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I Introduction: “Make It New”

A Guide to Transitions in the Period of Modernism and the Avant-Garde

The Introduction takes its title from Ezra Pound’s famous avant-garde slogan (and the title of his book, of 1934) “Make It New”, the founding impetus for the literature of the period this book covers. Chapter I, which in fact constitutes the Introduction, finds an excellent guide to the founding movements of the period, and to their diverse reorientations, in the pages of Nathanael West’s cult modernist novel *The Dream Life of Balso Snell* (1931). West’s avant-garde guide to the great canonical, avant-garde texts of high modernism (by James Joyce, Marcel Proust, Gertrude Stein, Fyodor Dostoevsky and so on) also enables us to discuss and define the most important critical terms that have emerged in mapping this period: modernism, modernity, the avant-garde, the new, postmodernism, and so on. His novel arms us with an overview of the scope and range of the period. And from its position in the trajectory of modernist and avant-garde aesthetics, roughly mid-way in the period (1931), is projected a discussion that directs us both back to earlier founding avant-garde texts and languages and forward to their later developments and concerns. Our reading of West’s novel provides a set of critical terms and questions, then, for proceeding through the period, and through this book. As well as defining and addressing the terms “avant-garde” and “modernism” and their cohorts, this reading of West also opens up a discussion reflecting on the significance of the other terms, and the dates, in the title of this book: “Image to Apocalypse” and “1910–1945”. The rationale and scope of this book is then compared with those of other introductions to the period and to its dominant designated aesthetic mode, “modernism”. The chapter closes with a note on the formal, academic study of modernist and avant-garde works.

**Nathanael West as guide to James Joyce, Ezra Pound,
Pablo Picasso et al.**

While walking in the tall grass that has sprung up around the city of Troy, Balso Snell came upon the famous wooden horse of the Greeks. A poet, he remembered Homer's ancient song and decided to find a way in.

On examining the horse, Balso found that there were but three openings: the mouth, the navel, and the posterior opening of the alimentary canal. The mouth was beyond his reach, the navel proved a cul-de-sac, and so, forgetting his dignity, he approached the last. O Anus Mirabilis!

(Nathanael West, *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*)

Searching for an opening to this book, *Modernism, 1910–1945: Image to Apocalypse* (should I start with modernism? or with the dates? or with the image?), I came upon the poet Balso Snell's fumbling entry into the anus of the Trojan Horse, itself the opening passage to Nathanael West's debut novel, *The Dream Life of Balso Snell* (1931), published bang in the middle of the period, and taking us bang into the heart (or bowels) of its dominant mythopoeic, and scatological, imagistic concerns. Balso's graphic declaration, "O Anus Mirabilis!" eloquently compresses the tensions between the chronological and the visceral; and it may be taken to portend the tensions and play between the historicising chronology of my chosen dates, "1910–1945", and the poetic synchronism of the imagery of "Image to Apocalypse". It transpires that "the intestine of the horse is inhabited solely by authors in search of an audience", according to West's advertisement for the novel (West: 398); and Balso's intestinal dream-landscape is in fact the terrain of the experimental, avant-garde literatures we have since come to know as "Modernism".

Disgusted, [Balso] attempts to get out but is tricked into listening to other tales. All of these tales are elephantine close-ups of various literary positions and their technical methods; close-ups that make Kurt Schwitters' definition, "tout ce que l'artiste crache, c'est l'art" seem like an understatement. (398)

As West indicates, for those engaged in the business of writing in these "various literary positions", no such homogenising label as "Modernism", itself only then emergent (see Smith, *The Origins of*

and . . . was originally nothing more than a type sample for a selection of fonts. With great imagination Hausmann made it into a performance, and as he was originally from Bohemia, he sounded it somewhat like this:

fümms bö wö tää zää uu,

pögiff

mü

(Schwitters: 234–5)

A learned legacy of avant-garde expectation, then, is behind West's citational work. And *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*, in keeping with such calculated explosive precedents, ends in volatile eruption – not exactly with the poet's expectation, but his masturbatory ejaculation.

His body broke free of the bard. It took on a life of its own; a life that knew nothing of the poet Balso. Only to death can this release be likened – to the mechanics of decay. After death the body takes command; it performs the manual of disintegration with a marvelous certainty. So now, his body performed the evolutions of love with a like sureness. (54)

If Balso's journey ends in auto-erotic bliss, it begins as a descent into Hell, and it is no coincidence that Dante's *Divine Comedy* is a key text for many of the writers of this period; and Hell a central trope. Both Homer's and Virgil's foundational accounts of the Trojan War, of course, include episodes describing a descent into, and return out of Hell. But many of the infernal narratives of 1910 to 1945 show little hope of a light beyond; while some wallow in the darkness; or reinvent the place; others plunder its discourses (excuse the pun), even celebrate it. Marion Wynne-Davies follows a heavenly trope common to the writers in her Transitions volume, *Sidney to Milton: 1580–1660* (2002), where although "Heaven was too long a reach for man to recover at one step," it was nevertheless thought mappable if not obtainable (Wynne-Davies, quoting Speed), but this volume's transitions are mainly located in the underworld. Hell now has become mappable, palpable, and inescapable.

Like many students and readers of avant-garde texts, Balso becomes angry and confused on entering the Trojan Horse, and he feels obliged to hire "a philosophic guide who insists on discussing the nature of

art" (397), as West explains in his own advertising guide to the novel. Whereas Dante is guided through the inferno by the spirit of Virgil, Balso has to spar with the cryptic rantings of a name-dropping bore:

"After all, what is art? I agree with George Moore. Art is not nature, but rather nature digested. Art is a sublime excrement."

"And Daudet?" Balso queried.

"Oh, Daudet! Daudet, c'est de bouillabaisse! You know, George Moore also says, 'What care I that the virtue of some sixteen-year-old maiden was the price paid for Ingres' La Source?' Now . . ."

"Picasso says," Balso broke in, "Picasso says there are no feet in nature . . . And, thanks for showing me around. I have to leave."

But before he was able to get away, the guide caught him by the collar. "Just a minute, please. You were right to interrupt. We should talk of art, not artists. Please explain your interpretation of the Spanish master's dictum." (9)

West's favourite inscription for the book was: "From one horse's ass to another". And it is difficult to discern whether *The Dream Life of Balso Snell* is an avant-garde novel or a guide to the avant-garde, or merely a guide to itself. It is of course all of these and a virtuoso parody of high modernism. Such self-conscious complication of categorisation too is a vital component of the art of the period: manifestos, critical commentaries, aesthetics manuals and guides abound to the point where we come to see such documents as "embodying rather than explicating the aesthetic gesture of the new – even while exploding the very category of the aesthetic" (Kolocotroni et al.: xix). And vital too are the interpenetrating influences of the verbal with the visual arts. But by the time his guide begins to prose on about the formative influence of Cezanne – "'Cezanne is right. The sage of Aix . . .'" – Balso manages to escape: "With a violent twist, Balso tore loose and fled" (10). He continues on his journey alone, and, unassisted by the guide, he manages to survive being buttonholed along the way by various other – more entertaining – authors.

Alternative guides: canonical texts, "little magazines", and anthologies

Whereas my sympathies are all with Balso, I am only too well aware that in undertaking the authorship of this book I have been cast in the

unenviable role of Balso's guide. I hope not to drive my readers away just yet. On the other hand, I would strongly recommend that the best guide to the literature of the period (indeed any period) is the literature of the period, and to be read not necessarily in chronological order. But if the prospect daunts of plunging straight into the literature of canonical high modernism – for example, T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, James Joyce's *Ulysses*, Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, W. B. Yeats's *The Tower*, Ezra Pound's *Cantos* – then following Balso on his journey, unaided by the likes of me, would constitute a splendid alternative introduction. So too would be a visit to the nearest collection of modern art. So too would be a flick through an anthology of manifestos and critical sources, as Peter Childs also suggests (24–5). I recommend *The Modern Tradition* (1965), edited by Richard Ellmann and Charles Feidelson; *A Modernist Reader: Modernism in England, 1910–1930* (1977), edited by Peter Faulkner; *The Gender of Modernism*, edited by Bonnie Kime Scott (1990); and *Modernism: An Anthology of Sources and Documents* (1998), edited by Vassiliki Kolocotroni, Jane Goldman and Olga Taxidou. Better still, if your library can oblige, would be a glance through some of the period's many – sometimes short-lived – “little magazines”, journals, almanachs and reviews, in which much of the significant work of the period first appeared: for example, *The Dial*, Wyndham Lewis's *BLAST*, Guillaume Apollinaire's *Soirées de Paris*, Dora Marsden's and Ezra Pound's *The Egoist* and Margaret Anderson's and Jane Heap's *Little Review* (foreign correspondent: Ezra Pound), Ford Madox Ford's *English Review* and *transatlantic review*, Hugo Ball's *Cabaret Voltaire*, Tristan Tzara's *Dada*, Raoul Hausmann's *Der Dada*, Francis Picabia's 291 and 391, Marcel Duchamp's *The Blind Man*, Man Ray's *TNT*, Kurt Schwitters's *Merz*, A. A. Orage's *New Age*, John Middleton Murry's *Rhythm*, Grigson's *New Verse*, T. S. Eliot's *Criterion*, and Eugene Jolas's *transition*. In the mean time I will continue to shape my introduction around Balso's journey and, at the same time, try to keep Balso's guide out of my throat.

Defining modernism and the avant-garde

To return to the title and rationale of this book: in order to explain the use of “Modernism” and of “Image to Apocalypse”, I also want to discuss another term that informs my argument. I was initially

tempted by the title "Avant-Garde to Modernism", which signals one of the ideological and critical transitions occurring in relation to this period that this book will explore. The French term "avant-garde" suggests the European sources and guiding criticism for much of the literature of this period, and "Modernism", by virtue of its American critical genesis and credentials, suggests its American slant and destination. The tensions and play between these terms inform this book. The term "avant-garde", originally a military one designating the advanced guard, or first troops into battle, emerged, as Paul Wood explains, "in the third decade of the nineteenth century, not in debate about art as such, but in the early socialist tradition as left-wing intellectuals and politicians tried to think through concepts of progress and freedom in emerging modern societies" (Wood; Edwards: 187). Mikhail Bakunin's journal *L'Avant-garde*, founded in 1878, exemplifies the term's purely political usage (Karl: 15). The word "avant-garde", Matei Calinescu points out, "has an old history in French. As a term of warfare it dates back to the Middle Ages, and it developed a figurative meaning at least as early as the Renaissance." But it was not used as a metaphor for "expressing a self-consciously advanced position in politics, literature and art . . . with any consistency before the nineteenth century" (Calinescu: 97). Art came to be seen in this period "as a kind of 'advance guard' for social progress as a whole" (Wood; Edwards: 187). Henri de Saint-Simon, the first critic to use the term in relation to art, rallied artists in 1825, to "unite" and "serve as the avant-garde: for amongst all the arms at our disposal, the power of the Arts is the swiftest and most expeditious" in spreading "new ideas amongst men". He also recognises that the present apparently "limited" role of the arts should be transformed and expanded to achieve this goal (Saint-Simon; Edwards: 187). The concept of the avant-garde, Calinescu concludes, "was little more than a radicalized and strongly utopianized version of modernity", in that, historically, it "started by dramatizing certain constitutive elements of the idea of modernity and making them into cornerstones of revolutionary ethos" (Calinescu: 95).

The sense of a "socially and politically committed 'avant-garde'", Wood explains, "originally stood opposed to the idea of *l'art pour l'art* ('art for art's sake') which emerged at the same time" (187), and which has since shaped definitions of the later, retrospective term "modernism". In the period after the Second World War art criticism, and Anglophone criticism in particular, began to foreground

"modernist" as the epithet for the autonomous, "experimental" art of the early twentieth century, a rhetorical manoeuvre exemplified in the work of the American critic Clement Greenberg. At this point, "avant-garde" became interchangeable, even synonymous, with "modernist".

It is one of those odd twists of history that the dominant understanding of the term "avant-garde" in the years after 1945 should in effect have come to signify the opposite of what was originally intended. This is not because of any sleight of hand on the part of critics and intellectuals, so much as a result of the way art itself evolved in modern western bourgeois societies. These societies have experienced what is widely understood as a "separation of the spheres". . . . It has been as a part of this widespread social and historical process that modern art has evolved a set of procedures, and references, techniques and assumptions, which add up to something like its own characteristic "language". And it has, further, been as part of this history of development that the notion of being "in advance" came to denote not so much modern art's relationship to society at large, as certain kinds of art's relationship to other, more conventional kinds of art. . . . In the 1960s this modernist understanding of the idea of an artistic "avant-garde" came under challenge. From what has come to be seen as a constellation of postmodernist points of view, the importance of art's active and explicit relationship to the wider culture beyond art has once more been widely canvassed. As part of this process, the appellation "avant-garde" has been withdrawn by many writers and critics from those "autonomous" art movements with which it was for long identified. . . . The idea of an avant-garde has been returned to those practices which explicitly sought to overcome the separation of art from life, the separation of aesthetics from politics. (Wood; Edwards: 187)

At stake in this shifting semantic terrain between the critical terms, modernism and postmodernism, avant-garde and neo-avant-garde, is the positioning and interpretation of the art of 1910 to 1945 in relation to politics, history, culture and aesthetics. "Postmodernism", a term invented and gaining currency, along with "Modernism", around the mid-century mark, has developed a number of theorised readings of Modernism which seem to confuse as much as clarify, leaving modernism bound up with postmodernist wrangling. Students of Modernism soon become accustomed to conflicting definitions of these terms, which are further complicated by their equally confused

relationship to the term "modernity", as Susan Stanford Friedman explores in her very helpful essay "Definitional Excursions: The Meanings of Modern/Modernity/Modernism" (2001). But in considering "modernism" and "postmodernism" in relation to the modern and modernity, she falls shy of offering a similar treatment of the term "avant-garde", which she uses unselfconsciously in her arguments. Fredereck R. Karl prefers to understand the avant-garde as "a form of cannibalism" on modernism, as an extreme of a modernist continuum. Whereas avant-garde aesthetics, I would argue, might be considered at the least transgressive, if not dissident, modernist aesthetics, even under postmodernist auspices, are at most perhaps transgressive. The terms' semantic instability, therefore, and a more complicated critical trajectory than is suggested by "Avant-Garde to Modernism", undermine this title's attraction, but the critical transitions between these two terms nevertheless inform the argument of this book, and are subsumed in the title's "Modernism". The terms "modernism" and "avant-garde" signal the international dialogue in aesthetics, between different critical approaches and between European and American metropolitan centres: Paris, New York, London. While the literary focus of this book is Anglophone literature, and while it is concerned with the cultural contexts of New York and London, its dominant metropolitan pole is Paris, the epicentre of avant-gardism for the first half of the twentieth century.

From the Imagists to the Apocalypse movement: literary landmarks of 1910 and 1945

I have attempted to preserve the sense of historical heterogeneity and development, indicated in West's advertisement (he is specifying a particular lineage of avant-garde precedents), by using the more specific demarcation, "Image to Apocalypse". Just as "Image" refers to the early international movement of Imagism that came to prominence under the auspices of Ezra Pound, around 1910, so "Apocalypse" refers to the (less well known) English Apocalypse movement, a post-Romantic surrealist group that emerged in the late 1930s and early 1940s, partly taking inspiration from the work of Dylan Thomas. But if 1945 saw the publication of Thomas's *Fern Hill*, it is also the year of Pound's *Pisan Cantos* (the literary landmark in post-war poetry), written out of his confinement as a fascist traitor. In

a sense, then, my dates take the reader from Pound to Pound (from his aestheticised Imagism to political apocalypse, perhaps), but to enshrine this particular strand of my argument in my title would be too restrictive. It would also be to repeat the errors of personification of other commentaries, most notably Hugh Kenner's nevertheless impressive work *The Pound Era: The Age of T. S. Eliot, James Joyce and Wyndham Lewis* (1972), as well as to ignore the breadth and diversity of the range of authors this volume samples, not to mention their often self-conscious organisation into contesting and *collective* aesthetic and political movements.

"Image to Apocalypse" as avant-garde technique

As well as referring to the specific avant-garde literary movements embracing the period, "Image to Apocalypse" may also indicate ways of reading avant-garde texts. The image dominates the period, and the juxtaposition of images becomes a dominant aesthetic technique. The power of the image is attested by Pound's much cited definition, in "How to Read" (1928), of the second of three kinds of poetry: "PHANOPOEIA . . . a casting of images upon the visual imagination". The first, by the way, is "MELOPOEIA, wherein the words are charged, over and above their plain meaning, with some musical property, which directs the bearing or trend of that meaning". And the third is "LOGOPOEIA, 'the dance of the intellect among words'", a pleasure not always recognised by first-time readers of avant-garde poetics. Pound explains that this kind of poetry

employs words not only for their direct meaning, but it takes count in a special way of habits of usage, of the context we *expect* to find with the word, its usual concomitants, of its known acceptances, and of ironical play. It holds the aesthetic which is peculiarly the domain of verbal manifestation, and cannot possibly be contained in plastic or in music. It is the latest come, and perhaps most tricky and undependable mode. (*Literary Essays*, p. 25)

All three modes are important in the period, and Pound's esteemed logopoeia is certainly illuminating in its endorsement of pleasuring the intellect, and actually enjoying the negotiation of densely allusive, difficult texts. But in this period, there is pronounced interest, never-

theless, in the development of phanopoeic writing, not only in terms of the "imagery" of Imagism, say, but also in terms of the visual dimensions of the verbal, particularly where the visual form of writing, and the materiality of the printed word, become vitally celebrated poetic components. This is evident in a whole range of writing, including (to name a few) Imagism, the calligrammes of Guillaume Apollinaire, the cubist poetics of Gertrude Stein, and Dada assemblages.

The reading mode implied by "Image to Apocalypse" suggests a non-linear, revelatory response to image, where a kind of instantaneous, epiphanic reading occurs in an intense moment of lyric aestheticism or subjective introspection. This approach owes something to the theories of Henri Bergson. His concept of the *durée*, as subjective, psychological, non-spatial, time, and the only site of true freedom, suggests such aesthetic moments constitute an escape from the real, material world. But Bergson's *durée* denies "genuine historical experience", according to Walter Benjamin (*Charles Baudelaire*, pp. 144–5), another important influence on theories of avant-garde art. And it is worth considering how "Image to Apocalypse" might conversely be understood as referring the reader outwards from the image to revelations of historical, political, technological and cultural context. Avant-garde texts may be read, then, as reflecting, and further, as interrupting, disrupting and even *transforming* such contexts, rather than merely escaping them (see Bürger; Eysteinsson).

Conflicting definitions of the avant-garde: from Baudelaire to Dada

Balso's entry into the Trojan Horse provides a useful analogy here. Is the poet escaping reality by disappearing up the fundament of art into an endless arcade of literary aesthetics (and in this case the fundament is that of the magnificently constructed gift horse the Greeks left at Troy, the central icon of the founding epic text in Western culture, Homer's *Iliad*)? To be avant-garde here means (merely) to be at the cutting edge of art, forging new aesthetics, breaking with – indeed violating – aesthetic tradition while celebrating a release into aesthetic oblivion. Here avant-garde has become synonymous with its earlier antonym, *l'art pour l'art*. And it is with this definition of the avant-garde that many definitions of modernism seem to coincide

(see Bradbury and McFarlane). Such release into aesthetic oblivion may be represented by Balso's final erotic oblivion, at the close of West's novel, itself likened to the ultimate oblivion of death. Balso's intense masturbatory fantasy, then, the anal penetration of the Trojan Horse, is an act of self-reflexive literary aesthetics *par extraordinaire*. West's advertisement, "Through the Hole in the Mundane Millstone", certainly encourages the reader to think of Balso's journey as a flight from reality into aesthetics, pointing out "the mechanism used – an 'anywhere out of the world' device [that] makes a formal comparison with Lewis Carroll possible. Just as Alice escapes through the looking glass, Balso Snell escapes the real world by entering the Wooden Horse of the Greeks which he finds in the tall grass surrounding the walls of Troy" (397). The status of the "real world", however, is undermined by the comedic assumption of a real location for the Trojan Horse, and the idea of escape from the world is itself signalled by the citation of Baudelaire's poem "Anywhere Out of this World", presumably already out of this world if we follow this line of logic. Balso is thus already in the long grass of art before entering the horse. Does this reinforce or unsettle the experience of reading *The Dream Life of Balso Snell* as an escape from life into art?

The concept of the avant-garde is also rooted in the attempts of various *historical* European avant-garde movements – German Dadaists such as the photomontagist John Heartfield and satirical artist George Grosz are the most often cited, following the influential *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1974) by Peter Bürger – to liquidate art itself "as an activity that is split off from the praxis of life" (Bürger: 22), to smash the boundaries between art and life. This is a radically dissident aesthetics deployed to break rather than merely transgress aesthetic, social, cultural and political boundaries. The Trojan Horse, of course, may also be understood as a primary example of this sense of the avant-garde, especially in view of the term's military origins. Misread by the Trojans as a purely aesthetic object, the horse was in fact a cunning instrument of war concealing shock troops. The Trojan War, furthermore, still had powerful cultural resonance in the years following the cataclysmic events of the Great War, which may well have prompted renewed interest in the myths surrounding the ancient conflict. Concealing an army in its guts, the Greeks used the Trojan Horse to penetrate the defences of Troy. The enemy is smuggled into the securest sector. Such military shock tactics are echoed in avant-garde performances where the promise of passive aesthetic

enjoyment is dashed by the eruption of transgressive violence – such as the physical attacks on the public advocated by the Futurists: “go out into the street, launch assaults from theatres and introduce the fisticuff into the artistic battle” (Goldberg: 12). Poetry, according to the seventh article of Filippo Marinetti’s “Manifesto of Futurism” (1913), “must be conceived as a violent attack” (Kolocotroni: 251), and the ninth article of the manifesto goes beyond the individual skirmish in vowing to “glorify war” (Kolocotroni: 251). Tristan Tzara’s “Dada Manifesto, 1918” rules that in the work of creative writers “every page should explode” (Kolocotroni: 277). He gives a lyrical account of the revolutionary, and collective, moment of dissolution when the boundaries between art and life are smashed: “a unique fraternity comes into existence at the intense moment when beauty and life itself, brought into high tension on a wire, ascend towards a flash-point; the blue tremor linked to the ground by our magnetised gaze which covers the peak with snow. The miracle. I open my heart to creation” (“Note on Art”, 1917; Kolocotroni: 280). Berlin Dadaists, who joined the (real, and doomed) post-war anti-Weimar revolution, declared themselves in 1919 the “Dadaist Headquarters of World Revolution” (Richter: 126).

The avant-garde, anarchy and political activism

It is difficult to tell sometimes where political activism or anarchism shades into performance art. Think of the British suffragette Emily Wilding Davison, who in 1913 leapt to her death under the horses’ hooves at Derby Day, in her fatally dramatic (but not actually clearly suicidal) attempt to disrupt the ritual events of the patriarchal public realm, and publicise “the Cause” (Green: 136). Or think of the American Wobbler troubadour Joe Hill, who joined the American union the IWW (the International Workers of the World – or “Wobblies”) significantly enough in 1910, and was author of many of the incendiary lyrics in *The Little Red Songbook* (“songs to fan the flames of discontent”). Before his judicial murder by the State of Utah in November 1915 (he had been framed for murder), at which he wore the standard paper heart for his execution squad to aim at, Hill requested to have his ashes mailed to every state in the Union, bar Utah, not wishing to be caught dead there. The Joe Hill Memorial Committee duly obeyed, and were delighted when some of the pack-

ages burst open disrupting the mail (Kornbluh: 157), this accident adding further dada to Hill's avant-garde agenda. Hill's last message to his comrades was: "Don't mourn – Organize!", imperatives to match the "Make It New" of avant-garde aesthetics. Hill recommended in *Solidarity* (December 1911) that "if a person can put a few cold, common-sense facts into a song and dress them (the facts) up in a cloak of humor to take the dryness out of them, he will succeed in reaching a great number of workers who are too unintelligent or too indifferent to read a pamphlet or an editorial on economic science" (Kornbluh: 11). Perhaps this manifesto item is merely a minimal and prosaic version of the ethos of classical literary poetics encapsulated in Horace's dictum, in the *Ars Poetica*, that poetry should both instruct and delight. In fact the "dress" and "facts" – or "Trojan Horse" – of Hill's famous songs are more sophisticated than he makes out. (See, for example, Van Wienen.) They have certainly succeeded in penetrating Western culture over the last century with their rich imagery. "Pie in the sky", for example, is from his most famous song "The Preacher and the Slave"; and the eponymous "Mr. Block" is the *Ur* "blockhead", a semi-reified industrial worker loyal to the bosses, with his own subversive cartoon strip, who may also be an early ancestor of Bob Dylan's "Mr Jones" (neither seems to know what is happening).

Proponents of "art for art's sake", however, would abhor the misuse of art for political effect: propaganda pollutes the purity of aestheticism. We might note that "false Sinon, the Greek from Troy", "the perjurer of the horse", the man who coaxed the Trojans to take in the fatal effigy (an early art critic perhaps), is to be encountered in the putrifaction of the tenth trench of Dante's *Inferno*, a "falsifier in words" squabbling with the "falsifiers in deeds" (*Inferno* XXX.91–9). To smuggle in teaching, or more crudely, political doctrine, or ideology perhaps, is damnable – but is it avoidable? It is not merely a matter of outward dress and content. But, it is in fact difficult to explain or understand how exactly the content of teaching (or dogma or ideology) or delight (or beauty) might be *in* the form of a poem "in the sense that Jeffrey Archer is in jail", to borrow from Terry Eagleton (*London Review of Books*, vol. 24, no. 8, p. 14), or in the sense that Greek soldiers are in the Trojan horse. On the other hand, it is difficult not to miss the shock tactics of a truly avant-garde public gesture! But let us return to the historical avant-garde.

The historical avant-garde: theory and practice

Avant-garde movements not only dealt in an (anti-)aesthetic of violent intervention; they also, on occasion, incurred violence. Futurist and Dadaist exhibitions and performances frequently attracted or incurred violent attacks, whether from outraged audiences or police raids. But avant-garde art, it should be noted, may also *ward off* physical attacks, as the jazz singer and connoisseur of Dada and surrealism George Melly discovered one dark night in Manchester in the 1950s, when he was set upon by thugs:

I was anaesthetized by fear. I subconsciously did the only thing that might work and it did. I took out of my pocket a small book of the sound poems of the dadaist Kurt Schwitters, explained what they were, and began to read. . . . Slowly, muttering threats, they moved off. I can't explain why it worked, but I suspect that it was because they needed a conventional response in order to give me a going over. (Melly: 43–4)

We can only wonder what Melly's assailants might have made of a snatch of Eliot, Pound or Woolf. Bürger maintains that the "attack of the historical avant-garde on art as an institution has failed, and art has not been integrated into the praxis of life, art as an institution continues to survive as something separate from the praxis of life" (57). Art, in this post-avant-garde era, he suggests, "can either resign itself to its autonomous status or 'organize happenings' to break through that status" (57). Melly seems to have brought about a spontaneous, if not organised, "happening" that briefly allowed art to penetrate into the praxis of life in a dark backstreet of Manchester. Such happenings, however, cannot achieve the kind of full-scale political and social revolution that Bürger has identified as the aim of the authentic, historical avant-garde. "All art that is not against its time is for it," the German satirist Karl Kraus declared in 1912: "Such art can make the time pass, but it cannot conquer it." He seems to share Bürger's desire for an art capable of root and branch transformation; and he offers language as the medium for the artistic assault on the status quo:

The true enemy of time is language. Language lives in harmonious union with the spirit in revolt against its own time. Out of this conspiracy art is conceived. In contrast, conformity, in complicity

with its time, robs language of its own vocabulary. Art can come only from denial. Only from anguished protest. Never from calm compliance. Art placed in the service of consoling man becomes a curse unto his very deathbed. True art reaches its fulfilment only through the hopeless. (Szasz: 158)

Denial, of course, may have many different inflections, incur many different responses, depending upon context. George Grosz, a Berlin Dadaist, is marked in Nazi SS files of 1939 as "one of the most evil representatives of degenerate art who worked in a manner which was hostile to Germany" (quoted Beth Irwin Lewis: 231); but after he had fled to the very different political context of New York in 1932, he dropped his revolutionary style of satirical caricature. "When he illustrated books and articles in America, his drawings were illustrations, nothing more," according to Beth Irwin Lewis. Grosz's avant-gardism was defeated by Nazism:

Under the impact of totalitarianism, Grosz's pen faltered and became silent. . . . His power of caricature . . . was bound inextricably to the hope and passion of a revolutionary period. George Grosz hated the ruling classes, but he hated in a context that sought to bring revolutionary change. When all possibility of change was denied, Grosz's drawing pen as a weapon of revolution became useless. (Beth Irwin Lewis: 210)

Yet Grosz, while not as extreme or desperate as he was in the context of German culture, and while also attempting an optimistic American outlook (Beth Irwin Lewis: 236), nevertheless seems to have shunned conformity in his American refuge, as is suggested by his editorial of November 1932 for the short-lived journal *Americana*, declaring disaffection with American Republicans, Democrats, Socialists, and Communists alike:

We are Americans who believe that our civilization exudes a miasmatic stench and that we had better prepare to give it a decent but rapid burial. We are the laughing morticians of the present. (Quoted Martin: 215)

Americana also published in 1932 extracts from West's *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*, and in August 1933 West joined Grosz as one of its associate editors.

The transformational languages of the avant-garde

The Trojan Horse is the foundational image of the (pre-Christian) "original sin" in European history and mythology: the Trojan War. It is an appropriate, and common, mythopoeic signifier in the violent years of the twentieth century, marked by two cataclysmic world wars. But West's (ab)use of the Trojan Horse, a violation of a signifier of violation, may also resonate with antagonistic energies of the historical avant-garde, since the horse, according to Deborah Wyrick, is a significant image because it picks up on one of the etymological sources for "Dada", the German word for "hobby-horse" (367). Avant-garde energies also resonate in his choice of military metaphor for his account of Balso's final ejaculation:

In this activity, Home and Duty, Love and Art were forgotten.

An army moved in his body, an eager army of hurrying sensations. These sensations marched at first methodically and then hysterically, but always with precision. The army of his body commenced a long intricate drill, a long involved ceremony. A ceremony whose ritual unwound and manoeuvred itself with confidence and training of chemicals acting under the stimulus of a catalytic agent.

His body screamed and shouted as it marched and uncoiled; then, with one heaving shout of triumph, it fell back quiet.

The army that a moment before had been thundering in his body retreated slowly – victorious, relieved. (54)

The imagery of Balso's orgasmic release of an army of sperm is not only charged with the mythopoeisis of the Trojan War, then, it is also an homage to more recent avant-garde celebrations of bodily fluids, such as the dictum by Schwitters he cites in his advertisement, as well as more visual examples such as the Dadaist Francis Picabia's blasphemous ink splash entitled *Sainte Vierge* (1920), which was published in his notorious international review, *391* (a publication West, as a disciple of the avant-garde, would probably be familiar with). In undermining the notions of aesthetic and divine transcendence, Picabia's work surely confronts rather than escapes mundanity. "A figuring of the Virgin's defloration in defiant contravention of Catholic dogma" (Hopkins, "Questioning Dada's Potency", p. 317), it challenges the religious pieties of transubstantiation, divine conception, and the afterlife with the visceral reality of ejaculation, and chal-

lenges the transcendental pretensions of the aesthetic with the materiality of ink on paper. It "delivers blasphemous and anti-art blows in equal measure" (Hopkins, *ibid.*, p. 317).

The boundaries of West's provocative metaphors are equally unsettled and unsettling. His account of the "catalytic" agency of Balso's orgasm speaks to the transformative as well as confrontational powers of the avant-garde aesthetics he is joyously invoking. By the time West is writing, then, in 1931, there is already available a tradition and a transformational language of "the new", familiar enough to be satirised and yet also supple enough to be stretched and pushed into new locutions, new transformations – aesthetic, cultural, political and historical. And this is one of the major and enabling literary transitions occurring in the period 1910–1945 that this book will chart and explore. The historical avant-garde's assault on the institution of Art transforms all aesthetic and interpretative practices. Any critical appraisal of the period must take account of the position(ing) of specific artists, writers, movements, works and texts in relation to it.

Transitions in transformational languages

The initiation, the laying-down, and the development of avant-garde transformational languages is, then, *the* major transition occurring in the period addressed by this book. "There is a language of sculpture, of painting, of poetry," acknowledges Benjamin in an essay (unpublished in his life-time), "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man" (1916):

Just as the language of poetry is partly, if not solely, founded on the name language of man, it is very conceivable that the language of sculpture or painting is founded on certain kinds of thing-languages, that in them we find a translation of the language of things into an infinitely higher language, which may still be of the same sphere. We are concerned here with nameless, nonacoustic languages, languages issuing from matter; here we should recall the material community of things in their communication. (73)

Avant-garde language translates from multiple such sources into another transformational language, if not "into an infinitely higher language". Benjamin recognises that "Language communicates the

linguistic being of things", and the art of this period often seems to draw on every kind of language, visual and verbal, in its attempts to forge a new language. Just as Benjamin recognises that "the answer to the question 'What does language communicate?' is therefore 'All language communicates itself'" (63), so the avant-garde, in a sense, communicates itself. He also alerts us to the idea that the verbal material of poetry is a higher form of everyday language, just as the visual arts transform the material of the everyday object world, itself possessing a kind of language. This thought also informs Kraus's identification of the task facing the contemporary literary artist. Kraus memorably invokes avant-garde practices, and the interpenetration of visual, musical and verbal aesthetics, in his satirical rage against the decline of German language, and the related decline in the understanding of enriching, literary, language, which he saw as concurrent with the rise of right-wing politics in the Weimar period:

Why do people treat literature so insolently? Because they know the language. They would take the same liberties with the other arts if singing to one another, smearing one another with paint, or throwing plaster at one another were means of communication. The unfortunate thing is that verbal art works with a material that the rabble handles every day. That is why literature is beyond help. The farther it removes itself from comprehensibility, the more importunately do people claim their material. The best thing would be to keep literature secret from the people until there is a law that prohibits people from using language, permitting them to use only sign language in urgent cases. But by the time such a law comes into being, they will probably have learned to answer the aria "How's business?" with a still life. (Kraus: 64)

Kraus points up the differences between literary language and the language of everyday, at the same time as acknowledging their interpenetration. He entertainingly depicts the theatrical gestures typical of avant-garde activism, "smearing one another with paint, or throwing plaster at one another", displacing the language of the everyday; but his closing observation on the absorption of art by capitalist corporate business is simultaneously both an avant-garde gesture and a signal warning to the avant-garde of the ultimate containment and commodification of avant-gardism by the forces it seeks to transform. Yet the historical, transformational languages of the avant-garde, commodified and culturally enshrined, like the Trojan Horse itself,

may potentially disclose the forces for continuing resistance and change.

Gendering modernism and the avant-garde

West's narrative of entry into the Trojan Horse, his imagery of anal penetration and male masturbation and ejaculation, certainly point up the subtexts of homosexuality apparent in many modernist texts, as well as the masculinity and the homosocial nature of many of the movements in the historical avant-garde. But equally, there is a discourse of feminine sexuality and of feminism running through the texts of this period. Several decades of feminist and gender-based scholarship has opened up the field to considerations of the inscriptions of gender and sexuality, in male- and female-authored texts, in ways that suggest these terms provide the image and apocalypse of the modernist period. The middle part of this book addresses these gender wars, and the mythopoeisis of the Trojan War again figures conspicuously. But gender, as we shall see, in fact provides the metaphorical staging and basis for many of the wider, and apparently unconnected concerns of modernist literature and culture. "The alienation from patriarchal discourse that belongs to its creative deviants," Naomi Segal argues, "is . . . after all the true avant-garde" (p. 249).

New theories of the avant-garde and new genres

Bürger's theory of the avant-garde has recently been opened up by various critics who have recognised the need both to revise his definition of the term, and to apply it to a wider spectrum of art of the period of the historical avant-garde as well as to the post-war works Bürger identifies as neo-avant-garde (see Murphy; Scheunemann; Karl). It has been argued, further, that Bürger's analysis of the aims of the historical avant-garde is, itself, mistaken. This current critical interest in revising and redefining the term "avant-garde", and in broadening its application, provides this book with a set of theoretical transitions, then, to test in its sampling of the literature of 1910 to 1945. "Image to Apocalypse" carries the freight of these concerns with the avant-garde, and suggests methods for reading and writing avant-

garde texts, while also signalling the historical span of avant-garde movements from 1910 to 1945. While "Image" is derived from the particular *poetry* movement, it should be noted that "Imagism" collapses strict generic categorisation, and ushers in a period of exploding old genres colliding with new (such as photography and film). As shorthand for avant-garde aesthetics and methodology, it also transcends distinct genres. The image is the common unit of currency and structuring principle of poetry, fiction, drama, essay, manifesto and so on. The juxtaposition of (broken) images, furthermore, enables the new avant-garde genre of montage or collage that dominates this period. "Image to Apocalypse" thus signals the period's apocalypse of image.

Modernism and the literary periodisation of 1910 to 1945

Students of the avant-garde and Modernism should find both reassuring and unsettling the choice of dates in my title, each of potent historical, political and cultural significance. The dates go from the death of Edward VII and the political upheavals surrounding the fall of the Asquith government, culturally implicated in all of which is the infamous Post-Impressionist exhibition of 1910 (for which "Image" may stand as shorthand), to the end of the Second World War and the dropping of the Atom bomb ("Apocalypse" indeed). I begin with 1910, itself a familiar topos of modernism, since it is the year (as every novice soon knows) when, according to Virginia Woolf, "human character changed" (*Essays* 3, p. 421); but it is not the year that many surveys of modernism, however enthusiastically they go on to cite it, take as their starting point (although for Peter Faulkner's reader and Critical Idiom introduction, the era of modernism is 1910–30). I conclude with 1945, extending the period beyond its conventionally understood close. The 1930s are often misleadingly treated as a separate and culturally disconnected decade. Modernism is more usually confined by literary commentaries to the period between 1890/1900 and 1930 (for example, Malcolm Bradbury's and James McFarlane's *Modernism*), and has even been narrowed to between 1907 and 1925 (by Frank Kermode) and 1908 and 1922 (by M. H. Levenson in his *Genealogy of Modernism*, although his edited *Cambridge Companion to Modernism* extends the chronology from 1890 to 1939). Peter Childs's recent New Critical Idiom guide, *Modernism*, more vaguely

assigns it to the work of authors "who wrote in the decades before and after the turn of the twentieth century" (4). Although two works on women modernists (Gillian Hanscome and Virginia Smyers; Shari Benstock) go to 1940, there are no introductions that go beyond this point – unless it is to go well beyond (the date and sometimes the student) into the realms of postmodernism (Peter Brooker, Brian McHale).

A typical rationale for starting in the mid-/late nineteenth century or turn of the twentieth century is to approach the heights of Modernism gently via the foothills of Symbolism and the Yellow Period, but this gradualist approach tends to defer and diffuse rather than sharply define the specific topics and shock tactics of the various movements in Modernism (see, for example, Peter Nicholls's introduction, which starts with 1845 and with Baudelaire). Starting with Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) is also a popular but equally problematic pedagogical and critical strategy: new readers and students of the period often find it difficult, in my experience, to discern the "modernist" aspects of this complex narrative, whereas they benefit enormously, I hope, from the insights gained by plunging into the visually and verbally distinct contours of Imagist poetry of a decade later. Childs opts for "plunging" his readers early into Samuel Beckett's *Murphy* (1938), which he finds "an in some ways exemplary Modernist text, which would actually be sidelined by some definitions of Modernism and by some definitions of Modernist writers" as it was published "supposedly eight years after Modernism started to wane and be replaced by the neo-realism of writers such as Graham Greene, George Orwell and Evelyn Waugh. It is also by a writer who is often cited as the first *postmodernist*" (4–5). I admire this gesture towards an extended boundary for the period and the undermining of "postmodernist" as a useful epithet, but the danger here is that "Modernism" may be seen as shorthand for a fixed category of aesthetic qualities that remain unchanged whatever the context. But whereas Childs's task is to define and explain the term "modernism", mine is to introduce readers to the *transitions* occurring within the period that has been retrospectively categorised as "modernist". "Modernism", it should be emphasised, "comprises numerous, diverse and contesting, theories and practices which first flourished in a period that knew little of the term as it has now come to be understood" (Kolocotroni et al.: xvii). This accounts for our first plunge into *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*, which does in some ways broadly seem

to exemplify retrospective definitions of "modernist writing", but which also illustrates, more specifically, the transitions (and regroupings) that have occurred in avant-garde literary practice by 1931.

Nathanael West: transitions in the avant-garde languages of Marcel Proust, James Joyce and Gertrude Stein

With this in mind, we might explore with Balso a little further what lies beyond "the lips of the mystic portal". What lies around it is graffiti:

Engraved in a heart pierced by an arrow and surmounted by the initial N, he read, "Ah! Qualis . . . Artifex . . . Pereo!" Not to be outdone by the actor-emperor, Balso carved with his penknife another heart and the words "O Byss! O Abyss! O Anon! O Onan!" omitting, however, the arrow and his initial. (West: 5)

The citation of Nero's dying words, "What an artist is lost with me!" (see West: 820 note), is rhythmically supplemented by Balso's playful and celebratory punning on the lyric exclamation as arsehole, and on this orifice as portal of death ("Abyss"). "O Byss" puns on the Latin verb *obire*, to die, as well as almost suggesting bliss; and the move from Anon to Onan, links the oblivion of authorial anonymity – Eliotic impersonality – with the erotic oblivion of masturbation. Onanism may well be the novel's alpha and omega, for it closes, as we have seen, with an account of Balso in masturbatory ejaculation.

West's novel sports a Proustian epigraph: " 'After all, my dear fellow, life, Anaxagoras has said, is a journey' – Bergotte," which sends us on a journey of further citations. Bergotte, himself a fictional construct, "a novelist and Marcel's hero in Proust's *A la recherche de temps perdu*" (see West: 820 note), cites the ancient philosopher Anaxagoras, whose concept of the universe as a "mixture" of "spermata" – seeds "of every qualitatively distinct natural substance, organic and inorganic" (*Oxford Classical Dictionary*) – seems particularly apt for West's onanistic text. If such arcane and obscurantist humour, coupled with West's bizarre and disorientating narration, his Eliotic allusions to classical mythology, and his Joycean wit and sordidity, have not already alerted the 1931 reader to the fact that he is writing in the new, or by now established, avant-garde manner, then Balso's following invocation would surely do so: "O Beer! O

Meyerbeer! O Bach! O Offenbach! Stand me now as ever in good stead" (West: 5). For this synthetic Bacchic (so to speak!) invocation of drink and operatic song also clearly echoes Stephen's famous invocation (of Daedalus) in the concluding lines of one of the major founding avant-garde texts, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), by James Joyce: "Old father, old artificer, stand me now and ever in good stead" (213). We might note that *A Portrait of the Artist* itself begins in a conflation of fairy tale, baby talk, colloquialism and song:

Once upon a time and a very good time it was there was a moocow coming down along the road and this moocow that was coming down along the road met a nicens little boy named baby tuckoo. . . .

His father told him that story: his father looked at him through a glass: he had a hairy face.

He was baby tuckoo. The moocow came down the road where Betty Byrne lived: she sold lemon platt.

*O, the wild rose blossoms
On the little green place.*

He sang that song. That was his song.

O, the green wothe botheth.

When you wet the bed first it is warm then it gets cold. His mother put on the oilsheet. That had the queer smell. (5)

It appears that both the opening and closing passages of Joyce's *Portrait*, then, contribute as points of departure for West's opening to *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*. Just as Joyce's text is punctuated by song so West also has Balso break into song as he enters the "foyer-like lower intestine" of the Trojan Horse. Whereas Joyce (just as he cites Ovid, an authentic classical source, in his epigraph to *Portrait*) here uses a snatch of a "real" citation plundered from a "traditional" cultural source (folk song), West, on the other hand, constructs a song from more recent, avant-garde sources:

To keep his heart high and yet out of his throat, he made a song.

Round as the Anus
Of a Bronze Horse
Or the Tender Buttons
Used by Horses for Ani . . . (5)

Here we find parodied, amongst other things, the sparse syntax of Imagism, the compressed lyric symbolism of Yeats, the perverse somatic humour of Joyce, and the cryptic poetics of Gertrude Stein's volume of cubist poetry, *Tender Buttons*. The "elephantine close-ups of various literary positions and their technical methods" that Balso encounters further down the digestive tract of the Trojan Horse include parodies of Dostoevsky, the Marquis de Sade, Rilke, Rimbaud, J. K. Huysmans, Yeats, Joyce, Proust, Williams, Pound, S. J. Perelman, Dashiell Hammett, Gorky, James Branch Cabell, Rabelais, Voltaire, Aldous Huxley, D. H. Lawrence (see Martin: 129–30).

**Transitions in American and European poetics:
from Edgar Allan Poe to performance poetry**

As well as pointing up the influence of the maverick Dadaist, Schwitters, West's advertisement also makes clear his debt to French avant-garde sources: "he is much like Guillaume Apollinaire, Jarry, Ribemont-Dessaignes, Raymond Roussel, and certain of the surrealists" (West: 397). West's formative, but relatively brief, pilgrimage to Paris in the 1920s, where he met and mixed with the French Dada/Surrealist crowd, Max Ernst, Louis Aragon and Phillippe Soupault (who befriended him), puts him in the modernist tradition of expatriate Americans in Paris. And out of this experience of the international avant-garde in Europe came *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*. In his satirical portrait of West, S. J. Perelman celebrates his friend's predilections for the life of an American flâneur-writer in Paris:

Picture to yourself . . . an intellectual vagabond, a connoisseur of first editions, fine wines, and beautiful women, well above six feet in height and distinguished for his pallor, a dweller in the world of books, his keen grey eyes belying the sensual lip, equally at home browsing through the bookstalls along the Paris quais and rubbing elbows in the smart literary salons of the Faubourg St. Honore . . . an intimate of Cocteau, Picasso, Joyce and Lincoln Kirstein, a dead shot, a past master of the foils, dictating his epigrams, aphorisms, and sayings to a corps of secretaries at lightning speed . . . (Perelman: 11)

But we might be wary of casting West, and other writers of the period, as seeking to replicate quite so faithfully the hyper-aesthetics

of the fin-de-siècle bibliophile, sensualist, and flâneur. West and Perelman are also in the business of sending up and undermining such stereotypes. West's few statements on his art (for, like many of his heroes, he issued a couple of manifestos) show a particularly American agenda to his avant-garde aspirations, despite his several European calling cards. "Some Notes on Violence" (1932) appeared in the revived *Contact* magazine during his co-editorship with William Carlos Williams (it was co-edited by Williams and Robert McAlmon in the early 1920s). Declaring, "in America violence is idiomatic" (West: 399), it is a defence of the violence at the "core" of modern American writing. In "Some Notes on Miss L." (1933), he shows how the "comic strip technique" of his second novel, *Miss Lonelyhearts* (1932), contributes to his American aesthetic of violence: "Each chapter instead of going forward in time, also goes backward, forward, up and down in space like a picture. Violent images are used to illustrate commonplace events. Violent acts are left almost bald" (West: 401). Here European avant-garde interests in narrative and temporal experimentation and in interartistic exchange meet with the American strip cartoon and American urban violence.

Contact magazine, in its new manifestation, was to "attempt to cut a trail through the American jungle without the use of a European compass" (146). This suggests a reorienting of international avant-garde aesthetics toward the development of a new local, in this case American, aesthetic. If the new European lyric novel is represented by Joyce's *Ulysses*, in which epic is recast to account for one day in Dublin as observed from a number of other European locations and over several years (as the novel's closing words tell us: "*Trieste-Zurich-Paris, / 1914-1921*"), then the modern American novelist must "Forget the epic", according to West: "Lyric novels can be written according to Poe's definition of a lyric poem. The short novel is a distinct form especially fitted for use in this country. . . . Remember William Carlos Williams' description of the pioneer women who shot their children against the wilderness like cannonballs. Do the same with your novels" (West: 401).

West's citation of Edgar Allan Poe's manifesto, "Philosophy of Composition" (recommending lyric formalism and brevity), combined with the violent and militaristic imagery of a Futurist manifesto, brings out the complex interrelations and dialogue between European and American literature underscoring this period initiated by Baudelaire's translations of Poe. In "Philosophy of Composition",

for example, Poe claims to have forged the compositional foundation to his poem "The Raven" from the refrain of "the long *o* as the most sonorous vowel, in connection with *r* as the most producible consonant" (Poe); and this primary emphasis on the poem's performance of sound in nineteenth-century American poetics finds strong resonance in the European avant-garde performance of (primal) sound poetry of the early twentieth century. The opening refrain of "O" in *The Dream Life of Balso Snell* sings from both sources.

Transition: the little magazine as international forum

1910–1945 is a period of constant transitions, then, between European and American and between international and local concerns. *Contact* magazine, for example, saw itself in 1930 as the "legitimate successor" (Martin: 144) to Eugene Jolas's aptly named Paris-based journal, *transition*, possibly the most important and influential little magazine of the period. Celebrating, in its famous "Revolution of the Word Proclamation", "the revolution in the English language [a]s an accomplished fact" (Fitch: 19), it was *the* international forum for avant-garde and experimental writing between 1927 and 1939, with a two-year interruption between 1930 and 1932 when *Contact* took up the gauntlet from the other side of the Atlantic. *Transition* published work by James Joyce, Franz Kafka, Samuel Beckett, André Gide, Rainer Maria Rilke, Hart Crane, Ernest Hemingway, William Carlos Williams, H.D., Kay Boyle, Richard Aldington, Djuna Barnes, Dylan Thomas and Gertrude Stein, as well as many leading Dadaists, surrealists and expressionists.

For West, his first novel was both "a very professional book, a play on styles" and "a protest against writing books" (Martin: 129). Such revolutionary experimentalism is in keeping with *transition's* appeal by and to those "tired of the spectacle of short stories, novels, poems and plays still under the hegemony of the banal word, monotonous syntax, static psychology, descriptive naturalism, and desirous of crystallizing a viewpoint" (Fitch: 19). West's audience, in 1931, was small but select. *The Dream Life of Balso Snell* was published, on the recommendation of William Carlos Williams, by Contact Editions (esteemed publishers in the 1920s of the best experimental writing by authors such as Gertrude Stein and Ernest Hemingway), in a beautifully designed de luxe edition of 500. This impeccable debut into

avant-garde letters was "historically fitting", as his biographer points out, "since West would carry out in the thirties the intentions and literary hopes of the twenties" (Martin: 124). Writers such as West, then, were in a position during the 1930s to take up – and discard or adapt – newly forged avant-garde legacies to new ends, and in response to changing cultural contexts and political climates. The example of West's first novel shows a sophisticated dialogue as well as explosive disagreements going on between various avant-garde positions. It also marks a transitional phase in – but not by any means an abandonment of (as some commentators would have it) – avant-garde aesthetics from the 1920s into the 1930s.

Transitions between aesthetics and politics: genre and periodisation

Modernist literature, according to some still prevalent accounts, is considered to peak as "high Modernism" in the 1920s, then tail off in the "political" 1930s, largely because of the dogmatic influence of the Soviet enforcement of socialist realism, and finally die in the 1940s. But this view, itself a legacy of Cold War criticism of the 1950s, has been undermined by recent scholarship exploring the political engagement of "high Modernism", and the robust life of avant-garde aesthetics during the 1930s and 1940s and beyond. This book will sample and chart some of the many literary transitions – smooth and rocky – occurring in the period 1910–1945, from the so-called "high Modernism" and avant-gardism of the first two decades of the twentieth century to their regroupings and reorientations the 1930s and 1940s. "Literary" is to be understood loosely here, and at all turns to be questioned. And, as argued above, it is not easy, or even just, to divide the literature of this period into distinct genres – drama, poetry, prose, criticism, etc. – for their practice and performance often refuse such easy categorisation, and are in explosive dialogue with the visual arts, with science, with politics, and with new genres such as film, photography and phonography. Indeed, the new method of montage or collage operates, in old and new genres, most basically as the juxtaposition of images. "Image to Apocalypse" signals this collagistic defiance of generic category. Like Balso's collagistically framed journey, this study will involve the digestion of any number of differing literary styles, genres, approaches, materials and influences.

Balso alerts us to such diverse influences in his encounter with the boy in short pants, who is anxious to impress his Russophile teacher, Miss McGeeney, with a Dostoevskyeian narrative of perverse Proustian and Freudian overtones "*written while smelling the moistened forefinger of [his] left hand*" (West: 14) (McGeeney, it transpires, is writing a biography entitled *Samuel Perkins: Smeller*).

Modernism and the avant-garde inside the academy

Here may be discerned the influence of the Russian canon on Anglophone writers of the period (see also Kaye), alongside that of psychoanalysis and modern French literature. But in seeking academic appraisal of the work penned by his sticky fingers, the boy also alerts us to the sheer and delightful absurdity of actually, formally, *studying* or assessing avant-garde writing. For his apprentice-piece in experimentalism, Balso Snell, named after Walter Snell, West's loathed basketball coach at Brown University (Martin: 55), in fact awards the boy in short pants "B minus and a good spanking" (West: 22). This vignette fondly reinforces Balso's passion for the avant-garde as a strictly juvenile affectation, and one that jeopardises the student's chances of a flying first class degree. On the other hand it portends the apparent fate of all avant-gardes, to be contained by or assimilated back into mainstream, official culture. By the end of the period of "Image to Apocalypse", the academic institutionalisation of its avant-garde literatures was well under way. West's initiation into the perverse disciplines of the avant-garde, however, like that of his heroes, was forged in strictly and gloriously extra-curricular contexts. On the other hand, Joyce was clearly looking forward to establishment in academic canons when he famously boasted that he would put into his work "so many enigmas and puzzles that it [would] keep the professors busy for centuries arguing over what [he] meant" (Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce*, ch. 30). Many bewildered students and readers of this period's highly experimental and often densely allusive texts have taken this playful statement (reducing the status of art to that of a smart crossword puzzle – something academic mediators may, sometimes inadvertently, seem to achieve), along with, for example, Eliot's noted penchant for cryptic footnotes or Pound's virtuoso displays of linguistic genius, as indicative of a certain sense of academic élitism and grave intellectual difficulty pervading its formal study.

"From time to time there appear poets and a poetic audience who prefer [the] refractory haze of allusion to be very dense," Edgell Rickword observes, in "A Fragmentary Poem", his (1923) review of *The Waste Land* for *The Times Literary Supplement* (Rickword: 42). Such preferences are not often noticeable in introductory seminars these days. But, as readers soon discover, any serious examination – or "examination" (see Beckett et al.) – of the great works of this period rewards with fantastic education and enormous pleasure in equal measure. I still find it a pleasurable shock to be allowed to study and teach material that so splendidly retains its sense of the illicit, the joyously arcane, the grandly revolutionary and the defiantly experimental. What follows is the fruit of happy years so spent.

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