

MODERNIST DISCONTINUITY

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William R. Everdell. *The First Moderns: Profiles in the Origins of Twentieth-Century Thought*. Chicago: U. of Chicago P., 1997. Pp. xi, 501. US\$29.95; \$16.00 (pbk.). ISBN: 0 226 22481 3 (pbk.).

Lenin's prophecy that the twentieth century would be remembered as a century of war and revolution should be revised. The century has instead been one of genocide and failed revolutions. One revolution, communism, simply collapsed overnight. The other, modernism, the great cultural revolution, seems to have fizzled out. This, at least, is the view of those who call themselves postmoderns. For them, modernism, a revolution that dissolved the proud towers of nineteenth-century rationalism, has been absorbed by enemies. The once-threatening products of modernism—sub-atomic physics, atonal music and abstract painting—are the property of the military, background music for Walt Disney films or decorations for banks.

Everdell's account of modernism ignores this postmodern triumphalism, and treats it as a permanent revolution. He sets out to recover the revolutionary core of modernism, to describe it objectively, and to suggest that this

particular revolution has not run its course. Modernism, Everdell claims, is above all else the continuing discovery of "ontological discontinuity". It deconstructed seamless structures such as the symphonies of Brahms, the countless elaborations of a dialectic operating in human affairs, and even the physics of waves and fields in which "everything shaded into everything else", dissolving them all into frenzied particles. Such particles suggested new structures of the physical universe, the painting on the canvas, or even the work of fiction, but rejected all hopes for providing them with a permanent or stable foundation. All that was solid shook. But, he declares, after modernism itself froze, the grenades that postmodernism threw into its tired products—the radical subject; the legitimacy of multiple perspectives, radical discontinuity—were themselves generated within modernism and remain part of its legacy.

Everdell's strategy is to step outside modernism and describe it through a form that has so far eluded the modernist rampage of discontinuity. This form is the old-fashioned rousing narrative. His account proceeds as a series of profiles of the struggles of personalities, Einstein grappling with the results of quantum mechanics, Picasso hacking into cubism, and Joyce reducing narrative into streams of consciousness. These profiles are grouped around profiles of the major capitals in which these and other struggles occurred, Vienna, Paris and St. Louis. The author is especially gifted at piling fascinating detail into long paragraphs which still sustain the narrative flow.

In the end Everdell finds that the spirit of modernism and its discontinuity is still afoot, and still somewhat menacing. Often the spirit of modernism proceeds against the will of its founders. There are fine passages, showing for example Einstein trying to reassemble what his physics disassembled and Russell (whom he considers together with Husserl¹) wrestling with the very disturbing paradox named after him which undermined the possibility of the passionately sought stable foundation of mathematics. Everdell concludes on the two philosophers of mathematics:

It was epistemology—the problem of knowledge—that most engaged both Russell and Husserl. What they both wanted most was to understand how one can know one thing from another. They began at the same place, with the question of what a number was and what a set was. Then each, in his own radically different way, found a profound new uncertainty through his rediscovery of discontinuity.

The result of this double assault has been the ultimate finitization of logic. The project of making all our ideas clear that began with Peirce and perhaps with Boole, and went on to engage Schröder, Frege, and Peano, failed with Russell and Husserl. The analysts among their successors, much humbled, are reduced to upholding rigor

¹ See Chapter 12, "Bertrand Russell and Edmund Husserl: Phenomenology, Number, and the Fall of Logic, 1901".

wherever it is threatened, and have their hands full trying to avoid dropping through the holes that are bound to open up in an infinite system. (P. 192)

The spirit of modernism, as Everdell understands it, is found in wonderful works of art, but also in that discontinuity called concentration camps. Nor has it fizzled out. In his closing chapter Everdell frets over whether modernism will undermine the very possibility of narrative that he has executed so brilliantly.
