renewal of culture against the imperatives of both realism and modernization alike.

And when it comes to modernism's relationship to history, another problem arises: modernism is not only a historiological term in its own right, suggesting a valorization of the new<sup>8</sup> and emergent in the field of historical happening, in its remote origin it suggests an entire philosophy, or at least a vision of history in which each moment appears as a plenum of possibilities – a 'now' – for the living being's liberation from time and temporality. The term modern, as is it is well

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again that it appeared first in sculpture. Outside France later still, it entered the dance.) The 'avant-garde' was what Modernism was called at first, but this term has become a good deal compromised by now as well as remaining misleading.

See Clement Greenberg, 'Modern and Postmodern', 26.

<sup>7</sup> This begins with Nietzsche of course, but modernism takes the 'critical' idea of history much further than Nietzsche did. This development is typically considered to be indicative of a rebellion against history itself. Thus, Jürgen Habermas asserts that 'modernity' begins with the idea that creativity must be utterly originary and original and cannot depend upon prior models. The rejection of prior models is tantamount to a rejection of the past altogether. He cites Koselleck's work on 'the new age'. See Jürgen Habermas, 'Modernity's Consciousness of Time and Its Need for Self-Reassurance', in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, trans. by Frederick Lawrence, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993, 1-22.

<sup>8</sup> 'Historically, in fact, in the debates over modernism, a far more abstract notion of change has won out over all its rivals; and the victory was so complete as to render the new account commonplace and virtually self-evident. This is that well-known dynamic called innovation; and it is eternalized in Pound's great dictum "Make it new," and in the supreme value of the New that seems to preside over any specific or local modernism worth its salt. How the new can be eternal, however, is another question, and perhaps accounts for the equally eternal enigma of Baudelaire's inaugural definition: "le transitoire, le fugitif, le contingent, la moitié de l'art, dont l'autre moitié est l'éternel et l'immuable.'" Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity*, 121. (One solution to the enigma lies in Heidegger's idea that the eternal return of the Same is not a thing, event, or action, but rather, a 'possibility'.)

known, derives from the ablative-dative case of Latin 'modus' (mode, manner, measure, quantity, interval, etc.) – suggesting an existence consonant with and defined by the moment and yielding the sense of 'just now,' 'right now,' 'only now,' 'recently,' and the like – so that we can justifiably see, buried within the history of the term, that the 'modern' is a series of instants, each qualitatively different from every other but no one of which is prior to or superior to another, rather like Leibniz's conception of the monads.<sup>9</sup> This conception of history will make it appear that modernism rejects history, is hostile to it, or has little use for it. But to think this would be to take the term 'history' in its accepted nineteenth century usage, to assume that this usage is the proper usage, and that once its propriety had been established, the concept of history itself will cease to change, will cease to have a history.

On the contrary, however, 'history' does have a history, just as does the notion of 'the past,' and, for that matter, the idea that time is 'naturally' parsed everywhere and whenever in the same way, i.e., as past-present-future, and in that order. So when it is a matter of modernism and history, we must specify which version of 'history' we have in mind. Is the history being referred to 'the past,' the relation between past and present, or the process by which the present becomes a past or, conversely, a future becomes a present, and so on?

One of the undeniable attributes of history in the twentieth century is its explosion into a starburst of different ideas about what 'history' is. Already in Nietzsche, 'history' is parsed into three kinds: antiquarian, monumental, and critical, each of which we are supposed to need 'for life.' But this parsing is not yet, in my estimation, modernist in kind. For Nietzsche's idea is still contaminated by the nineteenth century belief that temporality can be made sense of, if only by parsing it into a threefold sense each of which is fixed upon past, present, and future.

As we shall see, however, Heidegger, Benjamin, Joyce, Eliot, Pound, Stein, Yeats, and Woolf, not to mention Bergson and Sartre, have different and, I warrant, post-Nietzschean ideas of time and therefore of history.<sup>10</sup>

Modernism is, of course, first and foremost a time-concept but not a 'periodical' one. Or rather, although the term 'modern' does name a historical period beginning with the Renaissance and the Age of Exploration, the Reformation, and the Scientific Revolution, it does not catch the anti-historicist and anti-historist

<sup>9</sup> See Mieke Bal, *Citing Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999.

<sup>10</sup> An attitude towards history is not, of course, the sole determining feature of a modernist, but I would say it is a necessary – necessary but not sufficient – condition. Other features might be mentioned. I want in this essay to concentrate on three more: first, preterition; secondly, gender ambiguity; and thirdly, phagocitation.

nuances of the concept of 'modernism.'<sup>11</sup> For, as the etymology of the term 'modern' indicates, modernism has, since its invention in the fifth century A.D., connoted a time that is outside of history, an ahistorical temporality, in which no tradition, dogma, nor secular *scientia* can provide sure guide to action in the moment. It cannot even be said that 'modern' indicates 'the present' (*praesens*) insofar as the present presupposes a past and a future from which it can be distinguished by what it is *not*.

Insofar, then, as the modern can be distinguished from the historical present, modern is not a historical concept at all. And this difference between the modern and the present may give us some insight into the kinds of obscurities, ambiguities, and ambivalences that are so characteristic of modernism in its various phases (right down to about 1950) and its various representatives in so many different fields of the arts and thought (right down to our own time or rather, to our own 'modernity').<sup>12</sup> For James Joyce, history was that 'nightmare from which I am trying to awaken.' And for T.S. Eliot, another undeniable modernist, far from being a resource, 'history' *is* the problem.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> See Fredric Jameson, 'Transitional Modes' in *A Singular Modernity*, 97-138. Jameson thinks that modernism cannot be a period concept because it is a purely aesthetic phenomenon rather than an epistemological one. This means that, for him, modernism is a 'narrative' or way of giving form to a synchronic structure.

<sup>12</sup> Note Paul de Man's and Hans Robert Jauss's idea that modernism is a phase or moment in every era's sense of its own uniqueness vis à vis other and especially earlier periods. Thus, we might be speaking more properly of 'modernisms' than of a single substantive 'modernism'. But I want to argue that our modernism is different from earlier ones in that it takes its 'fallenness' out of history as a distinguishing sign of its originality. Earlier modernisms, such as that of the Patristic period, the various renaissances of the medieval period, the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Jacobins, the Romantics, and so on, still regard history as a resource for *renovatio* or renewal, not so *our* modernists.

<sup>13</sup> The problematic nature of 'history' in the modern age is indicated by the formation at about the same time that 'history' was constituted as a scientific (or at least academic) discipline (by Ranke *et alia*) of the discipline of 'philosophy of history'. This field has always been regarded as an aberration by professional historians because it appears to aspire to knowledge of history's meaning, aim, or overriding purpose. Moreover, philosophy of history – from Kant, Herder, Hegel, Comte, and Buckle through Marx, Nietzsche, and Spengler, down to Lessing, Spengler, Toynbee, and Vogelstein – has always appealed to 'deviant' philosophers, amateur historians, and ideologues in general, rather than to properly domesticated academic scholars. In fact, an interest in philosophy of history has been generally taken to indicate a defective philosophical sense and/or fundamental misunderstanding of what 'proper' historiography can legitimately aspire to. After World War II, Anglophone philosophy dealt with this problem by distinguishing between a metaphysical and speculative 'material philosophy of history', on the one side, and an 'analytical philosophy of history' (devoted to the exposure of the errors of the former), on the other. In general, professional historians were inclined to condemn philosophy of history

In fact, the professionalization of historical studies in the early nineteenth century had effectively left the problem of the meaning of history to novelists and poets, who were allowed to fantasize about history and the past as long as they maintained a strict division between fact and fiction, the failure to do so being vilified as the principal failure of the delusory but nonetheless dazzlingly popular genre of 'the historical novel.' And yet the realistic novel, from Balzac, Dickens, and Flaubert through Tolstoy and Eliot to Zola and Conrad increasingly took as evidence of its 'realism' its attention to the present social world understood as belonging to 'history.' In the modernist novel, 'history' continued to be the ultimate referent but this history was now understood to be anything but the workings of a benign 'progress' or 'reason' leading from savagery to civilization on a global scale. Now history understood as 'reality' was increasingly seen as a problem to be overcome rather than a source of wisdom or even knowledge.

We have, right at the beginning of literary modernism, T.S. Eliot's emblematic statement in his poem 'Gerontion' which begins with the epigraph:

*Thou hast nor youth nor age  
But as it were an after dinner sleep  
Dreaming of both.*

And the first and third stanza, which assert:

'My house is a decayed house' and 'I have no ghosts.'

Then, in the fourth stanza, asks:

After such knowledge, what forgiveness? Think now  
History has many cunning passages, contrived corridors  
And issues, deceives with whispering ambitions,  
Guides us by vanities. Think now  
She gives when our attention is distracted  
And what she gives, gives with such supple confusions  
That the giving famishes the craving. Gives too late  
What's not believed in, or if still believed,  
In memory only, reconsidered passion. Gives too soon  
Into weak hands, what's thought can be dispensed with  
Till the refusal propagates a fear. Think  
Neither fear nor courage saves us. Unnatural vices  
Are fathered by our heroism. Virtues  
Are forced upon us by our impudent crimes.

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on the basis of a distinction between a legitimate quest for knowledge, on the one side, and an illegitimate quest of meaning, on the other.

These tears are shaken from the wrath-bearing tree.<sup>14</sup>

This passage, in addition to the feelings against history it displays, also manifests another, a generational attitude towards the fathers which I wish to call 'preteritional' – the feeling of having been passed over or excluded from inheritance of a legacy wasted by the previous generation. It is 'the end of the line' phenomenon, the sense that genealogy no longer serves to establish legitimacy and descent in the paternal line (as in Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*). And along with this, another theme I will touch on: gender ambiguity and the epistemology of the closet.<sup>15</sup> To be modern is to be depleted, ambiguated, and without any resources, not even 'manliness,' to call on but art.

But it is important to remember that modernism *is* a time-concept; it names an experience of an epoch which, etymologically, indicates an *interval* in history in which the 'now' or more specifically the 'just now' of the original Latin 'modo' is detached from what came before and what must come after it. It should not be forgotten, moreover, that this 'now' (which will later reappear in Walter Benjamin's work as 'eine Jetztzeit') not only erases (*entkräftet*) the linearity of conventional historicity; it bespeaks an opportunity, a kairotic moment in which to break through the ordinary (*vulgäre*) idea of historical time and return to what Heidegger – a representative modernist – will call an 'authentic historicity [*eingentliche Geschichtlichkeit*].'

This 'return' is not, however, most decidedly not the return to the Classical or Christian past dreamed of by Renaissance and Reformation thinkers like Machiavelli or Luther. It is what Heidegger, in *Sein und Zeit*, will call 'the recurrence of the possible' (*eine "Wiederkehr" des Möglichen*), which knows that 'authentic historicity' only returns, if 'existence is open for it fatefully, in a moment of vision, in resolute repetition (*die Existenz schicksalhaft- Augenblicklich für sie in der entschlossenen Wiederholung offen ist*).'<sup>16</sup>

It was presumed that in 'the modern' (*modo modo*), 'history' had been jettisoned for 'myth.' Myth is understood here either as 'eternal return,' or as the kind of 'philosophy of history' represented by Max Nordau or Alfred Rosenberg,<sup>17</sup> or, most pertinently, by Theodor Lessing (assassinated by Nazis at Marienbad on August 31, 1933), who had published a work with the eponymous title *Geschichte als Sinngebung des Sinnlosen oder, Die Geburt der Geschichte aus dem Mythos*.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>14</sup> T.S. Eliot, 'Gerontion', in *The Complete Poems and Plays of T.S. Eliot*, London: Faber & Faber, 1969, 37-39.

<sup>15</sup> See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990.

<sup>16</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 391-92; *Being and Time*, 444.

<sup>17</sup> See Ernst Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961.

<sup>18</sup> Theodor Lessing, *Geschichte als Sinngebung des Sinnlosen oder, Die Geburt der Geschichte aus dem Mythos*, München: Verlag C. H. Beck, 1919.

But although philosophy of history had had a rebirth with the so-called 'crisis of historicism' of the years preceding World War I, it must be understood that philosophy of history during this period was more concerned to justify the methods and procedures of professional historiography – to establish the value of historical knowledge, determine what the various works by specialist historians added up to or signified for the understanding of the whole of history, and above all to defend historical *Wissenschaft* from Marxism and Nietzscheanism – than it was to reinvent or rediscover a basis for historical knowledge of the conventional Rankean kind.

But the more modernist move was to conceive a link between myth and an idea of artistic creativity more poetic than discursive in kind. Thus, for Eliot and Pound and Joyce, it was what Eliot called 'the mythical method' rather than a specific corpus of myths, classical or Christian, that was needed. In this view, history itself was a myth, what Lévi-Strauss himself will later call 'the myth of the West.' But a given myth is one thing, the 'method' of myth-making (as Eliot called it) is quite another. In his famous review of Joyce's *Ulysses*, he wrote:

In using the myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr. Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue after him . . . It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>19</sup> See Eliot's review of Joyce in T. S. Eliot, 'Ulysses, Order, and Myth', in Frank Kermode, ed, *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, New York: Harcourt, 1975, 177. See also Joyce Wexler, 'Realism and Modernists' Bad Reputation', *Studies in the Novel* 31:1 (1999), 60-73. 'One of the principles guiding the formation of the high modernist canon was T. S. Eliot's definition of the "mythical method" as 'a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history. The control, order, shape, and significance were to come from the author's ability to discern parallels between the chaotic present and the comprehensible past. By coordinating the contingencies of contemporary history with the unchanging patterns of myth, Eliot argued, writers like Yeats and Joyce found a formal principle that made "the modern world possible for art . . ." As much as Eliot admired this union, it has fallen into disrepute for ethical and political reasons. Critics initially complained that texts employing the mythical method were implausible or incomprehensible. Now the objection is that such texts are immoral. Where Eliot saw an aesthetic solution to a moral crisis, contemporary critics detect an ethical problem. Reading modernist symbolism as if it were realism, they object not only to particular symbols but to the use of extreme acts and foreign cultures as raw material for Western fantasies. When this kind of political interpretation of symbolism prevails, as it does now, the reputation of modernist authors suffers' (60).

Like the early modernists, Heidegger and Gentile regarded conventional historiography – with its belief in a ‘history’ which existed before ‘historiography’ – as bankrupt: their modernity consisted of an effort to rethink the historical from the ground up, as it were, that is to say, from a philosophical position that had more in common with Pre-Socratic thought – in which, according to Heidegger, science and philosophy had not yet been separated out from myth, or truth distinguished from being.<sup>20</sup>

During the period of the first (modernist or ‘modo modo’) modernism, that is to say, from roughly 1910 to 1930, thought about history and historicity was pretty much dominated by the figure of Benedetto Croce who, in his *Filosofia dello spirito*, argued that 1) philosophy of history à la Hegel, Marx, etc. was a contradiction in terms (philosophy was about concepts, while history was about things); and 2) authentic philosophy *was nothing more* than history or historical thinking (after metaphysics there is only history). But, Croce also maintained, one had to distinguish between history understood as the human mode of being in the world and historiography understood as the record and representation of humankind’s coming to consciousness of its own freedom. Thus History (the condition of humanity) preceded history (the story of freedom) as the latter’s condition of possibility. Reflection on History and its relation to history was reflection on an eternal present which could never be ‘filled out’ or ‘schematized.’ Historical knowledge is all we have, but it is incomplete and partial rather than complete and whole. But this incompleteness and partiality is what makes us able to believe in human freedom and human action, even in its vilest, as a contribution to the desire and pursuit of the good.

Now, Croce’s fall from popularity among philosophers after World War I was precipitate; he was definitely not a modernist nor was he taken up by them as a philosophical spokesman. Indeed, in their repudiation of ‘history,’ the literary modernists took the distinction between ‘History’ and history to be little more than a delusion, since the latter was nothing more than an account of the former in a different register. And yet the distinction between ‘History’ and ‘history’ was taken up by Heidegger who provided in his *Sein und Zeit* (1927) a characterization of (primordial) ‘historicity’ that effectively justified literary modernism’s favorite ‘method’ – what Eliot called ‘the mythical method.’

In 1927, Heidegger sought to put the idea of ‘historicity’ at the center of a post-metaphysical conception of human particularity (*Dasein*).<sup>21</sup> In the last sections of *Sein und Zeit*, he argued that the principal impediment to a proper understanding of the relationship between temporality and historicity was the commonsensical or

<sup>20</sup> See Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 213-14; *Being and Time*, 256.

<sup>21</sup> ‘In analyzing the historicity of *Dasein* we shall try to show that this entity is not “temporal” because it “stands in history,” but that, on the contrary, it exists historically and can so exist because it is temporal in the very basis of its Being.’ Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 376; *Being and Time*, 428.

'ordinary' understanding (*das vulgäre Verstandis*) of 'history.' And the first of these was the double paradox contained in the word 'history' (*Geschichte*) itself. 1) First, it stood for both an object of study (history) and the science of that object (history); and second, the idea that although the historical object existed in the past, it was knowable only by evidence of its existence in the present. 2) Next, 'history' is understood as both 'past' and what has been derived or descended from that past (*Herkunft*), which may be apprehended as sometimes a rise and at others a fall, as standing in a condition of 'becoming' and therefore implying that what is in history can also make history, which points it to the future and in which 'the past' has 'no special priority.'<sup>22</sup> 3) Third, the ordinary idea of history presumes 'the totality of those entities which change "in time"', which, ironically, includes 'Nature' as well as 'Culture' and really subsumes the former to the latter (cfr. Foucault). 4) And finally, history is 'whatever has been handed down to us' and has been 'taken over as self-evident, [even] with its derivation hidden.'<sup>23</sup>

Now, this 'vulgar' conception of 'history' and the 'historical' raises the question: '. . . why is it that the historical is determined predominantly by the "past." Or, to speak more appropriately (*angemessener*), by the character of having-been, when that character is one that temporalizes itself equiprimordially with the Present and the future?'<sup>24</sup> Heidegger's contention is that '. . . what is *primarily* historical is *Dasein*. That which is *secondarily* historical, however, is what we encounter within-the-world – not only equipment ready-to-hand, in the widest sense, but also the enviroing *Nature* as the "very soil of history.'" The 'vulgar' form of history thus derives from 'that which is secondarily historical' rather than from that 'Dasein . . . which is primarily historical.' Which raises the question: 'to what extent and on the basis of what ontological conditions, does historicity belong, as an essential constitutive state, to the subjectivity of the "historical" subject?'<sup>25</sup>

This question is answered in Section 74 of II, 5 'The Basic Constitution of Historicity':

'Thus, the interpretation of *Dasein*'s historicity will prove to be, at bottom, just a more concrete working out of temporality.'

'The resoluteness in which *Dasein* comes back to itself, discloses current factual possibilities of authentic existing, and discloses them *in terms of the heritage* which that resoluteness, as thrown, *takes over*. In one's coming back resolutely to one's thrownness, there is hidden a handing down to oneself of the possibilities that have come down to one, but not necessarily as having thus come down. . . *Dasein* hands itself down to itself, free for death, in a possibility which it has inherited and yet has chosen.'<sup>26</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 379; *Being and Time*, 430.

<sup>23</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 379; *Being and Time*, 431.

<sup>24</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 381; *Being and Time*, 433.

<sup>25</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 382; *Being and Time*, 434.

<sup>26</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 384; *Being and Time*, 435.

Then that famous paragraph set in italics and typographically emphasized:

*Only an entity which, in its Being, is essentially futural so that it is free for its death and can let itself be thrown back upon its factual 'there' by shattering itself against death – that is to say, only an entity which, as futural, is equiprimordially in the process of having-been, can, by handing down to itself the possibility it has inherited, take over its own thrownness and be in the moment of vision for 'its time.' Only authentic temporality which is at the same time finite, makes possible something like fate – that is to say, authentic historicity.<sup>27</sup>*

The authentic repetition of a possibility of existence that has been – the possibility that *Dasein* may choose its hero – is grounded existentially in anticipatory resoluteness [*vorlaufige Entschlossenheit*]; for it is in resoluteness that one first chooses the choice which makes one free for the struggle of loyally following in the footsteps of that which can be repeated. But when one has, by repetition, handed down to oneself a possibility that has been, the *Dasein* that has-been-there is not disclosed in order to be actualized over again. The repeating of that which is possible does not bring again something that is 'past,' nor does it bind the 'Present' back to that which has already been 'outstripped.' Arising as it does from a resolute projection of oneself, repetition does not let itself be persuaded of something by what is 'past,' just in order that this, as something which was formerly actual, may recur. Rather, the repetition makes a *reciprocative rejoinder* to the possibility of that existence which has-been-there. But when such a rejoinder is made to this possibility of resolution, it is made *in a moment of vision; and as such* it is at the same time a *disavowal* of that which in the 'today,' is working itself out as the 'past.' Repetition does not abandon itself to what which is past, nor does it aim at progress. In the moment of vision, authentic existence is indifferent to both these alternatives.

We [therefore] characterize repetition as a mode of resoluteness which hands itself down – the mode by which *Dasein* exists implicitly as fate (*Schickal=vicissitude?*).<sup>28</sup>

. . .the finitude of temporality – is the hidden basis of *Dasein's* historicity. *Dasein* does not first become historical in repetition; but because it is historical as temporal, it can be taken over in its history by repeating. For this, no historiology is as yet needed.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 385; *Being and Time*, 437.

<sup>28</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 386; *Being and Time*, 437-38.

<sup>29</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 386; *Being and Time*, 438.

The history that people think they live is what contributes to the dispersal and alienation of *Dasein* and it is from this history that *Dasein* must awaken in order to grasp the primordial historicity of *Dasein's* experience of temporality. 'In inauthentic historicity ... the way in which fate has been primordially stretched along has been hidden. ...Lost in the making present of the "today," it understands the "Past" in terms of the "Present."' <sup>30</sup> 'When, however, one's existence is inauthentically historical, it is loaded down with the legacy of a "past" which has become unrecognizable, and it seeks the modern.' <sup>31</sup>

On such a view, Heidegger provides us (as Ricoeur constantly reminded us) with an insight into the relation between historicity and temporality that comes along with modernism and also shows us how to understand that peculiar rebellion against narrative and narrativity that distinguishes the 'realism' of modernism from its earlier historicist prototypes (Balzac, Flaubert, Dickens, Tolstoy, Conrad, and so on). <sup>32</sup> The 'historicity' of *Dasein* – the primordial historicity – resides in its understanding that it exists 'in time,' that its existence is finite, and that its 'fate' (or 'vicissitude') will be authentic only in the extent to which it makes its choices or lives its life in care (*Sorge*). Ricoeur thought that narrative form was a proper way of retailing such a life because 'narrative' constituted the form in which temporality reached consciousness in language. Narrative form mediated, Ricoeur thought, between 'primordial' temporality and the chronological temporality of hours, days, weeks, months, and years. And it is indeed interesting to note that Fredric Jameson, whom we might call 'the Ricoeur of the Left,' shares belief in the intimate, indeed necessary, connection between narrative form and historical consciousness to the extent to which he can indict modernism for a lack of historical consciousness because of its abandonment or want of 'narrative' capability. Indeed, at the level of form, the narrative is the mode of expression adequate to the substance of the content of 'history.' Here he follows the Lukács of the *Studies in Realism* and 'Franz Kafka or Thomas Mann?' – the Lukács who indicts literary modernism for its failure to develop further the plot novel of the great nineteenth century realists.

Lukács' criticism of modernism is apt enough because what Eliot celebrated as Joyce's 'mythical method' (and contrasted with the 'narrative method') effectively *disemplots* the novel and the modernist long poem (as in 'The Waste Land'). <sup>33</sup> Thus Eliot says of the mythic method:

<sup>30</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 391; *Being and Time*, 433.

<sup>31</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 391; *Being and Time*, 444.

<sup>32</sup> See Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, Vol 1, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984.

<sup>33</sup> Ricoeur thought that the modernist novel – as represented by Woolf, Mann, and Proust at least – had kept 'plot' but had shifted the tropology used to connect up beginning with end of the traditional novel from the syntagmatic to the paradigmatic axis of the discourse. See Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, Vol 2, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985.

It is a method already adumbrated by Mr. Yeats, and of the need for which I believe that Mr. Yeats to have been first contemporary to be conscious. Psychology (such as it is, and whether our reaction to it be comic or serious), ethnology, and *The Golden Bough* have concurred to make possible what was impossible even a few years ago. Instead of narrative method, we may now use the *mythic method*. It is, I seriously believe, a step toward making the *modern* world possible for art.<sup>34</sup>

Although many critics and scholars thought that this signaled a return to mythology, it is evident that Eliot meant something quite different from that. The 'mythic method,' insofar as it is set over against the 'narrative method,' refuses the organicism, coherence, and closure of the earlier genres of 'realism' as being untruthful to 'reality,' on the one hand, and as being constraining of the freedom of art, on the other. Actually, Eliot's idea of 'the mythic method' comes close to early avant-garde 'collage,' Duchamps' use of 'objets trouvés' in his assemblages, and Lévi-Strauss's notion of 'bricolage' as the method of mythic invention (one is reminded, too, of that 'rubble' of history espied by Benjamin's 'Angelus Novus' as it surveys the ruins of past history).

Writing much later, Ricoeur tried to salvage narrative (or what, after Eliot, we might call 'the narrative method') by suggesting that narrative was the most 'realistic' of the modes available for depicting 'historical reality' because the lives and projects of historical agents actually took the form of narratives. This allowed Ricoeur to salvage a correspondence theory of historical truth.

But here again there is an ambiguity in the referent of the term 'history,' even if by 'history' one means only 'the past.' Indeed, *especially* if by 'history' one means only 'the past.' For, as Michael Oakeshott noted, there are not only many different kinds of past, there are many different modes of contemplating the past or drawing upon it for different purposes. Among these Oakeshott distinguished between 'the historical past' and 'the practical past,' the former of which was to be studied 'for its own sake' or 'for itself alone,' as an object of scientific interest only and without any attempt to draw lessons from study of it for use in the present or derive principles for predicting the future.<sup>35</sup> By contrast, Oakeshott argued, the 'practical past' is recalled only for its relevance to discussions about the present and future.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>34</sup> T. S. Eliot, 'Ulysses, Order, and Myth', 177-78. Italics added.

<sup>35</sup> Recall that this is the basis for Popper's attack on 'historicism' and 'historism'. Since history is, or aspires to be, a social science and since social science is interested in deriving laws and predicting the future, 'history' lapses into 'historicism' when philosophers of history attempt such moves.

<sup>36</sup> Michael Oakeshott, *On History and Other Essays*, Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1999, 18.

This distinction between 'the historical past' and 'the practical past' stands in for the older distinction between a 'historical' or 'scientific' study of the past and all versions of the past intended for ideological or political uses. But to take this tack is to overlook a fundamental difference between Oakeshott's distinction and that of anyone who would assimilate the practical past to ideology. First, Oakeshott, like Collingwood and Croce (as well as de Certeau later on), presumes that *all* inquiry into the past is motivated by 'present' concerns and problems, however 'scientific' the method of analysis may purport to be. So what is not at issue for Oakeshott is not the difference between the study of 'the past' for its own sake or for itself alone *versus* a study of the past out of *present* concerns and interests. In fact, Oakeshott does not identify study of 'the practical past' with *presentism* (as many psychologists who have taken up the term would have it) and the study of 'the historical past' with 'pastism' or antiquarianism. He distinguishes the two kinds of past on the basis of an analogy with Kant's distinction between 'theoretical' and 'practical' philosophy: the historical past is theoretical (constructed by an exercise of pure reason), while the practical past is constructed for use by 'practical reason,' which is to say, ethical consciousness, choice, decision, and judgment. So the difference is not between pastism and presentism but between two different construals of the past, the one as an object for scientific study, the other as an object of ethical or aesthetic reflection.

Of course, once we have reached this point, we are on the verge of the charge raised by Adorno against modernism, namely, its aestheticisation of what had formerly been construed as epistemological issues. Which in turn constitutes the basis for the differences between Left wing and Right wing criticisms of Modernism. What Eliot and his generation of modernists had done in appealing to 'the mythic method' was construe the imagination as a cognitive faculty and posit it as a basis for criticism of both the 'vulgar ideas of history (professional and amateur) and the metaphysical ideas about history promoted by the 'philosophers of history.' In seeking to return to the *arche* or origins, to the time before history began, the first cultural modernists abandoned all of the various 'plots' (macro- and micro-) which had been imposed upon temporality in modernity.

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