

Postmodernism as Modernism

By Denis Corish

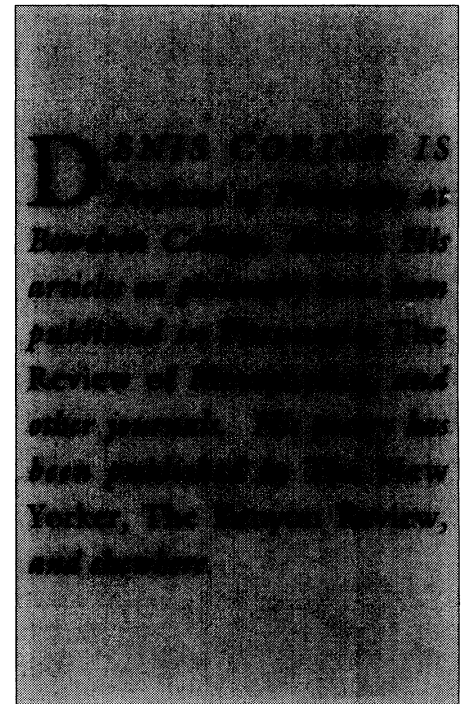
1 Modern Burden
 Modernism: We know better.
 Postmodernism: Now *we* know better.
 Postpostmodernism: Now *we really* know better.
 What a burden for the modern song —
 Hasn't common sense known better all along?

2 Post
 I hear 'poststructuralist', 'postmodernist' —
 What could 'post' mean but 'yet more modern than'?
 To hear them talk, you'd think that each new 'post'
 Was Messiah come to save new-fallen man.
 But could 'post' be the hinting of the hour
 That the modern fashion has no staying-power?

DO I ALREADY MISTAKE MY AUDIENCE AND myself? What has poetry (or, worse still, verse) to do with a serious philosophical question? The doubt is a typically modernist one, because the background conviction from which the doubt comes is modernist: philosophy, "science," is what has to do with thought; poetry is something else, that has to do with "images" or "emotion"; it is, in Eliot's words, the "emotional equivalent of thought." There may now be postmodernist "progress" on this question: criticism, "theory," *is* the new poetry; it has taken over from poetry.

Instead of agreeing with all that, I wish to enunciate a heresy (and who better to enunciate it to than the young — the readership of this *Review* — rather than the old, or middle-aged, the self-regarded "young revolutionaries," settled in their orthodoxies?). It is not the heresy you might have expected if you had not read the verses above: that modernism is dead and postmodernism must reign. Nor is it the heresy of what might be called recent oldfashionedness, of has-been orthodoxy: that postmodernism will fade and modernism survive triumphant. No, it is far more oldfashioned, and therefore a good deal more radical, than that. What I want to say is that postmodernism is merely yet more modernism — and, I want to add, modernism is a mistake.

Postmodernism is modernism. To be modernist is to aspire to be (and to seem to be) modern above all else. This is the urge behind the notion of "a



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modern sensibility,” which weighed so heavily with Eliot and other modernists. Now there have been of course many revolts against the influence of Eliot, but nothing, so far as I can see, against the essential modernist notion that we need above all else “a modern sensibility.” It has been taken somehow as beyond question that we should be preoccupied with our own age. Now, no doubt, we should be even *more* modern — and hence “postmodernism.”

One can find all sorts of terms to depict traits of postmodernism — as Ihab Hassan puts it, “a dozen current terms of unmaking: decreation, disintegration, deconstruction, decenterment, displacement, difference, discontinuity, disjunction, disappearance, decomposition, de-definition, demystification, detotalization, delegitimation” — all of which, together with other terms, Hassan sums up under the heading “Indeterminacy.”* But such terms do not at all affect the fundamentally modernist direction of postmodernism. In fact, they might simply be taken to label it as dog-in-the-manger modernism. To see this fully we must move to our next point.

MODERNISM IS A MISTAKE, (AND SO THEREFORE is postmodernism). Modernism, at least as represented by people like Eliot, is really the imitation of science by non-scientists. There is no such thing as modernist (or postmodernist) physics, chemistry or biology; there are merely these sciences as such. But of course they have been spectacularly successful—that is to say, as regards their associated technologies (it is probably fair to say that science without technology would be as ill-regarded as philosophy). And this success has stirred non-scientists to emulation. In the history of philosophy we already see this with Hume and Kant, who both thought it a scandal that philosophy had not progressed as Newtonian physics had done—and both tried to lay down the conditions under which it might so progress (and what both forgot, or never realized, was that science could progress only at the expense of requiring every practitioner of it to assent to the same general views—to accept, for example, Newton’s laws in physics—a condition to which the more personally seeing, and therefore skeptical, philosophical mind could never agree, as Plato was well enough aware: hypothesis is a blindness as well as a knowledge).

In the twentieth century, in the English-speaking world, such science envy took a positivistic/logical turn in philosophy, and a modernist turn in literature. People like Eliot thought that a “dissociation of sensibility” had set into the poetic mind, perhaps from the seventeenth century on, and “feeling” became divorced from “thought.” The cure, oddly, was not to try to rejoin the two but to adhere to one side of the split, the “feeling” side, and make it seek to emulate the success of the other, the “thought” side — hence Eliot’s odd doctrine of the “emotional equivalent of thought.”

With the poets this notion has tended to last, and so the rather imagist, often free-verse, associative and sometimes allusive poetry which is supported by it is still the prevalent norm — one does not see much poetry of thought or argument or simple statement. Also, with poets and others, the circumspection and despair that such a view bred has tended to last. The scientists can still claim to stand on the shoulders of giants but the poets, on the ground, must despair at the shadows the giants have cast; what has once been done may not be done again, and much that once belonged to poetry must now be relinquished to science. So poetry must, with continually dwindling resources, continually seek the new, the more modern.

And the natural place for that seeking, for the science-like method which it requires, is the university (in spite of the fact that Eliot, Pound and other mod-

ernists did not themselves seek to practice within the university system). Poetry, as the result of modernism, has become the property of the universities and is to be controlled through workshops and licensed by degrees.

But the “thought” side of the split, since the “feeling” side must seek to emulate it, has tended to triumph, and the universities, naturally, produce critics rather than poets; so we have come to the era of the critics, the “theoretical,” the yet more modern, the “postmodern” (with a strong French influence to fill the void left by the decline of the analytic tradition). But of course the science envy, science-emulative urge, which has produced this era has taken account, half a century later, of the “indeterminacy” and “undecidability” which the scientists and mathematicians spoke about — and so we get this terminology-that-would-be-theory which we call “postmodernism.” And it would undermine everything (including science itself) with its “indeterminacy” and “undecidability” and negativity — and constitute itself, as I say, a kind of dog-in-the-manger modernism.

BUT IF, AS I HAVE SAID, MODERNISM, AND WITH IT POST-modernism, is a mistake, what then should be the true course? For poetry, at any rate, it should be the abandonment of the notion that modernity, the complex variety of the age, is what we should be mainly concerned with rather than with human nature as such. It must be clear, when one thinks about it, that modernity is superficial, always due to be replaced by a later modernity. But does human nature change as easily as that? And must poetry, essential, our history seems to say, to human nature, then change too, every fifty or twenty years? It is a hopeless prospect, which ultimately denies the value of poetry altogether. Poetry is not science and does not need to progress as science does. Poetry, as the expression of primitive, vital human seeing, is pre-scientific, ancestral to science, and need not seek to emulate it. And philosophy should take note of that fact, and of its own ancestral relation to science.

It is merely a vulgar prejudice, flattering, in the short run, to ourselves, to imagine that our age has seen human nature change — a change which of course, we are convinced, is the final one, that establishes really *modern* man; a prejudice which the next generation will justifiably, on our precedent, recognize to be a prejudice, secure in that next generation’s own claim that it is the truly modern age. Couldn’t we all be better employed?

I have said all this better above, in verse. I finish now in the same way — whether it is a clear seeing or simply a vain defense of my own hopeless oldfashionedness (and the mere charge of oldfashionedness, one has to be aware, in this forward looking, “modern” age, is taken practically to preclude the possibility of a defense; perhaps, if one does not wish to be considered conservative, as I do not, since to be conservative nowadays is to be modernist, one would be best advised to make a boast of, instead of a defense against, oldfashionedness?)

Apology

God never granted me
A modern sensibility—
So memory has tainted all I see;
And therefore mere humanity
And not its last modernity
Has been what seemed significant to me. φ

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* Ihab Hassan, “Ideas of Cultural Change,” in Ihab Hassan & Sally Hassan (eds), *Innovation/Renovation* (The University of Wisconsin Press, 1983), pp. 27-28.