

Modernism - The Rebel

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Modernism as a creed, as a movement in the arts, was to use a phrase of Nietzsche. a means of “artistic taming of the horrible”. The horrifying decadence and the paltry creations of the arts were, in fact, the primary adversary of Modernism. As a movement, it attacked the prevalent notions in architecture, poetry, musical compositions, painting by not only creating a new and revolutionary path for itself but also by declaring superiority against prevalent authority. Matisse confesses, “I am paralyzed by some element of conventionality...that keeps me from expressing myself as I would like to do in paint.” This statement underlines two very integral features of Modernism: the principled self- study accompanied by the lure of heresy. Hence, Ezra Pound’s jaunty slogan, “Make it New” makes the perfect creed for an era marked by the struggle to emerge from the clutches of traditionalism and embrace novelty in the arts.

An exemplar of the first modernist novel –Gustave Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* is a vivid caricature of the bourgeois which incurred, consequently, commendable public rage and furore. Flaubert, the “bourgeoisphobus”, severely condemned the “perspiring philistine”-the middle class as did Emile Zola and his tone was shared by a number of nineteenth-century anti-bourgeois modernists.

The bourgeois did want to make things “new” quite but not too new. Hence the modernists relied on the support of the enlightened middle class. While earlier, the artists sought patronage amongst monarchs and aristocrats, the nineteenth century modernists were supported by the modern heirs of Macenas and anonymous public who provided them with means to alter prevalent tastes “The patronage which has been almost exclusively the privilege of the nobility and the higher gentry was now shared (to be subsequently almost engrossed) by a wealthy and intelligent class, chiefly enriched by commerce and trade,” remarks Lady Elizabeth Eastlake during the years of Queen Victoria’s reign. Hence, modernist’s aggression was intensified by the propagation of avant garde art, movement and literature that consequently led to the flexibility in the lower ranged of the “bourgeoisie”

The rise of the middle class is thus a precursor to the phenomena of Modernism. The factory system of the eighteenth century England and subsequently in Belgium, Germany, France and the United States led to a mass production and mass consumption. Modernism grew along with the growth of railroads –the means of transportation of passengers and the freight of change in the patterns of population spread and commercial opportunities as well as vast banking empires providing the capital support for unprecedented market for wealth. Hence Modernism can be considered an essentially urban phenomenon as Nietzsche marks “As an artist one has no home in Europe but Paris”

T.S.Eliot’s provocative verses on Modernism was launched in *Pru frock and other Observations* (1917) and the *Wasteland* (192) at a moment in history when as Eliot remarks “the situation of poetry in 1909 and 1910 was stagnant to a degree difficult for any young poet to imagine.” They were prudent, conscious of their attacks despite their frivolity guarding their seriousness. Modernism flourished on the important and serious principle of Liberty that fostered a creative spirit. Hence a number of modernists were democrats though Modernism was not a democratic movement. Liberty manifested itself from early times when Michelangelo defied the pontiff and Mozart dismissed the archbishop of Salzburg in favour of Vienna to live as a freelance musician. Their improving social status allows Modernism to be a matter of morale as well as money and liberty.

While cultural change was drastic, ubiquitous, irresistible and irrevocable, religion too was not to be overlooked. “New” as an epithet was proliferating –“New” Drama, “New” women, “New” Realism that seem to mask the light-hearted

adventurism and anticipated a “New” age. Voltaire’s *écrasez l’infâme* was of utmost relevance to anti-clericals and anti-Christians while the Protestants, Catholics and Jews mourned over the rising secularism. Theosophy – a combination of Theology, Philosophy and Science was advertised by Madame Blavatsky, “Christian Science” of Mary Baker Eddy encapsulated the appeals to be adhered by Victorian Men and Women that entail Modernism and the nineteenth century embraced new dogmas. In an attempt to destroy religion as it existed Rimbaud remarks “One must be absolutely modern” and Gauguin suggests “What must be killed so it will never be reborn: God.”

Nietzsche’s anarchist but aristocratic proclamation of the death of God and the bankruptcy of prevalent morality began to surface as a veritable truth. Eliot warned that most humans are unable to tolerate very much reality,. The Modernists exemplify this. The belief in the absence of illusion itself is probably the greatest illusion. However Modernism constitutes a double psychological liberation. It allows artists to decided candidly and without inhibitions if they should give free reign to their fantasies in a serious manner and override prevalent standards through a revolution.

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