

Martin Hilský, *Modernisté* (The Modernists), Praha: Torst 1995, 269 p.

Modernism remains a subject of fascination to literary scholars whether they glorify or condemn it or seek new interpretations from the vantage point of hindsight sparked by the strongly felt links with our post-modern situation.

The new Czech study of the modernists from the pen of one of our foremost scholars and devotees of English literature leads us carefully through the minefield of contradictions which constitute modernism: the term, the thought, the esthetics. The mode is celebratory.

Nevertheless, Prof. Hilský starts firmly on the ground when he introduces us to T. S. Eliot and James Joyce in an anecdotal episode of their first historic encounter, involving footwear: a pair of worn-out brown shoes sent to Joyce by Ezra Pound. With this almost symbolic picture of the characteristic modernist juxtaposition of everyday banality and the European cultural tradition, Hilský invites us to explore the space behind the term 'modernism' and re-experience the radical change which ushered in the new epoch in European culture, where the contrasts between the subjective and objective, the public and private, the rational and irrational were to dominate all its aspects.

Despite modernism's rejection of realism, two very real features of the period exerted a formative influence on its very foundations. The first, the turn-of-the-century preoccupation with time, reflected upon in Bergson's philosophy of fluid time or William James's stream of thought, underlies the modernist obsession with the experience of time and their experiment with literary time. Within this context, modernist time, which is private, plural and relative, appears to be a reaction in defiance of the traumatising standardised public time rather than a purely esthetic invention.

The second palpably real phenomenon is the film, which Hilský denotes as the typical modern space. Paradoxically, perhaps, considering its photographic reproduction of reality, it influenced the modernist impressionist literary technique and resonated with their understanding of the heterogeneity of space, experienced through the multiple cubist perspective, which echoed Nietzsche's philosophy and Einstein's theory of relativity. Here Hilský shows how such concepts of time and space, the two fundamental aspects of modernist thinking and creativity, batter at the very limits of the artistic medium. Both Eliot's *The Waste Land* and Joyce's *Ulysses* tend towards the spatial, creating a circular structure of beginnings in endings linked with the underlying myth of the eternal return of time.

Underneath the cosmopolitan character of modernism Hilský identifies the traditionalist and conservative features of Anglo-American modernists and points out the paradoxical nature of their eclecticism, anti-liberalism and anti-Romanticism, which landed them in a position similar to that of their Romantic predecessors. Hilský claims that with the benefit of hindsight of almost a hundred years we now may perceive a special kind of continuity, albeit denied, between the Romantic revolt and modernism, which – again paradoxically – led the Anglo-American moderns, through their fierce anti-liberalism, to admiration and support of Fascism. Hilský however does not dwell on the purely political side to their thought and focuses rather on the close links between their politics and poetics and thus speaks of the esthetic ideology of modernism.

After disentangling the intricate web of the modern timespace in his introductory chapter, Hilský proceeds with Eliot, Joyce, Virginia Woolf and D. H. Lawrence in self-contained extended essays which are nevertheless linked by constant cross-references and frequent comparisons into a complex tightly-knit whole.

Eliot's poetic voice crystallised in the early decades of the century against the background of the patriotic rhetoric of Imperial England. In this atmosphere, his rethinking of the function of poetry appears to be a reaction to the image of the didactic public bard appealing to the conservative mediocrity of the average consumer of poetry. Within this context, Eliot's now much criticised elitism and anti-democratic attitudes towards mass culture are to be seen as revolutionary.

Hilský views Eliot's role as the founding force of modernist poetry in terms of the far-reaching impact of his impersonal theory, which sacrifices the man for the poet and the poet for the tradition, his understanding of literary tradition as a constantly changing two-way relationship between the past and the present, and his search for a lost wholeness in the fragmented emptiness of negative life experience. In the development of Eliot's poetry and thought Hilský detects a shift from the social to the meditative, from the despair of *The Waste Land* to the changed tone of the *Four Quartets*.

Against Eliot's current critics, Hilský confirms his place on the pedestal of twentieth-century poetry and criticism. He sees the special merits of Eliot's criticism in its being an expression of an open intellect rather than a narrowly specialised discipline and in its personal impersonality – a paradox inherent in both his critical and poetic practice.

What connects Eliot and Joyce is the gigantic modernist kaleidoscope of their work, made up of fragments and shards of European culture, and their search for the unity of being and the world. The only major difference rests in their solutions: transcendent and Christian in Eliot, esthetic in Joyce, who substitutes the artist for God. Joyce's poet is the creator and his word is epiphany – a sudden spiritual manifestation which gradually becomes his creative vision and the creative act itself. Hilský demonstrates Joyce's revolution of the word on *Ulysses*, where the almost encyclopedic flow of words is meant to convey the myriad of scattered everyday perceptions and make sense of them and the senseless emptiness of the world. In Joyce's art of metamorphosis, which is a dramatisation of both the Freudian subconscious and language, Hilský highlights the subversive quality of metamorphosis, which is brought to perfection in *Finnegan's Wake*: the risk that the self as well as the word, by turning into anything, may easily turn into nothing.

The essay on Virginia Woolf centres around the impressionist method of her poetic prose and her place in the Bloomsbury Group. The circular structure of Woolf's stream of consciousness is where Hilský finds the essential modernist correspondence with Eliot and Joyce, whereas the main difference rests in her lack of historical memory, the absence in her work of Eliot's and Joyce's mythical substratum, the seabed of European culture. Woolf is wholly the poet of the individual consciousness and memory. Hilský recreates for us the moment of cosmic importance of Woolf's encounter with a snail in *The Stain* and shows the idea of the snail to be the anchor, the one fixed point of observation in time and space which keeps the weightless shimmering texture of her prose from dissolution. Woolf's role as the soul of the Bloomsbury Group was a two-way relationship; in turn the Group's left-of-centre political leanings, George Moore's religion of beauty and Roger Fry's esthetics of autonomous art came to be reflected in her attempt at Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk*. At this point Hilský comes full circle to the individuality of Woolf's hallmark: the musical and colour leitmotif of her prose, comprising also psychological, symbolic and social meanings. Considering Wyndham Lewis's, D. H. Lawrence's and F. R. Leavis's criticism of Bloomsbury, Hilský himself refrains from any final judgement. Nevertheless he seems to side with the Bloomsbury Group by presenting it in its fullness of being as innovatory as well as conservative, anti-Victorian as well as Victorian, traditional as well as non-traditional.

The last but far from the least to be included among Hilský's modernists is D. H. Lawrence. Examining the largely autobiographical *Sons and Lovers*, Hilský discusses the tension between the novel's documentary value and Lawrence's search for a creative method to give shape to emotional experience, which defies expression by language. Through his letters and essays, Hilský traces the development of the esthetics of Lawrence's novels and his philosophy, his 'religion of bood'. The latter is the one aspect of Lawrence's thought that Hilský is at variance with, and he voices the opinion that the less there is of it in Lawrence's work the better. He sees Lawrence's revolutionary contribution to the English novel in his 'real human being', the hero/heroine with a passionate physical life whom Lawrence pits against the 'social beings' in the work of both his contemporaries and his great predecessors. Pointing to the dichotomies of Lawrence's love cult, his ever-present metaphor of the body and the nature of his spiritual and somewhat puritanical eroticism, Hilský suggests that Lawrence would hardly be pleased by the fruit of his sexual explicitness in today's literature, which seems to be a denial rather than a continuation of his credo.

## REVIEWS

Without offering yet another fashionable re-interpretation of the complex phenomenon that is modernism, Prof. Hilský's wide-ranging study, both erudite and accessible, will fascinate serious students of the period and general readers alike.

In the 'Postmodern Postscript' the author ponders the significance of postmodernism, and with elegant wry humour raises questions about the term with which we have so readily, and perhaps hastily, labelled our time.

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*Slovník spisovatelů* (Dictionary of Writers), Praha: Libri 1996, 756 s.

This new arrival on our bookshelves and desktops is good news. The much needed and welcome *Dictionary of Writers* lists 1,410 entries from the ever-increasing range of literatures written in English with the exception of the literature of the United States (available separately in the series published by Odeon in 1979). User friendly in size and scope, it is the result of a joint effort of twenty-six Czech and Slovak (and one Canadian) specialists in the literatures of the British Isles, including the Celtic literatures in Irish, Gaelic and Welsh, Australian literature, Canadian literature in English and the other New Literatures in English. The dictionary proper is preceded by introductory studies of the literatures included in the form of concise surveys of writing from the beginnings to the present time. The individual entries on writers as well as important anonymous works vary in length from compendious biographies cum critical studies in some cases to brief biographical and bibliographical data in others. Included is also very useful information on existing Czech translations. Users will appreciate the pronunciation guide to surnames as they appear in the text and first names as listed in an appendix.

Against many odds, the editors, Zdeněk Stříbrný and Martin Procházka, and their team have provided the Czech reading public with a valuable well of information and an indispensable tool for learning about the literary production of a large part of the world.

*Milada Franková*