



The Magnet has a Soul & Everything is Water

How modernism is ancient by Darran Anderson

‘On or about December 1910,’ Virginia Woolf wrote in her essay *Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown*, ‘human character changed.’ *Homo modernus* had emerged, like some rough but eloquent beast, in the depths of an English winter. Woolf’s perspective of the birth of modernism was subjective of course and the date has been continually disputed. In his recent study, *Constellation of Genius*, Kevin Jackson selected as late as 1922 as ‘Modernism Year One.’ For many, T.S. Eliot included, the industrialised threshing of an entire generation of European youth by their parents in the Great War of 1914 to 1918 fragmented the old order and created something different, either as a presence or an absence. This was supported by the appearance of dada in the wartime refuge of Zurich; being a wilfully deranged but, to paraphrase R.D. Laing, rational reaction to an insane world. Yet there were identifiable modernists before this—Apollinaire, Marinetti, Jarry—to say nothing of the forerunners of modernism: Nietzsche, Ibsen, Jean-Pierre Brisset, Conrad, Strindberg, Lautréamont, Rimbaud. What becomes clear the further back you go, is this process does not effectively come to a standstill. There is no absolute point of beginning. As a way of looking at the world and recreating it, modernism, meta-modernism, postmodernism and deconstructionism have always been with us, long before we gave them such ludicrous names.

The timing of modernism is important because of the vacuum it’s perceived to have left when it dissipated (a likewise disputed period between the World Wars). With





commendable intentions, the more adventurous writers today bemoan the fall of the movement and the retreat of much of the literary community into pseudo-Victorian ways of approaching the novel. They discuss its loss with a hint of grief and the desire that it will come again, resurrected to save the day, like millenarian peasants awaiting the Messiah or Jacobites the Young Pretender. Who will save us from ourselves? A more compelling view is that modernism was not entirely obliterated in a collective loss of nerve but survived abroad, in isolated pockets, underground, or flourished in science fiction and comic books. Yet when you begin to list the writers who have reputedly kept the spirit of modernism alive, you find their number is colossal, making up the more critically acclaimed sections of contemporary literature. Indeed, the loss of confidence is not restricted to mainstream novelists. The admirable question posed by Gabriel Josipovici—*What Ever Happened to Modernism?*—has been answered not by polemics but by fiction. It is still there when we search for it.

Modernism didn't disappear because it never definitively appeared. It has been part of our character since at least the earliest identifiable story, the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, and the trail only runs cold there because the archaeology of the written word does. It's not a question of colonising the past and extending modernism back through the centuries. Rather, it is to merely detect what's already there when we look back.

Let's begin with the more cursory signs that an authoritative date of origin cannot be established; we find these most obviously in the great disruptors of early twentieth century





culture, the progenitors of the new primitivism. When the colonialists sent back plunder from the lands and peoples they'd invaded and subjugated, they did so to create a sort of imperial *wunderkammer*, a cabinet of curiosities gathered from the farthest reaches of their territories. The exotic and unrefined nature of the artefacts would prove, by contrast, the superiority of civilisation. They made, however, a costly mistake displaying their thefts. The artists were watching, many of them godless cosmopolitans, immigrants and bohemians. Whilst their discoveries were only in the sense of Columbus discovering the Americas, they nonetheless had a profound effect on the course of modern culture, challenging the orthodoxies and establishments of art. When you view Munch's *The Scream*, you are seeing a work inspired, not just by the artist's breakdown ('I stood there trembling with anxiety—and I sensed an infinite shriek passing through nature') but by the silent cadaverous shriek of a Peruvian mummy he'd viewed in the Louvre. The very same skeleton appeared as a harbinger of death in *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* by Paul Gauguin, another anxiety-riven edge of suicide masterpiece. Similarly, Picasso's radical *Les Femmes d'Alger* was partially based on African and Oceanic tribal masks (the artist had picked up masks (re)stolen from the Louvre on the black-market), as were early disconcertingly 'new' Giacometti sculptures such as *Statue of a Deceased Woman* and *Invisible Object*. When critics railed against the 'atonality' of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*—Debussy stormed out at the 'improper use of a bassoon'—they were simply admitting their ignorance or distaste of musical modes and scales beyond the Western





post-Diatonic (most of the world's music in effect). 'To make a great leap forwards, sometimes you have to take a few steps back, or look in another direction.

This reinvention through appropriation is not new or problematic to anyone but the territorial and the delusional. No artist is an island, culture is an echo-chamber, and these influences were no doubt influenced in turn. It's possible to decipher the triskele spirals of Ancient Celtic stonework in the gilded swirls of Klimt for example. Joyce famously used Homer's *Odyssey* as the blueprint for a day in the life of a cuckolded Jewish Dubliner in *Ulysses*. In doing so, he rendered the everyday epic and the epic everyday. Less well-known is Musil's adaptation of the Ancient Egyptian Isis and Osiris myth for the final book of *The Man Without Qualities*. Rilke, Cocteau, Trakl and Apollinaire all turned to Orpheus. As we now see the earlier works through the prism of that which they inspired (Virgil through Dante for instance), there is considerable truth to Borges' bold claim that 'a great writer creates his 'predecessors.'

Everything is fragmented, even the self. No one believes in anything. We are atomised. All is transitory and in flux. 'My souls (characters) are conglomerations of past and present stages of civilization,' Strindberg claimed, 'bits from books and newspapers, pieces of human beings, rags and tatters of fine clothing, patched together like the human soul.' We are those characters. To Herbert Read, modernism was 'not so much a revolution, which implies a turning over, even a turning back, but rather a break-up, a devolution, some would say a dissolution. Its character is catastrophic.' We are alone in facing this catastrophe. 'To be modern,'





Declan Kiberd has claimed, 'is to experience perpetual disintegration and renewal and yet somehow to make a home in that disorder.' This may well all be true. What is omitted is that life and certainly art have always been like this. Classicism, with its Doric columns and pentameters, was after all an invention. What makes disorder appear a recent development is that we've lost the suspension of disbelief to have faith in the illusion, or aspiration, of order. Just as we are credulous enough to assume that the Ancient Greeks believed in the gods and myths they invented, so too do we ignore the upheavals, uncertainties, destructions and the ever changing aspects to life then. The aesthetic attempts at symmetry and unity have partially survived in archaeology; the chaos they were created from and to replace is often forgotten. Cybernetics, chaos theory, evolution, all of these phenomena existed then.

In *The Mind of Modernism*, James McFarlane was wise enough to see that our view of what is ancient and what is modern was warped through the prism of solipsism, 'Were this all that is characteristic of modernism—a viper's tangle in which yes and no, life and death, man and woman [...] there would be little real novelty. The notion of the reconciliation of opposites is in itself at least as old as Heraclitus.' The ability to look two ways at once, that seemingly modern trait, is indeed millennia-old. In Ancient Rome, they even had the two-faced god Janus embodying this, a god that was also fittingly the god of entrances and perpetually-occurring beginnings. The ability to abandon either/or and embrace cognitive dissonance is there in Eubulides' line 'I am lying' or 'This statement is false,' a proto-Schrödinger's Cat paradox





that is simultaneously true and untrue. Ezra Pound was mischievously aware of the possibilities of something being 'both/and' when he borrowed his call-to-arms 'Make it new' from an inscription on a Chinese Emperor's washbasin.

Literary 'truth' and Reason have always had the element of wishful thinking, one reinforced by the Enlightenment, which for all its admirable free enquiry was a curious attempt to regain our collective innocence. The questioning of Reason, its deconstruction from various angles, goes way back beyond Derrida, Nietzsche or Hegel and Kant's squabbles. Before he drank himself to death, the Sceptic philosopher Arcesilaus asserted that we could be certain of nothing, even, paradoxically, our own ignorance. Anaxagoras believed that everything was once fragmented, interspersed and endlessly interconnected and that it was the mind that segregated things and gave the appearance of order. We are moving still, in the dim light, in that direction.

In *Hermotimus, or the Rival Philosophies*, Lucian assessed the difficulty of finding something to cling to, 'The truth is hidden from us. Even if a mere piece of luck brings us straight to it, we shall have no grounded conviction of our success; there are so many similar objects, all claiming to be the real thing.' The untrustworthy nature of art and consciousness is brilliantly displayed in his *True Story*. A work of science fiction before there was a clearly-defined field of science, it contains telescopes, aliens, robots, space travel and inter-planetary warfare. In an introductory statement, he captures the essence of fiction, 'I now make the only true statement you are to expect—that I am a





liar... My subject is what I have neither seen, experienced, nor been told, what neither exists nor could conceivably do so. I humbly solicit my readers' incredulity.' This is also underlined in *On Unbelievable Tales* by Palaephatus, which examines the origin of contemporaneous myths, deeds that had been metaphorical but were taken as literal—pirates ships mistaken for sea beasts, men on horseback becoming centaurs, miners subterranean creatures. The passage of time and the effect of Chinese whispers might make such tales seem plausible when they are not Palaephatus warned. In believing that the Ancients believed unquestioning in myths, we are being considerably more naive than they were. We may think we are uniquely sophisticated with a cynical edge compared to the gullible troglodytes who came before us, but we grossly underestimate them and overestimate ourselves. And as they taught, hubris will eventually meet nemesis. They were after all cynical enough to call the Black Sea, notorious place of storms and shipwrecks *Euxine* ('the hospitable') and their paradise Elysium originating from *enelysios* meaning 'struck by lightning.'

The idea that objectivity is inherently compromised and set on shifting sands of perception, context and even semantics, and the 'modern' anxiety that arouses, is discussed at length by Hermias,

'Some say the soul is fire...some say it is the mind; and some say it is motion...Why must we term these things? They seem to me, to be a prodigy, or folly, or madness, or rebellion, or all these together...I confess I am harassed by the ebbing and flowing of the subject.'





At one time I am immortal and rejoice; at another time again I become mortal and weep. Anew I am dissolved into atoms: I become water, and I become air: I become fire, and then after a little, neither air, nor fire: he makes me a beast, he makes me a fish... 'The beginning of all things is mind, and this is the cause and regulator of all things, and gives arrangement to things unarranged, and motion to things unmoved, and distinction to things mixed, and order to things disordered.'

Beset by an inability to grasp any form of certainty, or rather suffering from the vertigo of modernity, Hermias concludes, 'all worldly knowledge is madness from God.'

The Cynics formed a sturdier line in the face of the same problem. Bion of Borysthenes resolutely attacked everything, from the top down, 'How stupid it was for the king to tear out his hair in grief, as if baldness were a cure for sorrow.' Less antagonistic, Pyrrhon of Elis accepted that nothing can be definitively known and noted the abandonment of concern resulted in *ataraxia* ('freedom from worry'). The two approaches may have their flaws (Bion's could result in a shortened lifespan, Pyrrhon's in a self-satisfied stupor) but both resemble modern approaches to intractable political problems; the permanent revolution (or rather the play of revolution) of satire and the blissful ignorance of hedonism and quasi-Buddhism. Both are a form of stepping outside.

What brings about the requisite angst is worth looking at. There are innumerable social, economic, political and psychological factors (from the inequities of capitalism to





the fault-lines of childhood) but one thing is clear: every generation is re-enacting the Great Disillusionment. For some, there is a cataclysmic event, which speeds up and amplifies the process immensely (the First World War, the Holocaust and so on). Occasionally, a much smaller event acts as a catalyst or a spotlight for a disenchantment that would eventually come to pass regardless. It acts as a metaphor and outlet for underlying and building tensions. The events have a power because they cut through omnipresent and perhaps necessary societal denial about the nature of who and what we are as creatures. It happened in Rome with the loss of three entire legions (20,000 men) in the Teutoburg Forest, their skulls found years later nailed to the trees. It happened in Victorian England with the loss of *HMS Terror* and *HMS Erebus* and news of their cannibalised crew, wandering mad in the Arctic wastes. Chivalry is stillborn, good and evil much more intertwined than we wish. The realisation happens still periodically in real life, and always will, not least in the cracked mirror of art—the epiphanies that litter the works of Joyce, Woolf, Grosz, Chaucer, Dostoyevsky, Camus, Plath and Céline—to name just a few of what must constitute every real writer and artist in effect. We are constantly undergoing The Fall because we constantly insist on believing in innocence and in things being as we would wish rather than as they really are.

The ability of art to jolt us out of complacency is an archaic technique in relatively-new clothes. When Bertolt Brecht spoke of his estrangement technique (*Verfremdungseffekt*) in theatre, picked up from Shklovsky and pre-empting





Derrida's *différance*, it seemed that he was doing something startlingly fresh. The audience might be awakened from their slumber, able to consider the political and social ramifications of the play, their own levels of culpability and privilege (or lack of) rather than being seduced or lulled into acquiescence by what he scornfully called, 'culinary theatre.' Was this fundamentally different from the role of the Greek chorus?—a question tacitly acknowledged by Brecht who labelled his style of theatre *nicht Aristotelisches* (non-Aristotelian). Homer had anticipated this in the *Odyssey* with the Land of the Lotus-eaters, where Odysseus' crew feast and lose all thoughts of returning home. Art could be a narcotic and, worst of all, an opiate. It would take a focused mind like Odysseus' or Brecht's for that matter, and another form of art to force us back onboard the ship.

When the event in question is so monumentally harrowing, how can any response be adequate? There's an understandable mute paralysis to Theodor Adorno's line 'After Auschwitz, there can be no poetry' to which Paul Celan gave an unintended response with 'Death Fugue,' a haunting bewildering poem that barely seems like any other. Having endured years of electroshock therapy, incarcerated during the Occupation, Antonin Artaud responded with primal noise. Our wielding of language, with its justifications and deceptions, had led us to the gas-chambers. Artaud abandoned it for what he called 'a vortex,' his Theatre of Cruelty consisting of spasmodic shrieks and contortions with the representational aspect of art obliterated. It was pure uncomfortable experience but one with roots in Balinese dance and the rites of Dionysus,





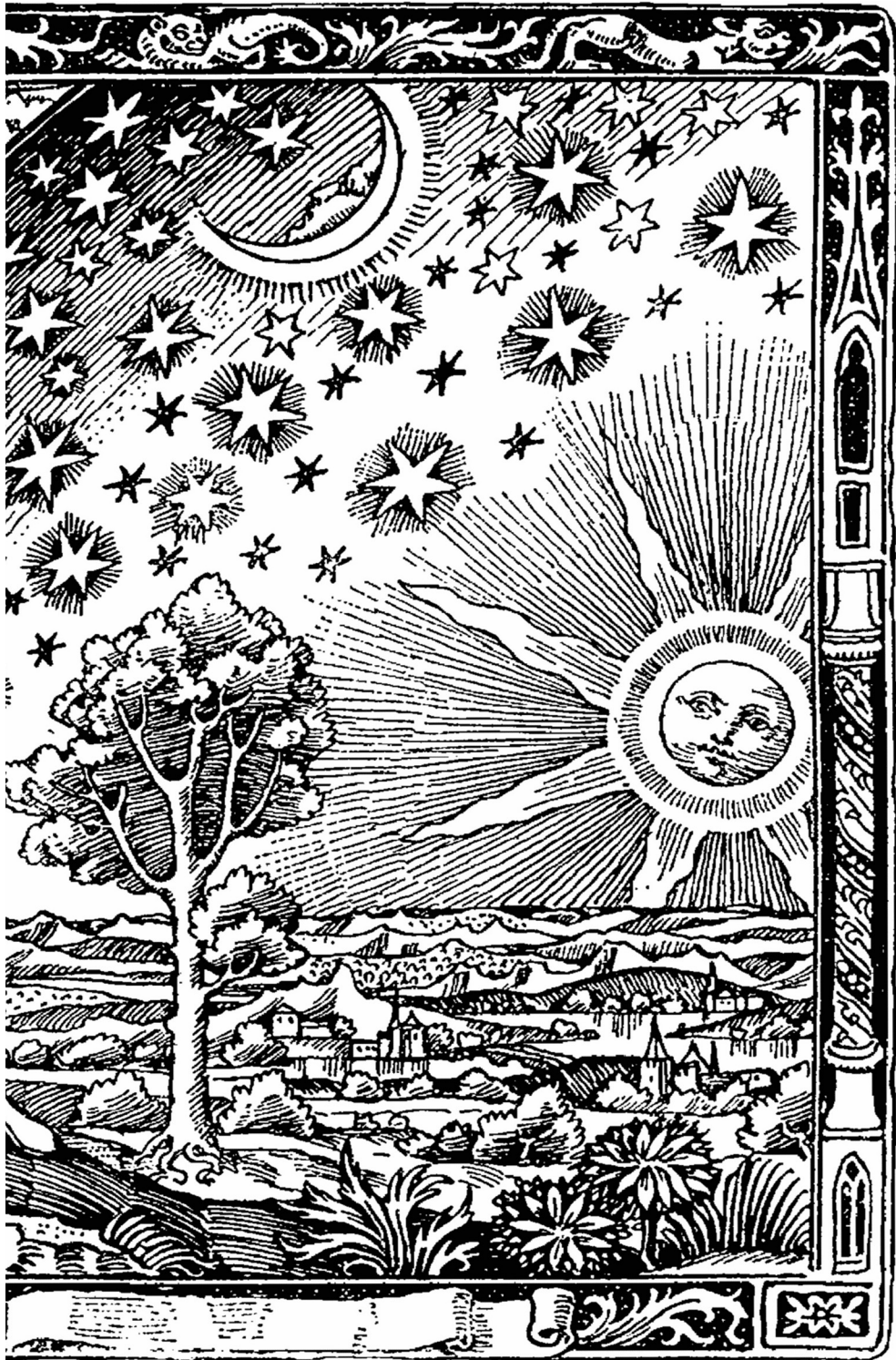
the *mainomenoas*—‘the raving god.’ It was perhaps an attempt at accusation or exorcism, to start again or finish, as if we ever could.

Though Artaud could attempt to escape language, it is not possible to escape the tyranny of context. When the dadaists revolted against the patriotic anthems and jingoism that brought Europe to self-immolation, they did so partially through nonsense language. Hugo Ball was not just conjuring up some new international language of gibberish or calling into question what language is and means with his poem ‘Karawane’ (‘jolifanto bambla o falli bambla / großiga m’pfa habla horem’), he was, like Artaud, performing the ancient art of glossolalia or speaking in tongues. Just as the apostles had responded to the trauma of their messiah being executed with tall-tales of resurrection and then a chorus of possessed supernatural utterings, so too the dadaists responded to the trauma of a continent at war with itself with babble. The dadaists knew that nothing means nothing. Associations inevitably spiral off as synapses fire. Even the name *dada*, picked for its meaninglessness, is said to originate from the French for ‘hobbyhorse,’ the Romanian for ‘yes, yes,’ or paternal baby-talk. It does not matter whether it has a definitive meaning or even if such a thing is possible; it is what we perceive it to be. Similarly for the apostles, it is not what the holy spirit might be saying with our tongues as its vessel, it is what we want to hear that matters.

God, if such a thing were any less ephemeral or man-made than Reason, can appear in other manifestations. We might see the use of a device like *Deus ex machina*, when a deity is mechanically lowered in from the rafters or appears in









a puff of smoke from a trapdoor to resolve some intractable plot dead-end, as a dusty old device unworthy of a decent playwright. This was a common view in Ancient Greece with Euripides continually castigated for his fondness for the cop-out; most scathingly by Aristophanes who unceremoniously swings the playwright as Perseus in on his own device in *Thesmophoriazusae*. A modern writer would never dare employ such a ham-fisted resolution unless we consider the ingenuity of our microscopic saviours, the bacteria in *The War of the Worlds* or of Raymond Chandler's secular adaptation, 'When in doubt, have a man come through a door with a gun in his hand.'

The layers of narrative and perception that are characteristic of modernist and postmodernist writing, the irreverent games, contradictions and unreliable narration were all at play aeons ago; *meta*, after all, is an Ancient Greek word. Incidences of what we might term conceptual or experimental fiction abound in age-old tales. Tales exist within tales in Heliodorus' *Ethiopian Story* and *Deipnosophistae* by Athenaeus, the latter being employed to subtly mock its gastronomic cast and the prevailing thoughts of the day. In Apuleius' *The Golden Ass*, there are shifting and unreliable narrators, picaresque encounters, twists and double twists. The concept of mimesis finds expression in Plato or rather Socrates' symbolic three beds—the idea of a bed (conceived by God), the physicality of a bed (made by a carpenter) and the artistic rendering of a bed. Alongside Socrates' allegory of the Cave, the idea acts as an integral precursor to Descartes, Wittgenstein, the Situationist spectacle, Magritte's *The Treachery of Images* ('*Ceci n'est pas une pipe*') and endlessly





multiplying schools of thought that all is not as it seems and there is something behind everything. Before he and a sidekick ran off laughing into the mountains, the Chinese poet Han Shan etched his verse as graffiti onto bamboo, cliff-faces, rocks which the governor of the area had written down for posterity. It was poetry, conceptual art and performance, the breakdown of the barrier between form and content, and possibly none of the above in its creator's mind.

If we take playful and occasionally lacerating self-reference to be modern then Ovid is a modern writer. He flaunts a level of wry knowing, irony and a willingness to let the reader in on it all (as Plautus does with his deceptions) that defy any surface reading of his *Amores* (The Loves), *Ars Amatoria* (The Art of Love) and *Epistulae Heroidum* (Letters of Heroines). This flirting with meta ('what harm will a letter do?') would prove costly for Ovid who was banished from Rome by the Emperor for, in his own words, 'a song and a mistake'. 'My books have hurt no one but myself / the author's own life was ruined by his 'Art,' he continues, somewhat disingenuously, given his curse sequence *Ibis* is one of the most exquisitely bile-soaked screeds committed to text (even if its revenge, like Dante's *Inferno* is a description of sullen impotence),

'Let earth deny its fruits to you, the rivers their waves,
let the winds and the breezes deny you their breath.
Let there be no heat to the sun, for you, no light for
you from the moon, let all the bright stars forsake your
eyes.'





Written in his Black Sea exile, Ovid's *Tristia* (Sorrows) have proved immensely influential to writers since, especially those forced into exile; whether external (Dante), internal (Osip Mandelstam borrowed the title for his second post-Revolution book) or a migration by choice (Ovid was crucial to Joyce's conception of Stephen Dedalus in *Portrait* and *Ulysses*). Applying a multiplicity of views to the text as well as the self, the opening lines of the book address the book itself, 'Little book, go without me—I don't begrudge it—to the city / Ah, alas, that your master's not allowed to go!' This is echoed at the end of Ovid's *Thebaid*, when he ponders artistic immortality, speaking not just to his book but to the not yet born, 'Wilt thou endure in the time to come, O my Thebaid, for twelve years object of my wakeful toil, wilt thou survive thy master and be read? [...] O live, I pray!'

Blamed by Tom Stoppard for the invention of love as we know it, Propertius demonstrates a multi-faceted view of the subject and the legacy it leaves. 'It is a shame,' he writes in verse to a Muse (with the logic of Eubulides Paradox) 'that my verse has made you famous.' In contrast to the naive courtly love we might expect, he shows it can be a wretched thing,

'Even now, the gods are against me... yet I didn't dare disturb my mistress' quiet, fearing the outbursts of her expert cruelty. Poor boy, you're rushing into a hellhole!'





He addresses friends, naysayers, distracting adventurers and enemies and, in all the correspondence, love is a blissful curse, 'I saw you, Gallus, dying, wrapped / in her arms, engaged in a long, languorous dialogue! ... He will remain happy with one girl /who will be never free, never thoughtless.'

Acute self-awareness informs commendably self-deprecating verse in Horace's *Satires*,

'You write so little, Horace, you barely trouble The copyist four times a year, always unravelling The web you've woven, angered with yourself because, Despite lots of wine and sleep, nothing's done to speak of.'

Archilochus goes further with sexually explicit, gleefully-cowardly and above all mercilessly-honest writing that would do Henry Miller proud centuries later. 'One of the Saiôn in Thrace now delights in the shield I discarded / Unwillingly near a bush, for it was perfectly good, / But at least I got myself safely out. Why should I care for that shield? / Let it go. Some other time I'll find another no worse.' This is a man who sees through it all and bravely admits so, who has come to the conclusion that honour be damned or at least that there is a honour in dishonour. What it recalls is not some hoary old text but the eternal struggle between political commitment and personal happiness, a question explored by George Orwell in his essay on reading and meeting Miller *Inside the Whale*. Despite many centuries separating them, Archilochus and Henry Miller are contemporaries.





If a delight in degradation and despair can equally bridge the millennia then Aristophanes and Samuel Beckett are comrades-in-arms. Reading the words of the chorus in *The Birds*, you get the sense of Beckett's eloquent wallowing in the mire particularly in novels like *Watt*, 'Ye Children of Man! whose life is a span, / Protracted with sorrow from day to day, / Naked and featherless, feeble and querulous, / Sickly, calamitous creatures of clay! ... Weak mortals, chained to the earth, creatures of clay as frail as the foliage of the woods, you unfortunate race, whose life is but darkness, as unreal as a shadow, the illusion of a dream.' Aristophanes would also equip modern writers with the ability to satirise in the best way; from oblique, unexpected and invulnerable angles. The fantastical settings and occurrences of his writing and the scathing truths about real human frailty and corruption therein find different but unmistakable incarnations in the writings of Jonathan Swift, Bulgakov, Gogol, the surrealists, the Theatre of the Absurd, Brecht, Václav Havel, Andrey Kurkov, the animation of Jan Svankmajer and so on. 'Man is least himself,' wrote Oscar Wilde, 'when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth.' The same goes for cloud cities, giants, depressed penguins, cats that walk upright, noses that have lives of their own. Unable to truly 'make it new' or 'make it true,' we can at least, to paraphrase Shklovsky, 'make it strange.'

Sometimes the magic described seeped into the text itself. In medieval times, the writings of Virgil were seen by some as possessing supernatural properties in terms of predicting the future, what is known as bibliomancy. The *Sortes Virgilianae*





(Virgilian Lottery) involved delving into the *Aeneid* and extracting random lines which would then be interpreted for divinatory clues. There was in fact a long tradition of this, incorporating texts by Ovid and Homer as well as the *I Ching* and the holy books of all the major religions. Words had power and not just of the ordinary time-travelling, talking to the dead, bridging of consciousness kinds. We might dismiss such acts as the acts of folly and desperation by barely-literate superstitious ‘dark age’ denizens but the practise has had durability as an experimental technique. Philip K. Dick has the characters in his *The Man in the High Castle* use the method, one which he in turn used when plotting the novel. The surrealists employed various games of chance in their creative processes most famously in *cadavre exquis* but also bulletism, frottage, cubomania, *éclaboussure*, *collage* and entopic graphomania. Chance rather than god or magic was the supposed guiding hand though it was still presumed to have a ghostly sentient element. To B.S. Johnson, the chance assemblage of his ‘book in a box,’ *The Unfortunates*, was a preferable conclusion, or lack of, than anything he could have chosen himself. From the dadaist Tristan Tzara and the surrealist idea of ‘latent news,’ William Burroughs and Brion Gysin cribbed their cut-up method, about which Burroughs claimed, ‘When you cut into the present the future leaks out.’ Superstitions are ideas, however malformed, and ideas do not die.

It is worth reminding ourselves that concepts such as Lacan’s gaze and *objet petit a* or Freud’s id and ego are ageless phenomena, which they identified rather than invented. It is we who link them to their precedents and antecedents. It’s





entirely possible to argue that Freud's talking or writing cure found expression centuries ago in the practise of Catharsis, as discussed in Aristotle's *Poetics*. Or that the subconscious found manifestation in the mythic underworld; psyche coming from the Greek spirit of the dead. We might concede that psychogeography had a past life as the ancient Irish *Dindsenchas* ('lore of places') tradition or the Aboriginal Songlines or Pausanias' *Descriptions of Greece* where place is wedded with myth and legend. We can acknowledge that Nietzsche was turning Lucian's *Kataplous* (Downward Journey) on its head to create his *übermensch*, ignoring the valuable lesson therein on the dangers of hubris. In a similar sense, the gnostics believed the human body to be venal and inferior and transcendence was the logical next step pre-empting not only Nietzsche but trans-humanist philosophers like Max More and Nick Bostrom. We have been *Human, All Too Human* since we first flopped onto dry land.

We might recognise that the anti-hero was born not in noir or *Paradise Lost* but much further back: Cú Chulainn with his chariot festooned with human heads, Achilles dragging Hector's body around Troy or Odysseus slaughtering Penelope's suitors. We might also recognise that this challenge to our sentimentalised Manichean conceptions of good and evil is a necessary one. We can recognise Werner Herzog's 'ecstatic truth' in Longinus' treatise *On the Sublime* and the flashbacks of Ford Maddox Ford's *The Good Soldier* in *The Ramayana*. We can detect the voices of the Cynics in Tristan Tzara's claim that 'Dada is useless, like everything else in life' and Wilde's and Gautier's 'All art is quite useless.'





a crucial ingredient in the development of 'Art for art's sake.' Aeschylus and Dickens were masters of the reversal of fortune (*peripeteiai*). In the *Satires* of Horace we find the embryonic Pylon Poets, Mayakovsky and Brecht. Persius' words 'All Romans have asses ears' is uttered into a hole in the ground echoing Julia's words to Winston Smith 'I LOVE YOU' placed into the memory-hole in *1984*. Even the anti-tradition of the Futurists, urging the flooding and incineration of museums, finds a place in the long tradition of iconoclasm.

Consider Philip Larkin's pitch black words in 'This Be The Verse,' often celebrated as introducing a refreshing scorn into post-Romantic poetry,

'Man hands on misery to man.
It deepens like a coastal shelf.
Get out as early as you can,
And don't have any kids yourself.'

Now compare them to Theognis' lines from the sixth century BC,

'Best of all for mortal beings is never to have been
born at all
Nor ever to have set eyes on the bright light of the
sun
But, since he is born, a man should make utmost haste
through the gates of Death
And then repose, the earth piled into a mound round
himself.'





It's possible to chart currents through themes, methods, subjects and subgenres linking vanished civilisations with ours. Achilles' heel is Chekhov's gun in a sense: one must receive an arrow as the other must be fired, instilling a sense of narrative tension in their respective stories. The stream of consciousness technique used by Joyce and Woolf, pioneered by Édouard Dujardin and Knut Hamsun has existed as the *Citta-samtana* ('stream of the mind') in Buddhist literature for hundreds of years. The use of the seriocomic method *spoudaiogeloion* (according to Horace 'what forbids one to tell the truth while laughing') forms the basis of much comic but piercing writing from the likes of Flann O'Brien, Kurt Vonnegut and Gunter Grass where laughter is a Trojan Horse and tragedy all the more poignant in juxtaposition. The mix of verse and prose (*prosimetrum*) in Nabokov's *Pale Fire* finds an ancestor in Basho's *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, *The Madness of King Sweeney*, the *Mahabharata* and Petronius' *Satyricon*. Beloved of noir (Dashiell Hammett) and literary fiction (Bolaño's *2666*, Durrell's *The Alexandria Quartet*, Faulkner's *Light in August*), the *in medias res* technique, where the story begins in the middle and flicks backwards and forwards, was evident in Odysseus' earliest appearance in *The Odyssey* trapped with Calypso on the island of Ogygia. Similarly, the reverse chronology that we might see as modern and experimental in Martin Amis' *Times Arrow* (inspired by a scene in which the war appears to wind backwards in Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*) appeared in Virgil's *Aeniad* and *One Thousand and One Nights*. When Huxley wrote of his experiences with LSD, or Burroughs of Yage, they were doing so in the wisdom through debauchery tradition of the





Greek Symposium, the Native American sweathouse and Li Bai and the Eight Immortals of the Wine Cup. When Eliot shored the fragments against his ruin, he was doing little that Confucius, Sei Shonagon, Sallust and Heraclitus did not do before him. All literature is gathered fragments and, as Sappho could testify, time makes fragments of all literature eventually.

Often there can be a cautionary lesson to glean from the links between the modern and the ancient. In Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World*, the theorist introduces his concept of the 'carnavalesque' his observance of how festivals act as a temporary suspension of social boundaries and class. Everyone can socialise together for as long as the carnival lasts and all is permitted. This was an established practice during the Greek Saturnalia of which Horace wrote, addressing a slave, 'Come on, then, use the freedom / December allows, since our ancestors wished it: speak!' It is tempting to view such times as a social leveller, a glimpse of what after the revolution might look like. Yet the time was necessary to act as a pressure release for social tensions. It was meant to prevent revolution and sustain oppression for the rest of the year. The slave may be able to say what he or she likes to the master during the carnival but they will see many less festivals during their shortened life-span.

Class distinctions found their way also into the separation of high and low art. Stories like *The Ephesian Tale of Anthia* and *Habrocomes* by Xenophon were as castigated as soap operas, Hollywood movies or pulp. The denigration had much to do with a priestly cultural caste establishing itself





as the arbiters of taste and monopolisers of knowledge, as with certain parts of academia and the commentariat today. Despite acting as crucial reservoirs of stories, travelling rhapsodists and sophists were demonised for existing without the permission of these culture-bearers and also because of the fear their words might have real power (it was said effective satire in Ireland could raise boils on the skin of its targets). The establishment of court jesters were not simply to preserve objective truth for monarchs in courts filled with sycophants; they were also to neutralise satire from outside. We might think we are immune to such snobbish and intransigent views until we recall how the Beat Generation were treated by the literary establishment of their day or more recently the reaction to James Kelman's Booker win.

The revelation that the lives of ordinary working people were worthy of writing literature was likewise made long ago; Alciphron raised it to rhetorical heights and the mix of high art and low life in *The Waste Land* was evident in the parodies, curses, recipes and elegies of *Appendix Vergiliana* with its song of the seductress barmaid Syrisca and its evicted nameless farmer calling down floods and fires upon his landlord. The modernist focus on the body and the inferred abolition (or at least exploration) of shame, which emerged in Joyce, Lawrence, and Beckett (Bakhtin's 'grotesque body' theory), has its roots not just in licentious literature like Byron or the bawdy moments of Chaucer but further back in Petronius' *Satyricon* (as resurrected by Fellini) and Aristophanes' *The Knights*. More succinctly, there is the unearthed graffiti of Pompeii, preserved by pyroclastic





flow, where poetry and messages to the gods are written alongside messages such as ‘Theophilus, don’t perform oral sex on girls against the city wall like a dog’ and ‘Phileros is a eunuch!’

Less obvious or exalted modern mediums were rehearsed in the far-flung past. The still-compelling wisdom of Marcus Aurelius’ *Meditations* and Seneca’s *On the Transience of Life* could be seen as prototype self-help tracts, if we were to degrade such masterpieces by association. Blues music is an often-overlooked modern idiom and it’s worth remembering the likes of Blind Boy Fuller were contemporaries of Joyce and co. Many of the lyrics of blues standards are as magic realist (‘St James Infirmary’ for example), violent (‘A to Z Blues’) and sexually explicit (‘Shave ’em Dry’) as the most edgy contemporary novel. Yet the blues was not strictly new, employing not just the general laments of old (the Gaelic ‘songs of sorrow’ *Goltraighe*) but specific forms like the Augustan Paraclausithyron where a suitor lusts for their muse behind a door or the ‘Gambler’s Lament’ of the Hindu Rigveda in which an addict curses the magnetism of the dice that brought him to ruin and the loss of family and friends.

Even the rap battle of the present has precursors in bucolic amoebaean poetry duels. Shepherds would face-off verbally, with the first to repeat or contradict an earlier statement losing. In Theocritus’ *Fifth Idyll*, Lacon and Comatas abuse each other in glorious terms, ‘you dare look me in the face, I that had the teaching of you when you were but a child...Those buckgoat-pelts of thine smell e’en





ranker than thou... Most excellent blockhead, all I say is true, I'm no braggart... Somebody's waxing wild; see you not what is plain? / Go pluck him squills from an old wife's grave to cool his heated brain.' Insults would often revolve around who received better fortune from the gods as well as physical, sexual and shepherding prowess. A transitional figure between the throw-downs of then and now is the scientist and writer Paracelsus whose insults and boasts rival the dexterity and megalomania of hip-hop braggadocio, 'You are not learned or experienced enough to refute even a word of mine... Let me tell you this: every little hair on my neck knows more than you and all your scribes, and my shoe buckles are more learned than your Galen and Avicenna, and my beard has more experience than all your high colleges.'

Given that modernism is an amorphous entity and something of a retrospective invention, it's useful to look at the unlikely power of ancient writing over individual modern writers. Whilst the influence of Apuleius' *The Golden Ass* on pioneering conceptual fiction like *Don Quixote*, *Candide* and *Tristram Shandy*, it was also a crucial influence on Franz Kafka. The metamorphosis in the earlier work had an obvious parallel, though the direct source of Gregor Samsa was Kafka's father's use of the insult *Ungeziefer* ('bug') to describe his son. Less obvious was the role book three of *The Golden Ass* would have on the writer, particularly his book *The Trial*. In one, Lucius awakes and is promptly arrested. In the other, Josef K. undergoes the same. Lucius escapes through metamorphosis; Gregor Samsa meets his





end through it. The difference is pessimism; for Apuleius, this is all comedy, for Kafka tragedy, or perhaps comedy at his expense (and ours) and for the benefit of someone or something unseen.

The Satyricon also casts a long shadow, partially on F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. The earlier tale of nouveau riche libertinage, the grotesqueries of wealth and the vapidness of status had such an effect on Fitzgerald's work that he came close to naming the novel *Trimalchio in West Egg* (or *Trimalchio* or *Gold-Hatted Gatsby*) after one of its characters. If we take the lavish but haunted Gatsby as Trimalchio reincarnated it throws Fitzgerald's book into a fascinating different light. Petronius' character throws characteristically extravagant parties with live birds inside suckling pigs and indulges himself by rehearsing his own sumptuous funeral. His guests are trapped and have to escape from the festivities. If Gatsby is as much an example of the emptiness of the American Dream and the impossibility of striving for the impossible as *Moby Dick* is, then Gatsby's world is as much a prison for he and his guests as Trimalchio's party. Is it a failure or an attempt to escape that defines the last trace of the Satyricon left in Fitzgerald's novel? 'It was when curiosity about Gatsby was at its highest that the lights in his house failed to go on one Saturday night—and, as obscurely as it began, his career as Trimalchio was over.'

Unfurling the allusions in the work of James Joyce would take a labyrinthine library but one identifiable strand linking him to the past is his feminism. Molly Bloom's stream of consciousness monologue in *Ulysses* and the two





washerwomen of *Finnegans Wake* recall Theocritus' *Idyll* #15 in which the rambling apparently throwaway gossip hides profound truths ("Trying took Troy"). There are wise cursory glances towards men ('my lunatic') but also a subversive depiction of freedom, community and covert power ('My dear, women know everything') below the male radar and before, and despite, fading away.

When Kant was searching for a motto for the Enlightenment, against the tyranny of ignorance and its profiteers, he found it in Horace's epistles 'Sapere aude'—'Dare to know.' Those scientists furtively discovering the world of atoms could take solace in the fact that Democritus had prophesied atomic theory around 400 BC. In his book *The Swerve: How the World Became Modern*, Stephen Greenblatt goes so as far as to say the Renaissance and Enlightenment were sparked by the saving (by the humanist Poggio Bracciolini) and rereading of a single copy of Lucretius' *On the Nature of Things*, which had been mouldering away in a German monastery. Modernity itself owes everything to the rediscovery of ancient Greek texts and continuation of their explorations after the 'Dark Ages' of theocracy.

The idea that nothing is completely new and history is helical may seem a reactionary one but that would be a superficial reading. Nothing is new and yet everything is new to someone. If we accept the solipsism that we only ever exist in the present then modernism and ancient culture only exist now. 'There is no was,' as Faulkner pointed out. The patron saint of writers and the one who most understood





the magic of books in transcending time, mortality and authorship, Jorge Luis Borges was attributed as saying, 'I am not sure that I exist. I am all the writers that I have read, all the people that I have met, all the women that I have loved; all the cities that I have visited, all my ancestors.' Elsewhere, in *A Note on (toward) Bernard Shaw*, he wrote 'A book is more than a verbal structure or series of verbal structures; it is the dialogue it establishes with its reader and the intonation it imposes upon his voice and the changing and durable images it leaves in his memory. A book is not an isolated being: it is a relationship, an axis of innumerable relationships.' Some might feel profoundly dispirited at the inter-connectedness of things and the weight of history, burdens that challenge our infantile attraction to originality and authenticity. If we have courage, they have however the power to liberate us. William Gibson famously stated, 'The future is already here—it's just not very evenly distributed.' Many forget this has *always* been the case. When we look back, we can discover the present and the future hidden in the past, just as much as we can recreate it. Despite what we might initially think, this is a radical idea. There is no lost utopia centuries ago, no Garden of Eden or and no Fall from grace. There is only the most monumental scrapyard with innumerable paths through it. All history is there and it's ours for the taking, along with the present and future, if we can only begin to make the connections.

