

AESTHETICS OF MODERNITY: ART, CONSCIOUSNESS, AMBIGUOUS REPRESENTATION OF ANGUISHED AND PARADOXICAL LIFE

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Abstract

Modernism as well as Modernist writers have always been on flux. The matrix out of which the literary modernity emerges is replete with a sense of loss of faith, alienation, up-rootedness, paradoxes, simultaneous claims of opposites etc. The upheavals at the level of society, religion, culture and economy are clearly traceable in the literary representation of the Modern age. As a matter of fact, Modernism is often seen as a break with traditional aesthetic values and principles. In order to articulate verbal equivalent to the traumatic experiences of modern life that can be “measured out in coffee spoons”, the artists evolved aesthetics that is capable of dealing with flux, absurdity and anguish. In order to deal with such crisis, Modernists had to undermine the traditions aesthetics; thus, it becomes a threat to aesthetics; at the same time it is also functions as a stimulus to modern aesthetics.

AESTHETICS

It is branch of philosophy that investigates into the nature of beauty and the perception of beauty in the field of arts. It also denotes a conviction of the importance of beauty as compared with other values. When we use the term ‘aestheticism’, it refers not only to the philosophical study of beauty, but also to a particular set of convictions about art and beauty and their place in art. As a separate movement it did not begin until the mid18th century, but the questions it deals with date back at least to Plato and Aristotle. These questions think about art as imitation, about the function of the artist in the society and about the impact of art on its audience.

Modernist Aesthetics

A central problem and ambiguity about Modernism lies in the understanding of the “aesthetic”, the meaning of the artistic realm as such. As a matter of fact, Modernism is not significantly aesthetic. It rather a turn against the aestheticism of the preceding age, but it uses highly self-conscious aesthetic means to do this. Thus, the category of the “aesthetic” is deeply ambivalent and it went through a crucial transformation during Modernism. This process of aestheticism can be illustrated through Nietzsche’s parallel transformation of Schopenhauer’s thought on this subject since Schopenhauer stands for nineteenth century symbolist and aesthetic movement and Nietzsche for Modernist aesthetics.

Schopenhauer's pessimistic philosophy in *The World as Will and Idea* perceived human nature as evolved by Nature and it has to achieve its own blind purpose. The irony of this consciousness is that it has to imagine itself to be independently purposive rather than merely reflecting the great process of Nature. For him, all human purposes are an illusion. When an individual has to understand only this concept of consciousness, the only defined posture for him is mental withdrawal from the whole process. Farther he has to adapt Kant's definition of the artistic realm, "purposiveness without purpose". For Schopenhauer, artistic experience was a principal means to achieve this end. Art gives intensity without detachment. Nietzsche gradually turned the structure of Schopenhauer's thought on its head to serve a vital affirmation. He turns more critically against Schopenhauer for the sake of simpler vitality. Instead of standing in opposition to the natural impulse, artistic beauty is now merged with attraction of sexuality as a part of procreative affirmation. But in doing so Nietzsche did not abandon the categories of aesthetics, rather he was making it model of all experience and therefore did assimilate them. Life, like art, is "purposiveness without purpose": it is lived for its intrinsic values rather than for some transcendental end. Aestheticism saw life in opposition to art, but now Nietzsche saw art the most telling image for the "joyful and trusting fatalism." Here the remarkable change in aesthetics and art is the elision of the categories of the aesthetics into a life term. The "aesthetic", of course, continued to mean many different things within the period and the above discussion may be controversial and often misunderstood.

Modern writer's alienation from the major focus of the society is the key sense behind the changed attitude of creation. The writer makes anguished and paradoxical efforts to invent aesthetics appropriate to the modern world. The writer feels that he or she is an inevitable part of the society and therefore has to examine the aspects of literary work and creation. : What is the relation between the author's vision to the thoughts and values of the society, how the values and pleasures implicit in any literary work are related to materialistic and secular world?

Baudelaire recognized that it is from this world that the modern author has to create beauty. The artist's mission is to uncover the beauty that exists within the society though it is dominated by bourgeois materialism. In preceding ages the sense of modernity was there but it was linked to an accepted aesthetic and belief in transcendental dimension while the modern world is transitive, contingent and fugitive.

Modernity has become as much a threat to aesthetic production as much a stimulus to it. It is because modernism has effectively undermined the bases upon which the aesthetic tradition had rested. The writers are supposed to create a new style appropriate to the present moment. This need disrupts the sense of coherent literary tradition on one hand and implies on the other that value and significance of any literary work are in a way determined by extra-aesthetic social condition. For the modernist the primary challenge is to find an appropriate modern style and yet this style should enable them to assert a certain degree of literary and personal freedom from the world they must depict.

The modernists feel that the materialistic bourgeois concerns of the society are alien to aesthetic vision necessary for the significant creation. Common social behavior and ideology are hostile to the spiritual or aesthetic fulfillment of the writer.

Social history has become amoral. Therefore the writers either avoid the social context in their literary works or they chronicle the failure of society to provide an adequate dimension for the development of individual spirit. The modernists think that each step into the unknown future will increase their separation from the spiritual and ethical values of the classical culture.

In the modern literature aesthetic elegance appears greater than social concern. They adopt an ahistorical perspective by which they can depict an order to the individual's experience of modern world. For Eliot the main enemies of a modernist writer and literary work are anarchy, futility, chaos, and meaninglessness of social reality. Because of this chaos unified audience or stable aesthetic tradition is not possible. The major modern writers were unaware of this groundlessness and therefore self-conscious.

Thematically the characters of modernist novel confront with a disruptive and meaningless environment. They have nothing to fallback upon except personal heroism, brute sensation and endangered consciousness. Like the characters, the literary texts also respond aesthetically to the perturbed environment. Any self-consciousness text is torn between faithfully describing the conflicting aspects of individual's experience and the desire to transcend that experience. Thus the modern work formally represents an effort either to portray the nature and quality of personal experience in modern culture or to achieve an impersonal, hermetic voice and perspective. The first alternative highlights the process of one's conscious or unconscious response to the environment. On the other hand, the writers try to create a pure language, an ironic voice, an impersonal mask or self-reflexive art work. Thus they try to free the literary work from social referent or individual perspective or voice. Thus these two impulses- personal and impersonal- show the basic paradox of modernist literature. On the whole the modernist writers have reacted against the individualistic, expressionist and socially activist of the Romantic Movement. However the modernist aesthetic strategies sustain the Romantic belief in the unique attributes of the literary work and the special capabilities of the poet apprehend and articulate a realm of significant value and meaning, free from the debasing contingency of modern bourgeois life.

The modern work of art is authentic by reason of its entire definition. It is governed by the laws of its own being. Therefore the work acquires the right to embody painful, ignoble or socially unacceptable subject matters. Similarly the artist also seeks autonomousness. He wants to be as self-defining as the art object he creates. The audience communicates with such a work which may appear unpleasant unacceptable or even hostile. However, the audience acquires the sense of authenticity. The aesthetic strategies of the modernist writers announce the putative primacy of the creative consciousness and the preference to literary work to the social domain. The work and its language thus create an apparently autonomous domain from which one views critically the modern society. They further claim to offer new knowledge and a sense of authentic being which is not attainable in daily life. At every turn modernist writers foster strategies of inwardness and aesthetic privilege. Which purportedly give strength and validity to provide experience? This experience seems appear to be in opposition to the society but it is in the ultimate interest of the society. Again it is the direct expression of that society.

The modernist work represents a protest against its governing social conditions and the aesthetic artifice allows a glimpse of fragmented consciousness momentarily free from contingency of daily life. But the literary text inevitably reveals its submission to the world against which it protests. In fact the entire history of modernism is the one of increasing internal contradictions and limitations in the modernist aesthetics. In any case a literary work only testifies to the strengths of the writer's desire and not to the fulfillment of the ideal. A literary work cannot transcend and provide a refuge from modern society. From a long period of time modernists have been struggling with the fact that a work remains a vulnerable artifact; it is the product of an individual's alienation and of his effort to impose personal will on a hostile or indifferent world in order to overcome or deny that alienation.

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