

## **Modernity: A Brief History**

## **I. Romantic Moderne**

It's a commonly held perception that modernity began about a hundred years ago, with the advent of early 20<sup>th</sup> century Modernism. So you see a lot of discussion of how modernity emerged with the growth of the modern metropolis (London, Paris, New York), and how it's closely related to the urban scene and the developing urban consciousness. What I want to suggest, however, is that we need to see it very differently. Specifically, my claim is that it started over 200 years ago and that it didn't arise from any modern metropolis or even the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century urban scene of a city like London, but rather from what was being thought by a few people in a small town in eastern Germany: Jena. What you're looking at now is a photo of a house and garden of a former resident of this town: Friedrich Schiller.

[PPT 1. Schiller Gartenhaus]

In fact, Schiller only moved into this particular house (the so-called

Schiller Gartenhaus) a few years after writing the piece I want to talk about first. But it's a very pleasant house—as anyone who's had a chance to visit it can attest—and we can stretch chronology a bit to incorporate it. I have a specific motive for doing that, which is to get us to feel the idyllic quality of this garden house and of the whole surrounding scene. So when we're thinking about modernity as originating with Schiller in Jena, we'll think of it as coming out of these particularly idyllic circumstances. The Schiller work I want to use for my starting point is his famous essay of 1795, "On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry" [ Über Naïve und Sentimentalische Dichtung ]. In it, he makes a distinction between the naïve and sentimental outlook. The naïve poet is interested only in the imitation of reality, and as a result doesn't have any choice about how to treat it. With the sentimental poet, however, it's a different matter entirely:

This one reflects on the impression that objects make on him and solely on that reflection is the emotion based, into which he is transported, and transports us. The object is here related to an idea, and on this relation alone is his poetic power based. The sentimental poet has therefore always to do with two conflicting representations and feelings, with reality as limit and with his idea as to the infinite, and the mixed feeling he inspires is always produced from this double source.

(Schillers Werke 20: 441)

Notice where all the emotion's coming from here: not from the object, not even from any impression of that object, but from reflection on the impression that objects produce on a perceiving consciousness. In his essay, Schiller associated the naïve with ancient writers, the sentimental with the modern. Now to my way of thinking,

this sort of association is significant. If you look at earlier 18<sup>th</sup> century comparisons of ancients v. moderns, they're typically just about who's better. What you're not so likely to find is a sense of one group of writers differing fundamentally from the other in terms of the very kind of literature they produce. So the way Schiller distinguishes ancient from modern is important, because the obvious takeaway from all this is that you're going to find writers reflecting on the impressions objects produce only after you've got writers trying to describe these objects realistically. In other words, it's never going to be the other way around. And in that respect we can say the kind of movement or shift we're seeing here is irreversible. After subjectivity, you don't go back to objectivity—unless that objectivity is itself infused with self-consciousness.

Shortly after Schiller's 1795 essay, Friedrich Schlegel (partly in response to Schiller) tried to frame the ancient v. modern comparison in a way that's clearly based on what Schiller says but takes it one step further, by trying to get more into the mindset of these ancient and modern groups. About the modern, Friedrich Schlegel in "On the Study of Greek Poetry" [ *Über das Studium der Griechischen Poesie* ] observes

It's immediately evident that modern poetry in terms of the goal it's striving for either hasn't yet reached it, or that its striving has in general no firm goal, its development no definite direction, the substance of its history no law-obeying connection, the whole no unity...

And subsequently:

The most prized modern poems appear to differ from this category [ portrayal of

the ugly ] more by degree than by type, and indeed it's a mild punishment of a more perfect beauty that it isn't so much in peaceful enjoyment as in unsatisfied longing. Indeed not infrequently one distances oneself from beauty all the more, the more violently one strives for it.

(KA I: 217-19)

At the time of his writing the “Studium” piece, interestingly, Friedrich Schlegel placed a much higher valuation on ancient than on modern writers. At this point, what he liked about Greek or classical art was its definiteness, its clear delineation of people and things, its clarity of consciousness (a phrase he used at that time), its objectivity. But it didn't take long for this to change: fast forward a few years to his “Dialogue on Poetry” [ Gespräch über die Poesie ] and we can see pretty clearly how he's gone over to the other side. Now everything he'd disliked before about the modern—its indefiniteness, its subjectivity, its endless striving for something it can hardly name or specify—gets a positive spin put on it. It's as if (as René Wellek so aptly puts it in his History of Modern Criticism) all the + signs had gotten changed to — and vice versa. And, as far as I'm aware, this is probably the first time we see a positive valuation of the modern. Hence the title of my talk: “Romantic Moderne” to signify how we need to start thinking about modernity as a concept that emerged out of Jena Romanticism or—putting it more broadly—Germany rather than England or France.

Friedrich Schlegel wasn't however the only one going through a sea change at this time. Even in Germany, people were very much aware of what had been happening in France. By the time Friedrich Schlegel was writing his “Studium” piece,

Louis XVI had gone to the scaffold, the Terror had already come and gone, and France was embarked on a course from which it couldn't turn back. As I said, Friedrich Schlegel named the French Revolution as one of the three dominant tendencies of the age (the others being exemplified by Fichte's Wissenschaftslehre and Goethe's Wilhelm Meister). But he wasn't the only one to notice. Unquestionably, the French Revolution had sent shock waves through all of Europe. Thirty years later, Carlyle would try retrospectively to register what the shock might've felt like. So in his French Revolution he talks about the breakup of the "World-Solecism" ( Centenary II: 96 ), the loss of belief in the French monarchy. Here we can think of solecism in a broader sense—not just a speech blunder but maybe something like a misnomer, because by 1795 "monarchy" had become something of a misnomer. Supposed to designate those who ruled from divine authority, it had been exposed as a sham, as a word that didn't signify what it was supposed to signify because the referent or signified didn't really exist. And this was something then being felt or registered all around the world. It isn't accidental, I suppose, that the execution of Louis XVI or, later, of Marie Antoinette gets more attention in Carlyle than the policies of the Terror. For Carlyle, the French Revolution is all about shock, and how it gets registered. From that standpoint, certainly, the execution of the king (or queen) is far more important than any papers issued by ministers or by the National Assembly. In this respect Carlyle looks a lot like Clarendon, who in his History of the Rebellion had similarly given a huge amount of space to the execution of Charles I—as to that of the Earl of Strafford before him. The execution of a king is just what's likely to produce the kind of shock Carlyle's talking about: everything

we might've believed about the king, about the divine right by which he supposedly ruled, comes to an abrupt end. When the king's no more, hard to believe any longer in divine right or authority.

But the French Revolution wasn't the biggest shock Europe suffered at that time. A much bigger shock was the one produced by the Napoleonic wars. Unlike the French Revolution, which for most people was something happening in far-away France, the Napoleonic wars brought the reality of that Revolution home to everybody all over Europe. At this point it's a bit hard to imagine the impact Napoleonic warfare must've had—but we can try. For one thing, the scale of warfare changed completely. A typical 18<sup>th</sup> century battle in continental Europe involved relatively small numbers of professional troops. Knowing that 6,000 French regulars sent to help out at Yorktown tipped the balance in favor of the American colonies in 1781 tells you all you need to know about the scale of 18<sup>th</sup> century conflict. By contrast, Napoleonic conflict was massive—usually over 100,000 men involved on any given battlefield. The French Revolution made it possible to wage war on a different scale: the cry of “la patrie en danger” allowed the French government to draft its entire population of young men to meet that danger. And Napoleon was happy to continue the practice. In fact, he applied it ruthlessly, calling up “classes” of young men (the class of 1802, 1803, 1804. ... ) long before their year had come. In this way a whole generation was tragically lost in the snows of Russia in 1812. But when you have the capacity to call on virtually any young man from Paris or the provinces to fill your ranks, a commander like Napoleon wasn't about to hesitate.

It's now time to return to Jena. When I mentioned it before, I spoke of it as a small town in eastern Germany. Clearly, anything happening intellectually in either the Schiller Gartenhaus or the nondescript pale green house occupied by many of the Frühromantiker (Friedrich Schlegel, Caroline Schlegel/Schelling, others) wasn't about to make big waves immediately. But something else that happened just outside the town of Jena around this time did have a huge impact. The battle of Jena, in which Napoleonic forces engaged those of Prussia, brought about the sudden, complete collapse of the Prussian monarchy.

To get an idea of how that happened, it's useful to look at the Jena landscape. Here, then, is a shot of the plateau just above the town (Jena itself is in the valley below, not quite visible from where we are).

[PPT 2: Jena landscape ]

Some years ago I was in Jena myself and somewhat curious to check out the actual battlefield site. What I found on getting to it was somewhat surprising—that the scene of conflict literally stretched for miles, to towns I couldn't even see from my vantage point at Cospeda (which gives, once again, an idea of scale). Anyway, looking at the PPT slide what you see is, obviously, a landscape of rolling hills and lots of forest blocking visibility—perfect, you might say, for screening rapid, undetected movement by an army corps. Which is exactly how Napoleon used it. The result was a classic example of Napoleonic battle tactics: the signature end-around move Napoleon used repeatedly to attack his enemies from the rear, causing a sudden stretching out of the enemy line to meet this attack and hence making

the whole formation vulnerable to frontal assault by his reserve force, what he called his “masse de décision.” Once broken up by that frontal assault, the entire enemy formation could then be pursued relentlessly by cavalry aided by artillery, until the formation had completely disintegrated. Such, then, was the kind of Blitzkrieg campaign typical of Napoleon, long before World War II.

This wasn't however the only aspect of Napoleonic warfare that changed the face of Europe. For a look at some of the others, we now need to resort to Abel Gance and his epic film on the battle of Austerlitz:

[ Gance: battle of Austerlitz excerpt 1 ]

[ Gance: battle of Austerlitz excerpt 2 ]

Here several aspects of the new style of conflict seem especially worth pointing out. Note, first of all, the rapidly shifting scene or place of conflict. Unlike the 18<sup>th</sup> century style where armies typically advanced against each other at a measured pace and in tight formation, Napoleonic forces look much more mobile. And in fact they were expected to cover a lot of ground, because of all the maneuvering involved. Second, note the use of massed artillery: Napoleon would typically move his cannon all over the battlefield as the focal point of the conflict changed, in order to concentrate all his firepower on a given point. The effect (from up to 150 cannon) could be terrifying. Finally, the casualties. Because this new style of warfare was aimed not just at inflicting tactical defeat but at breaking down and destroying an enemy

army entirely, casualties on both sides could be costly. In a way, the history of 19<sup>th</sup> century French medicine partly begins here, as a whole new cohort of surgical talent (Larrey, Percy, Coste) rose to prominence through their development of innovative surgical procedures on the battlefield. But the numbers of those killed and wounded could be appalling. And clearly, once conflict had escalated to this new level, there could be no going back. What Hegel saw from a distance at Jena on 14 October 1806 was—as he himself recognized—a new world beginning to take shape.

Finally I want to shift the scene again, this time to rural England. Specifically we're looking now at the Wye River meandering its way through a northern English landscape, the so-called Lake District.

[ PPT 3: Tintern Abbey + Wye River ]

[ PPT 4: ¼ mile above Tintern Abbey + Wye River ]

In the second of these PPT images, we're seeing particularly the ruins of ancient Tintern Abbey, much as another observer would've seen them in July 1798. That observer, of course, was William Wordsworth. But while the idyllic landscape he found himself gazing at was one that probably hadn't witnessed much change for several hundred years, he himself had changed. Hence his desire to record the moment, in his famous poem.

[ PPT 5: Wordsworth, "Lines... Tintern Abbey..." text ]

What I want to focus on particularly here is a pattern or sequence that hasn't,

I think, been sufficiently noticed. We might call it the sequence by which Wordsworth comes to a recognition of the irrevocable. And what triggers it is something he can't assimilate: rural poverty and, beyond that, the growing misery of a new urban scene. Years ago Marjorie Levinson pointed out, in her well-known reading of this poem, the haunting aspect of that rural poverty which we see in (2) with the mention of "vagrant dwellers," occupying a kind of liminal space somewhere on the fringes of the poem's consciousness. Wordsworth knew, of course, exactly how those "vagrant dwellers" had gotten to be there: by the enclosure of what had previously been common pasture land, which prevented these people from using it to scratch out a living by growing food for themselves and their livestock, thereby reducing them to poverty. It's the story of big-city capitalism gradually transforming the rural scene irrevocably, a story brooded on even more fully in the poems of John Clare.

My argument is that Wordsworth struggled to assimilate this evidence of irrevocable change and, finding he can't, comes to recognize its irrevocability in seeing how he himself had changed and, still unable to make sense of the larger change, tries to sublimate it in pantheism. We've already seen the unassimilable element in (2). Notice how Wordsworth tries to submerge it in (3), where he refers to it specifically as the "weary weight of all this unintelligible world"—a weight he hopes will be "lightened" by the memory of landscape. This leads to the introspective movement of (4), a moment in which he specifically turns inward. Nonetheless he doesn't find rest there, partly because what he comes to realize is that he's no longer the same unreflective, unselfconscious person

he was in those earlier days—a person very close to Nature, as he now notices, in in his lack of self-consciousness. And this leads him on to (5), which is the moment of explicit recognition of how he’s changed: “That time is past, / And all its aching joys are now no more.” As a result we get “For I have learned / To look on nature, not as in the hour / Of thoughtless youth, but hearing oftentimes / The still, sad music of humanity”—which is to say: the music of thought, reflection, self-consciousness. But because he can’t be satisfied with that, we then get (6), Wordsworth’s attempt to sublimate the trouble caused by this recognition of the irrevocable within himself into a larger pantheism. One way of seeing such a move might be that, unable to deal with his awareness of time (the irrevocable), Wordsworth then tries to trade it off for space, omnipresence. But unsuccessfully. In the final section, (7), we see him moving on: to his sister (consoling human presences), nature, the landscape, the world out there. What we register, however, is that all these moves don’t quite suffice to prevent recognition of the irrevocable, which is the beginning of modernity.

## II. Mid-Century

Modernity begins in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century—the Romantic era—as a sense of the irrevocable or of how we can't go back to where we were, but by mid-century it's acquired a very different sense. Now it's no longer about the irrevocable but about the passing of time and our falling behind. One of the best places to see this is in Matthew Arnold. I begin with a famous passage from his Essays in Criticism that expresses quite well the mid-century sense of modernity:

Modern times find themselves with an immense system of institutions, established facts, accredited dogmas, customs, rules, which have come to them from times not modern. In this system their life has to be carried forward, yet they have a sense that this system is not of their own creation, that it by no means corresponds exactly with the wants of their actual life, that, for them, it is customary, not rational. The awakening of this sense is the awakening of the modern spirit.

(Lectures & Essays in Criticism, p. 109)

I have to confess I've come to see Matthew Arnold a bit differently in recent

years from the way I saw him before. I used to think of him as holding out for a kind of objectivity. Toward that end the touchstones were meant to act as reference points, and all the philological criticism of the Old Testament and New Testament from his later years pointed to an effort to establish what we can know objectively about these texts and the background circumstances from which they arose. Well, not any more. What I've now come to feel is that Arnold is much more about subjectivity. If we think about his famous dictum on the function of criticism—"to see the object as in itself it really is"—maybe we ought to put the emphasis in a different place: not on "the object as in itself it really is" but on the seeing. After all, whether we see it or not doesn't have any effect on the object. It is what it is. But our seeing it "as in itself it really is" can affect us in a very significant way.

One of the reasons I've come to see Arnold differently has to do with his affinity for Heinrich Heine, subject of the essay I've quoted from. As I've gotten to know Heine better, I've come to realize he's also very much about subjectivity of a particular kind, one where you keep trying to pressure the world out there to be what you want it to be. One of the best places to see that is in his description of the funeral procession for Napoleon when his body was brought back from the island of St. Helena in 1840 for burial in the Hôtel des Invalides. A contemporary illustration captured the moment:

[ PPT 1: Napoleon funeral procession ]

Heine had a very complicated relation to Napoleon. On the one hand, Heine

clearly didn't like any regime that was too authoritarian—and the First Empire was definitely that, to put it mildly. On the other hand, Heine very quickly came to see how Napoleon I could be used to criticize the doings of Louis Philippe, the “citizen king.” As the century moved deeper and deeper into everyday drabness, everyone—including Heine—probably couldn't help yearning for the glory of the First Empire. All this and more comes out quite clearly, I think, in the description from Lutezia I of the funeral cortege of Napoleon:

But this mist dissolved miraculously, as soon as the cortege reached the Champs-Élysées. Here the sun broke suddenly out of the dark clouds and kissed for the last time its favorite, and strewed rosy light over the imperial eagle that preceded it, and as if with soft compassion shone over the poor, meager remnant of those legions that once at the double-quick conquered the world, and now, with disappearing uniforms, weary limbs and altered manner, staggered along behind the hearse as mourners. Between ourselves, these disabled veterans of the Grand Armée looked like caricatures, like a satire on glory, like a Roman mockery of a dead Emperor!

(Sämtliche Werke 13/1: 110)

Notice how the passage moves from the soft glory hovering over the imperial eagle to the decrepit appearance of the mourners. Like much else in Heine, this passage begs to be taken reflexively, as referring back to himself. If these disabled veterans look so bad, it's because they're clearly past their time. And that's the way it is with Heine, who clearly wishes he were back in the glory days. So this is what modernity looks like at mid-century: a sense or feeling that time has somehow passed us by, left us behind in such a way that we can no longer feel right about it. Unlike Arnold, then, Heine isn't looking forward to the future. But the effect

is the same: we're out of joint with our time.

Paris in 1840 was clearly a place where you could feel out of joint with your time: in the French capital, things kept moving. After 1848, however, they started to move even more quickly. Unlike Louis Philippe, Napoleon III—who emerged from the revolutionary tumult—was totally into empire building. With the help of Baron Haussmann as chief planner, the Second Empire witnessed a massive and sweeping renovation of Paris that brought a completely different look to the city: broad, straight avenues in place of narrow, winding streets and a uniform architectural style imposed on all new residences. One area targeted for revamping was the Place du Carrousel within the Louvre complex, which up to this time had managed to hold onto its odd, ramshackle collection of old buildings:

[ PPT 2: Place du Carrousel, 1850 ]

As the city planners saw it, these buildings in effect blocked the vista as well as the throughway from the Louvre to the Tuileries and beyond, all the way up to the Arc de Triomphe at the end of the Champs-Élysées. To the city planners, then, it seemed like an easy, natural move to just sweep these old buildings away.

At least one Paris resident wasn't terribly happy about it, however. He made his feelings evident in a poem entitled "Le Cygne" [ The Swan ] which was published within a collection he called Les Fleurs du Mal:

Andromaque, I think of you! This tiny stream,  
Poor and sad mirror where formerly shone  
The immense majesty of your widow's grief,  
This lying Simois swollen by your tears,

Suddenly fed my fertile memory  
As I crossed the new Carrousel.  
Old Paris is no more (the form of a city  
Changes more quickly, alas, than the heart of a mortal);

I see only in my mind all this camp of barracks,  
This heap of half-formed capitals and barrels,  
The grasses, the big blocks of stone greened by puddles of water,  
And, gleaming at the endpoint, the confused bric-a-brac.

There spread out formerly a zoo;  
There I saw, one morning, at the hour where under skies  
cold and clear Work awakens, where the road network  
Launches a somber storm-cloud in the silent air,

A swan who had escaped from its cage  
And, with its webbed feet rubbing the dry pavement,  
On the rough ground dragging its white plumage,  
By a streambed without water the bird opened its beak

Bathing nervously its wings in the dust,  
And said, its heart full of the beautiful lake where it was born,  
“Water, when will you gush again? when will you rumble, thunder?  
I see this unfortunate, strange and fatal myth,

Toward the sky occasionally, like the man in Ovid,  
Toward the sky ironic and cruelly blue,  
On its convulsive neck craning its thirsty head,  
As if addressing reproaches to God!

(Oeuvres complètes I, pp. 85-87)

Because of its length, I've given only the first half of the poem here. Baudelaire starts off by invoking Andromache, widowed by the death of Hector and subsequently taken to Greece as one of the spoils of war after the fall of Troy.

At first it almost looks as if we're in for one of those 18<sup>th</sup> century imitations of classical verse, complete with all the accompanying antique place-names. But then, suddenly, the scene shifts to Paris and we're very much in the present, in real time. Baudelaire even gives us a whiff of construction dust as well as other inconveniences, like those parts of columns left lying around getting green with mold because the city planners' schemes seem to be racing far ahead of the capacity of their workforce. At this point, we get another shift as the speaker's attention turns to a swan from the now-defunct zoo who's been left behind. But the swan can't shake off its old habits or practices: it's still looking for water where it used to find it. Unlike a lot of animals, though, the swan isn't just going to accept this altered situation. Instead, it voices a complaint: "Water, when will you gush again? when will you rumble, thunder?" As it does that, we suddenly realize that this isn't just any ordinary bird, that it's clearly taken on an anthropomorphic quality. In the very next line, in fact, the poem confirms that explicitly, referring to the swan as "this unfortunate, strange and fatal myth." So we need to take what the swan's saying seriously. Interestingly, the swan doesn't just ask why it's not getting any water, but rather when the water will come back again—as if it has a sense of time, and even of cyclicity. In addition, it appears to be associating water with something like spiritual renewal, asking not just for water but for thunder and, implicitly, rain. And now we've got the bird turning toward the sky "like the man in Ovid" (more anthropomorphic) and as if "addressing reproaches to God."

So now we've gone outside the classical frame. But you can't just keep increasing anthropomorphism indefinitely. At last we realize: this swan

is simply Baudelaire himself. Finally, then, it's Baudelaire who feels he's out of joint with time, wanting a return to what he apparently saw as better days. Of course he isn't going to get it, which he knows perfectly well. So "Le Cygne" becomes a lament for the passing of time, which in this way is associated with modernity.

Baudelaire also voiced his feeling about the passing of time in other places as well. One of the most memorable can be found in his description of the work of Constantin Guys, whom he very much admired. Since Guys doesn't figure much in surveys of 19<sup>th</sup> century French art these days, it's worth looking at one of his pictures more closely:

[ PPT 3: Constantin Guys, "Leaving the Theater" ]

In the past, I always used to feel a bit puzzled by Baudelaire's admiration for Guys. Looking at Guys's work, I just wasn't able to find much in it. Thinking about it in terms of Baudelaire's feeling for time passing, however, makes its qualities come out a bit more clearly. After all, what "Leaving the Theater" is about is that transitional moment when we're merely between one thing and the next: no longer engrossed in the play, but not home yet either. The way Guys portrays the moment works to amplify this point: the faces barely sketched so we don't really see their expression very clearly, the washed-out sepia-like tone of the clothing of the men, and even the women in just a slightly stronger blue. None of this, however, needs to be seen very clearly, because we're simply moving on. And that's how we get the feeling of time passing: by having our experience of it recalled via one of those particularly typical

instances. Thinking about Guys and his typical subject matter, Baudelaire

in “The Painter of Modern Life” [ *Le Peintre de la vie moderne* ] can then frame

very explicitly his own sense of modernity as awareness of time passing:

Modernity is the transitory, the fugitive, the contingent, that half of art of which the other half is the eternal and immutable. There was a modernity for each antique painter: the majority of the beautiful portraits that remain to us are clothed in the costumes of their epoch. They're perfectly harmonious, because the costume, the hairstyle, and even the gesture, the look and the smile (each epoch has its way of carrying itself, its look and its smile) form a whole that's completely vital. This transitory, fugitive element whose metamorphoses are so frequent, you don't have the right to scorn or pass by. In suppressing it you automatically fall into the void of an abstract and indefinable beauty like that of the one woman before Original Sin. If for the costume of the time, which necessarily imposes itself, you substitute another, you get into a misinterpretation which can have no excuse except in the case of a fashionable masquerade. Thus the goddesses, nymphs, and sultanas of the 18<sup>th</sup> century are portraits that psychologically resemble each other.

(Oeuvres complètes II, p. 695)

One way of summarizing what Baudelaire's trying to say here would be that you can't neglect your own time. But the reason you can't neglect it isn't finally because of the beauty of its costume or dress but because by neglecting it you don't experience and so can't convey the feeling of time passing. Baudelaire says modernity is the transitory, the fugitive, the contingent. More significantly, he goes on to claim every period has its own modernity. And the reason it does is because each period dresses itself in a costume it knows to be ephemeral. But that's okay—because what each period is doing is getting up its own style or way of expressing itself, which it does by people finding a particular way of carrying themselves, by the way they look, how they smile, etc. They know these won't last, that another period will

find another style, but that's okay too, because the ephemerality of this style (like that of fashion) is precisely what they want. By experiencing that ephemerality they experience what life is all about: the sense of time passing. So the only unpardonable sin is dressing your people up in the costume of another period, because then what you're doing is trying to deny that feeling of ephemerality by being above time. In doing that, however, you're not really facing up to what your period—or any period—is really about, which is precisely its own ephemerality. For Baudelaire, then, modernity is modern in the sense that it's aware of its own time. And the heart of that awareness isn't the sense of being more modern than the period before it, but rather of being aware of the transience of time, of its perpetually passing away.

My final example of mid-century modernity is taken from the American rather than British or European scene. Mid-19<sup>th</sup> century Wall St. in New York looked a bit different from the way it does now:

[ PPT 4: Wall St., 1864 ]

However that may be, it offered Herman Melville (native New Yorker) a chance to reflect on the problem of modernity from a highly original, even unique viewpoint. In his writing—as in his life—Melville always took chances. For that reason, maybe, he didn't go for the obvious way of treating modernity—which he could've done so easily with a story set in New York. Which is to say: he didn't go for it as a way of commenting on the urban scene. Yes, I know “Bartleby the Scrivener” lends itself to this kind of treatment very easily. But I think what Melville was really after

was something much deeper, something that wasn't to be found in the stone and concrete appearance of Wall St. but that had to do, rather, with the way its people had evolved over time. In her book Confidence Men and Painted Women the American historian Karen Halttunen shows how New York and other places had gradually achieved modernity: by becoming places where people didn't really know each other because they didn't know where others had come from, what their roots or backgrounds were, and so couldn't hope to know what people really were. And that's the situation we find in "Bartleby": the narrator doesn't really know Bartleby, doesn't know where he came from. To some extent, I think, Melville sees this process as inevitable: given how big modern cities come to be what they are, you can't really expect everybody to know everybody. That's perhaps an inescapable condition of modernity. For him, though, the important question is whether we can find a way of getting over that. So we've got all the high walls, both physical and psychological, separating people from each other so that each remains trapped within his or her own individual subjectivity. Significantly, Bartleby makes an appeal to the narrator. Of all the instances of his famous preference ("I would prefer not to") the only one that isn't negative is "I would prefer not to leave you." In other words, in a very indirect way, what Bartleby's asking for here is something like friendship, acknowledgment of a shared humanity. And that's precisely what—sadly—the narrator can't seem to give him. Maybe the narrator's not even fully aware of the kind of appeal Bartleby's making. But the deeper reason, I think, is one we can glean from a clue the story leaves at the very end: the Dead Letter Office. There are many ways of reading it, but one (given Melville's familiarity with the Bible)

strikes me as inescapable. We recall the famous dictum of St. Paul: “the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life” (2 Cor. 3:6). There are of course plenty of ways of reading this too, but the one I think Melville was likely to have had in mind was that if we live by the letter of the law, we’re all condemned. But if we live by the spirit—in other words, by that charity or generosity that goes beyond the letter—we can hope to survive. This charity or generosity, however, is precisely what the narrator can’t find it within himself to give. As a result, Bartleby goes down. For Melville, then, this is perhaps the deep problem of modernity. Because of so many unavoidable factors (money, among others) cities are destined to grow, and with them the problem of our no longer knowing each other. The question, though, is whether we manage to find a way of overcoming that problem which will allow us to come to terms with our modernity.

### III. Modernism

20<sup>th</sup> century Modernism (or High Modernism) took a very different view of modernity from that of its predecessors. And that's because its sense of time was very different. We've seen how the Romantic era experienced modernity as something irrevocable: key events like the French Revolution and—even more important—the Napoleonic wars had forever changed the face of Europe, so that we simply couldn't go back to what had been before. The mid-century experienced modernity as time passing. There's a sense of our struggling to catch up to time, of change happening too quickly for us to adjust. So if Modernism felt itself to be totally in sync with modernity and even able to control and arrange time, we might see this as just progressive: first we're in shock (Romantic moderne), then we're always behind (mid 19th-century), and now we've finally caught up. In fact, I suspect the actual trajectory is probably a bit different. The end of the nineteenth century witnessed a complete breakdown of

objectivity, or a kind of extreme subjectivism. By the time we get to Modernism (1920s, say), we're no longer in any position to be playing catch up. Instead, you might say that after complete breakdown the only thing possible is complete re-formation. And that, I think, is what we find with Modernism: no longer experiencing time as objective, as part of the world out there, and as a result forced to make up its own time. This isn't to say people aren't experiencing time, or that they don't have a sense of time passing or of things changing. On the contrary: we might say people living in the heyday of 1920s Modernism felt everything to be changing very quickly. But that isn't necessarily the same thing as experiencing time. If we think of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century view of time as something objective, it's then possible to talk about our being connected to time as part of being connected to the world out there. Time is an ongoing sequence of events but we're part of that sequence, we fit in somewhere—even if we feel it all to be happening too quickly. By the early twentieth century, though, we might imagine people to be seeing time differently. At this point we no longer have objective time because we've lost the sense of graspable sequence—which is to say: we're no longer sure of where everything's going. And that means any kind of formation or arrangement of time is now possible.

My first example of this new consciousness of time as something capable of being structured or arranged in whatever way we choose comes from a novel by Alfred Döblin: Berlin Alexanderplatz. German modernism has been getting a lot of attention recently, and for good reason. Clearly it's quite different from Paris modernism or the Anglo-American modernism of Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, James Joyce

et al. Less into formalism, more into the whole sense of lived time as it was experienced in the early twentieth century, and into what we might call the phenomenology of consciousness. Because of all that, German modernism is I think at its best in the novel, where it conveys an extraordinarily fluid sense of time that's very much contoured to what its characters are experiencing. But before we start looking at Berlin Alexanderplatz I thought it might be interesting to take a quick glance at the Berlin square after which the novel is named, at roughly the time (1929) the novel was written:

[ PPT 1: Alexanderplatz in 1929 ]

[ PPT: 2: Alexanderplatz with surrounding layout ]

My 1<sup>st</sup> photo shows just the square itself, my 2<sup>nd</sup> the square with a bit more of the surrounding layout. Notice in the 2<sup>nd</sup> photo all the fenced-off construction material lying in the foreground. This is a motif that keeps popping up in the novel. When Franz Biberkopf first emerges from Tegel prison he's immediately assaulted by the deafening noise of construction work all around him. Later the novel comes back to this same motif, mentioning specifically the work going on around Alexanderplatz, use of a pile driver, buildings going down (some with a history). But overall the impression is still positive: all this construction work is essentially formative, we can feel something new in the process of emerging. I think the reason Döblin likes to introduce construction work as a motif is to hint at another kind of formative process going on. Throughout this novel we repeatedly find time being stretched or contracted

to fit what the characters are experiencing. So some events that are important to the characters—the murder of Franz Biberkopf’s former mistress Ida, later the murder of Mieke, all the trouble connected with Reinhold—keep getting replayed. It’s all part of the very plastic sense of time displayed by the novel. And then, at roughly the midpoint of the work, we get a bit of explicit authorial commentary on this process:

There are no grounds for despair. As I continue my story, and follow it through to its rough, awful, bitter conclusion, I will often have cause to repeat: there are no grounds for despair. For while the man whose story I am telling is no ordinary man, he is at least ordinary inasmuch as we exactly understand him, and sometimes tell ourselves: we would have done the same as he did at each point and put ourselves through what he did. I promise, although this is not customary, not to keep silent during the story.

It is the grisly truth that I tell about Franz Biberkopf, who left home in all innocence, against his will took part in a break-in, and was thrown under the wheels of a car. There he lies, under the wheels, having unquestionably tried his hardest to keep to the straight way. But is precisely this not cause for despair, where is the sense in this criminal, repulsive and pitiable nonsense, what twisted meaning can be imputed here, maybe even to become the fate of Franz Biberkopf?

I say again: no cause for despair. I have the odd surprise still up my sleeve, perhaps some readers can already sense something. A slow revelation is in progress, you will see Franz undergo it, and finally everything will be made clear.

(p. 205)

Clearly the novel is shaping time. And clearly there’s no anxiety about time passing, or about falling behind. Whatever Franz Biberkopf might be feeling, however out of sync he might be with the new Berlin that’s been emerging during his prison years—all that doesn’t matter. What does matter is that the narrative is supremely confident it can pull it all together. But if Berlin Alexanderplatz

displays this kind of confidence, it can only be because Döblin doesn't believe in objective time. Instead, if the only kind of time we've got is one that contours itself around our experiences, then time will always be arrangeable, always shapeable. So there's no reason to worry. Rather than objective time, what we now have is time as a formal construction.

I want to pass now to another instance of Modernist time by shifting the scene to America and specifically New York, focusing on the prologue to Hart Crane's long poem The Bridge, entitled "To Brooklyn Bridge." Before we get to that, however, I think it's useful (as with Berlin Alexanderplatz) to take a quick look at the ostensible subject of this prologue, the actual Brooklyn Bridge itself. Here we have 2 photos, the first an "art" photo by professional photographer Walker Evans whose work Crane knew and admired, the 2<sup>nd</sup> a shot of Brooklyn Bridge as it looks to the ordinary present-day observer.

[ PPT 3: Walker Evans, Brooklyn Bridge ]

[ PPT 4: current Brooklyn Bridge ]

Somewhat surprisingly, not a huge difference between the 2 photos.

It's as if Walker Evans has just elicited or emphasized an aspect of Brooklyn

Bridge that's very much part of the actual bridge, or our impression of it:

the strong rhythmic feel provided by the bridge towers combined with the suspenders connecting these and the suspension cables dropping down from those suspenders

to the deck. In both instances, we feel we're very much within a network or framework of lines, with a strong sense of movement via the suspenders going all the way up to the top of each tower. But movement is connected to time. Hence the emphasis in "To Brooklyn Bridge" on time as arising from our impression of Brooklyn Bridge. Unlike Döblin in Berlin Alexanderplatz, however, Crane doesn't see time as merely an index of our own formative, creative activity. Instead, he seems to want to define it as a way of giving structure to our experiences. So "To Brooklyn Bridge," like Berlin Alexanderplatz, offers a Modernist shaping of time by means of human artifice. Yet in contrast to Alexanderplatz, it doesn't see the time created thereby merely as a way of organizing our experiences, but rather as giving these something closer to objective structure. In that way, it approaches the level of the mythical.

[ PPT 5-8: Hart Crane, "To Brooklyn Bridge" ]

We start with natural time: the seagull, by its circular movement of soaring, dipping down, and soaring up again produces a natural version of time. The text speaks of it as "Shedding white rings of tumult"—the blur of movement coming from the motion of its wings in flight. By being repeated, this circular movement is progressively building a vision of Liberty or freedom—the bird high above the "chained bay waters" that represent a lack of freedom, unable ever to rise above their present level.

But the bird disappears. With "inviolable curve"—the curve of its flight—the bird is said to "forsake our eyes." The text then speaks of it as "apparitional,"

comparing it to “sails that cross some page of figures to be filed away”:  
in other words, as apparitional as some daydream we have while stuck  
in our boring office work routine (accounting, it looks like, getting done in some  
huge New York skyscraper). Yet an apparition can often be a hint pointing  
to better things, as maybe here.

We then pass to our first version of human—as opposed to natural—time:  
the cinema. In the 1920s, the early years of cinema, viewers were probably much more  
aware of motion in film. So we have the speaker referring to “panoramic sleights” by  
which film would induce its audience to imagine a scene, by showing everything  
leading up to it. By hinting at but not showing, however, what cinema does  
is to get us to think of sequence. Sequence is what will happen next. And with  
cinema sequence we get our first version of human time.

From cinema we then pass to something more objective: Brooklyn  
Bridge, seen from across the harbor. After all, cinema, like the flight of the seagull,  
had been “apparitional,” illusory in the sense that it’s movement that disappears  
without any trace. Not so the Bridge. Instead, the speaker admiringly addresses it  
as “silver paced / As though the sun took step of thee.” Pacing implies intervals, and  
from these intervals we get time. Here we can imagine the pacing as supplied  
by the cables hung at regular intervals from the bridge suspenders. Because of that  
regularity, it seems, the Bridge or human time can almost appear to dictate  
to natural time (“As though the sun took step of thee”)—in other words, the sun  
takes its cue from the Bridge. But the Bridge isn’t just motion but also potency.  
So the sun light it up “yet left / Some motion ever unspent in thy stride,—.”

My guess here is that the “unspent” motion comes from the viewer or observer: we take in the Bridge, and especially the curve of its suspenders as they rise to the height of the towers. And this is like the movement of waves, which always, as Crane says, give a sense of “some motion ever unspent in thy stride,” a sense of always having something more. Its having that “unspent” motion is in turn why the speaker can then characterize the Bridge as he does in the last line of the stanza: “Implicitly thy freedom staying thee!” It’s precisely because the Bridge doesn’t expend all its potency or capacity for movement (the wave-like curve always suggesting something more) that we can speak of its freedom—which is just another name for that potency or capacity. This potency or unspent capacity for motion is also perhaps what attracts the speaker to the Bridge: the sense it conveys of being not just motion but the source of movement.

I pass over the next several stanzas more quickly: they seem to mark the long interval of day between dawn and night and—perhaps for that reason—look to be less fraught with mystery or poetry. Boredom or despair is suggested (the “bedlamite” and his/her suicide attempt), but note also the many references to time: “from girder into street noon leaks... / All afternoon the cloud flown derricks turn... / of anonymity time cannot raise.” It’s as if we’re making a long day’s journey into night.

Finally, though, we manage to get there: I take the invocation “O harp and altar” as marking the turning point. The Bridge, of course, is both: harp-like in its shape, but also suggestive of an altar because it’s a vehicle for worship of the unseen, of that potency of movement it conveys. And here’s where it

begins to take on a more mythical aspect, not just the result of mechanical labor  
“(How could mere toil align thy choiring strings!)” but hinting at something  
more spiritual (“choiring strings” of course looking forward to the Aeolian harp image  
of “Atlantis,” final section of The Bridge). So it can be “Terrific threshold of the  
prophet’s pledge, / Prayer of pariah, and the lover’s cry.” People look to it, in other  
words, for different things, of which it offers a symbolic embodiment.

And now, finally, night has come: the “traffic lights that skim thy swift /  
Unfractioned idiom” refers, I suggest, to the lights on the suspenders, clearly visible at  
night. Crane then gives us a wonderful bit of imagery: “immaculate sigh of stars, /  
Beading thy path.” It’s as if the lights on the suspender cable with its upward curve  
could be seen as the visual equivalent of an exhaling sigh, going upward.  
Lights = stars because of their brightness, but these can also be described as “Beading  
thy path” because they mark (like beads on a string) the upward curve of the suspenders.  
As a result of punctuating the suspender curve by their regular intervals, these  
lights then become a form of time. And as time they can be said to “condense eternity.”  
But the upward movement of the suspender curve also conveys lift, which is why  
“we have seen night lifted in thine arms”—a movement very reminiscent, by the way,  
of the end of Crane’s later poem “The Broken Tower”: “And lifts love in its shower.”  
In an essay on the unity of Beethoven’s late quartets, Deryck Cooke once spoke  
of composers as recurring to a few basic pitch-patterns. Here we might see  
this lifting movement as a poetic equivalent to one of those.

The next stanza is both anticipation (“Under thy shadow by the piers I  
waited”) and retrospect (“Already snow submerges an iron year...”). But the basic sense

seems to be that as the city lights go out (“The City’s fiery parcels all undone”) the structure of the Bridge becomes more visible.

The final stanza is almost dreamlike in its transcendence of space, its compression of time. “O Sleepless as the river under thee”: we sleep, and in sleeping dream, but the Bridge, like the river, doesn’t sleep. Nonetheless, it manages in some symbolic sense to abolish the limitations of space: “Vaulting the sea, the prairies’ dreaming sod.” Which is to say: the Bridge spans all of mythic America.

“Unto us lowliest sometime sweep, descend”: like the seagull at the beginning of the poem, the Bridge goes down to the lowliest, so as to take everything with it in its upward movement. “And of the curveship lend a myth to God”: here the curveship is, as we’ve seen, that of the suspenders going to the top of the Bridge towers. But this curveship is also, as we know, expressive of that wave-like potency the Bridge possesses, making it not just movement but potentially the source of future movement as well. And this is how it begins to take on a mythical aspect. Because the curve of the Bridge is indicative of movement and hence time, it takes us into itself: as time, it gives structure to our experiences, and hence to our lives. We’ve seen how the poem is about one long day’s journey into night. In that way, you might say, it’s about time and how we live in time. But while the Bridge offers an embodiment of time (“silver paced / As though the sun took step of thee”) it’s also human artifice, the expression of human creativity. In that respect we can see it as expressive, finally, of the ultimate Modernist ambition: no longer living in time as part of the world out there but instead seeking to create our own time as the objective structure in which we live.

If Modernism is about creating time, we can see the movement called Abstract Expressionism as forming a kind of coda or epilogue to this brief history of modernity. Simply put, in Abstract Expressionism there's no more time. And the reason time disappears is because now the work of art takes all of consciousness into itself, into a space where the only experiences we have are no longer those of our lives but those we have with the work of art itself. One painter whose work shows this especially well is Mark Rothko. Rothko wrote a fair amount about art, but if you read his early writing (The Artist's Reality) you find it isn't terribly illuminating about what seems to be going on in his later work. Two later statements, though, seem more useful:

Mark Rothko, "The romantics were prompted" (1947)

I think of my pictures as dramas; the shapes in the pictures are the performers...

Neither the action nor the actors can be anticipated, or described in advance. They begin as an unknown adventure in an unknown space. It is at the moment of completion that in a flash of recognition, they are seen to have the quantity and function which was intended. Ideas and plans that existed in the mind at the start were simply the doorway through which one left the world in which they occur.

(p. 58)

Mark Rothko, Address to the Pratt Institute

I want to create a state of intimacy—an immediate transaction. Large pictures take you into them. Scale is of tremendous importance to me—human scale. My pictures are involved with these human values. This is always what I think about it.

(p. 128)

With these in mind, we can now turn to a later example of his work:

[ PPT 9: Mark Rothko, 1957 #20 ]

Like the Bridge, then, a Rothko painting is designed to “take you into” it. Unlike the Bridge, however, it’s no longer about time in any way. So although Rothko refers to his pictures as “dramas,” they’re clearly not drama in the ordinary sense—given that the shapes in the pictures are the only performers. Instead, we might say the world they occupy is purely spatial. Rothko talks about an “action” occurring within the work. In that sense we might say that while there’s action, there’s really no more time because this action is happening only within the work, not in our lives. This, then, is how Abstract Expressionism becomes a coda or epilogue to our history of modernity: by transposing what used to happen within the realm of lived time onto one that’s purely spatial. Nonetheless, the “action” occurring within the painting is clearly relevant to us: Rothko speaks of his pictures as “involved with these human values.” I see them as all about a process by which we come to recognize the rectangular shapes on the canvas as suggestive of numinous presences. Basically, to get something out of a Rothko painting you have to look at it for a long time. But when you do that, you discover that the rectangular shapes depicted there seem to be in some way growing in their luminosity. That’s what I mean by describing them as numinous presences. They suggest something more than the literal shapes they represent. It’s not too far-fetched, I think, to see them as an abstract expression of what we might call the “thingness” of things, their noumenal quality. And if we saw

these rectangular shapes that way, we might see the process by which they seem to grow, achieve a kind of luminousness, as a sort of presencing, a revealing of their essential being. For Rothko, I suspect, our becoming aware of that essential being of things possessed a religious or spiritual aspect, and seems to be what he had in mind in speaking of the “action” taking place within a painting. But this action that’s taking place within a painting is, as we’ve seen, one that by happening solely within the picture plane is removed from the element of time in which we live. In that sense, then, we can see it as having brought the history of modernity to an end.