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"Modernism" in Wartime: Avant-Gardes, Revolutions, Poetries

For this conversation about modernism and wartime, I'm going to begin by taking "modernism" at its word, as a word. From the Latin "modo," a temporal adverb, from "modernus," the temporal adjective: the root of the word includes, not the adjectival sense of "recent" or "current," not even the adverbial meaning of "today" or even "now," but "*just now.*" A *special or intensified present*, a brink (as well as a blink) of time, a precipitous instant, all in all, a crisis time, and a time in crisis, as its cultural etymology suggests: the word's memory extends back to the late 6th century, when it was introduced into Latin as a register of crisis time in a very present tense, that is, in the late days of empire and the early time of darkening ages. That is a redolent memory in the word when it is stirring into currency again in the early twentieth century, or, rather, over the long turn of that century, when, with the sense of endings as well as beginnings, the Latin radical attracts the intensive suffix "ism," which adds the idea of an intensified sense, a self-conscious awareness, maybe even a faith or belief, to this feeling of quicksilver existence, this sense of living in the vertiginous instant.

I want to take this idea of "the special present of modernism" to the place in time that is occupied by the First World War, but to do that second. Ahead of that, in this talk as in history, let's take this idea of the special present of modernism to the moment in cultural history where it finds its most characteristic and intense expression: in the immediately prewar period, in the attitudes and practices of the historical avant-garde, in the aesthetics and ethics of *present-ism.*

Not a *re*-presentation of an idea preceding it, not a *re*-doing of a theme anterior let alone ulterior to it, the avant-garde event aims most characteristically at being its own idea, in its own moment of happening: the avant-garde event is not *re*-producible. So, what happens to the temporality of this super-present, what happens to this feeling of an absolute time of the instantaneous, what happens to this most radical manifestation of the root meaning of our word "modernism," in *wartime*, more specifically, in the war of 1914-1918, where the avant-garde lives this idea of modernist time forward through the ever-accelerating tempos of an ever-lengthening war, an always longer wartime?

On the history of the avant-garde in this First World War, we know the story, we think. What we know is the outcome of a narrative told in terms and images of the advanced guard's most extravagant mannerisms. This story ends in a summary understanding we can put in the words of John Keats, whose "poet dreamt, and woke, and found it true." That is, the violence cultivated by the avant-garde as the means of its intervention in history moves to a climax in this First World War. Here, in the methods as well as the remnants of mass technological destruction, it comes all too true and, in that appalling climacteric, realizes its own undoing. It is more complex, less spectacular, but at least equally significant, I think, to get inside that moment of explosive violence, so to regain a sense of its generative temporality, so to tell the time of crisis from the inside out, from which the story moves, if not to a better end, to a different meaning. So I'll be changing the first and last words of Keats's explanatory aphorism: "Apollinaire dreamt, and woke, and found it *false*." And the reasons why "false" matters and matters a lot have to do with something like the deep time of crisis time. Even the special present has a past: there is a history and memory—a form of consciousness—which this idea of

Radical Now encloses. That's the dimension of historical understanding I want to open up by taking our perspective on the fate of the avant-garde at war through the story told by Apollinaire.

The avant-garde whose story he tells represents this consciousness evolving out of a particular time and place: a specifically pre-war European location. This is an avant-garde that preexists the formations and understandings that have been mapped so influentially by Peter Burger, for whom, in *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, it is Dada, the Dada that grew up in Zurich among German refugees *from* the war in 1916, that provides the signature instance of avant-garde cultural validity. Yes, Dada offers a set of positional styles and oppositional stances that look different to the stylized extremities of prewar groupings like Futurism, whose anti-institutionalism it obviously shares, but whose enthusiasms, at least on the visual or verbal surfaces, it strongly ironizes. This sense of irony is the most conspicuous difference. There is a more significant difference, however, one which goes to underlying understandings. This is the difference the war made in the avant-garde's historical understanding of itself, the difference the war made in the avant-garde's sense of what art was or could do in actual political history. As I figure it, it's about the loss of art as a non-ironic model for possibilities in political history. There is of course postwar Surrealism, a term Apollinaire himself coined several years before the postwar, whose poets claimed a strong, a most non-ironic, connection between their poetics and a politics of revolutionary socialism. It is interesting, though, to hold that claim against this critique, this disclaimer, from the Peruvian avant-garde poet Cesar Vallejo, writing in France in the 1920s: "While mocking the law of vital transformation, the surrealists became academics, I repeat, in their famous moral and intellectual crises, and they were incapable of exceeding or getting over them through *truly revolutionary forms*, that is, constructive-destructive poetics." The dissolving political possibility is not one of a partisan political philosophy, as Vallejo

intimates, it is about the failure of form, of *truly revolutionary forms*, that is, a form of time in motion, a poetics of destruction as well as construction. It is, indeed, about time, it's about tempo, it's about the time of art telling the times of history how they may be imagined, it's about a politically as well as aesthetically radical *present*. That is what is going to be lost in this war. I'll fill out the more particular political history lying in the memory of this aesthetic time, in the echoing depths of the rhythmical lives of individual lines of poetry, but I want to start with the poetry, particularly of the prewar, letting it tell the times of radical possibility. For this is a story whose import turns on the difference the war made in this idea of a radical present, and we can track it best from a narrative that begins by following Apollinaire and a couple of fellow-traveling-avants in the immediately *pre*war years.

Here are the opening lines to "Zone," a middle-length poem from the 1913 volume *Alcools,* in Samuel Beckett's English translation (you've got the French next to it):

In the end you are weary of this ancient world

This morning the bridges are bleating Eiffel Tower oh herd

Weary of living in Roman antiquity and Greek

Here even the motor cars look antique

Religion has stayed young religion

Has stayed simple like the hangars at Port Aviation

You alone in Europe Christianity are not ancient

The most modern European is you Pope Pius X

And you whom the windows watch shame restrains

From entering a church this morning and confessing your sins

You read the handbills the catalogues the singing posters

So much for poetry this morning and the prose is in the papers

Special editions full of crimes

Celebrities and other attractions for 23 centimes

This morning I saw a pretty street whose name is gone

Clean and shining clarion of the sun

While many of us know this poem for its record of the pleasures of urban modernity, even an urban modernity unopposed to the anti-modern Pope Pius X, the poem is also—and especially, and critically—about time. It was earlier in the same year as *Alcools* that Apollinaire's "bleating Eiffel Tower" transmitted the first "universal time signal." Deprecatory or not (Sam's translation is pretty free), that image provides a reminder that the standardization and rationalization of time had begun in earnest only three decades earlier. And so we remember how that consolidation of temporal measures prompted the kind of pushbacks made in the several gestures in these lines, where none of the rationally established standards or calendars applies: "Weary of living in Roman antiquity and Greek," "Weary of this ancient world," where, not those Roman ruins but "even the motor-cars look antique." So Pope Pius X, the author of the recently published encyclical "contra *modernismo*," is most advanced in the same way that an assignably "primitive" art—as from the hand of Apollinaire's great friend Picasso—is in the forward van. Long *durée* indeed, the temporal imaginary of the contemporary avant-garde includes their feel

for the great creative plasticity—a made-up make-up—of time. Any sense, any stretch, of antecedent history is being forced to a focus in the present, which is gathered in the ephemera and throwaways of the hour—the handbills the catalogues the singing posters—and invoked in papers of the day, les *jour*nals du *jour*. This is a temporal present of critical mass, the crisis time of a surcharged Now as the establishing ground of the poem's character in voice. And the vanishing ground. For this is the quicksilver moment of the consciousness of modernism, where the name of the radiant street is lost—the French tells us it has been forgotten—in the same line in which the memory fills itself out.

And it is in the framework of the line that we can see the consciousness of this temporal imaginary operating most demonstrably. Virtually no *enjambment*, each line (in French as in English) stands on its own as a living signature of its own brink, and blink, of time. Here it is forgetting, not remembering, that sends the poem ahead, that extends its temporal sense in a perpetually renewing difference, like the same paper on its different days. Consider the last couple lines in the longest of the verse paragraphs, the last one I read, from "So much" to "the sun." The first three of these five lines, like the last two, in French as well as in English, could be formed and framed as a single syntactic unit, a continuous sentence, since each group of lines is about a shared reference. But that larger perception doesn't form, it comes disaggregated, it gets chopped up into single instants that provide the time signal of Apollinaire's radical temporal imaginary. One line at a time, this is the Prosody of Now.

Apocalypse Now? Surely *some revelation* is *at hand*? Here, and Now, in the poem:

The aeroplane alights at last with outstretched pinions

Then the sky is filled with swallows in their millions

The rooks come flocking the owls the hawks . . .

And again:

Behold the dove spirit without alloy

The ocellate peacock and lyre-bird convoy

The phoenix flame-devoured flame-revived

All with its ardent ash an instant hides . . .

"Flame-*devoured* flame-*revived*": this incandescent moment offers a signal image of the self-generating self-consuming instant of avant-garde time, of the "instant hidden" in its own quick transit. Just so, the apocalyptic quality of the imagery that unfolds across the longer passage comes just now, and again just now, and now just again: no ponderous apocalypse (thank god), but there's no concentration of apocalyptic feeling either, and any revelation just slips through the fingers of the moving hands of that unstoppable clock.

So, understandably, or imaginably, this feeling of the Utter Now, a Total Turn of Time, will be uttered in the Absolute, apocalyptic novelty of mass modern war. This is the imaginative configuration I'm asking us to take in: Time, as constructed and experienced in the orders of imaginative magnitude of a newly Total War, is a totalized Time, but this feeling of Wartime is portended, in the immediately prewar period, in the temporal imaginary of the European avant-garde. What I'm suggesting then is that this orientation towards war is coming from the *time* mind of the avant-garde, not from the minds of grown men behaving like adolescent males. It is not a *cause* of war, that is too complex, but it is a foretelling that tells us ahead of time what this time-mind is leaning toward. For the sensibility that puts time on the line, that puts all time on

the line in any one line, holds in that compacted mass an explosive that ignites on its own desire for apotheosis. And it is the political history compelling this development that we can recover and retell once we've followed this portent through to its virtually certain fulfillment.

We can hear the clock of Apollinaire's apocalyptic line ticking loudly and in fact clamorously toward the *tock* of war in the poetry of his German contemporaries, his sometime fellow-travelers, Georg Heym and Alfred Lichtenstein. Writing in the first years of the decade of war, both of these poets locate explosiveness as the potential of a time packed into loaded instants. Here, in signal positions, adverbs and nouns of critical time portend war as consequence in their poetic fictions, inviting war also as the explosive potential of these impacted intervals of time. As in the first lines of Heym's 1911 poem *Der Krieg*, "War":

Aufgestanden ist er, welcher lange schlief,

Aufgestanden unten aus Gewölben tief.

The translation of the first line, "He [war] is risen *now* that was so long asleep," is inventive but correct. Even though there is no "jetzt" here, the repetition of the same verb in the same form in the same place, as the first word of these two lines, serves to couplet and compress the time of these rhyming lines into one surcharged present. And from that point of compacted explosiveness, the Now of the poem gathers its rhythms and sounds noisily towards the finale as an answering Then, or next Now, a moment of no secondary or merely echoing intensity, there to demand that war's "hellfire may consume *this night*."

Similarly, in Lichtenstein's 1913 poem "Prophecy," opening on "Einmal." The translation you have interprets it as "Soon," which is not one of the dictionary meanings of the word, though, following the title, it serves to convert the war being prophesized into an

imm*i*nent, the next, event. The more exact sense of that temporal adverb—*ein* mal, *one* time—compresses any notion of prophetic interval into a single or simultaneous interval, a charged instant indeed. This one time, this primed Now of the poem, this first word, registers the pressure of a temporality cresting into the prospects of apocalypse, of war, in the poetic fiction that follows. So, in the lines that follow, the prosody of Now pops off like a chain reaction in the tightly, integrally compacted verses. The time sense of the poem is charged with the imm*a*nence as well as the imm*i*nence of war, that is, a war coming from within but also, and at least equally, coming next.

In this respect, the special present is also and especially an *expectant* time. This is a dimension that I want to take a bit of time to historicize, to build back into political history, so to get the historical content and political depth of the moment of wartime that these poetries of the prewar avant-garde have aspired so powerfully toward. For the temporal sense of history reaching critical mass has its own history of similar instants in a longer story of European crisis times, specifically, of European *revolutions*, which, together, establish the critical mass, the special density, of apocalypse now in 1914. So, a quick turn into political theory, so to take a further turn into political history, so to return us with some historically informed understanding to the avant-garde poetries of a revolutionary, or would-be, revolutionary war.

In *On Revolution*, Hannah Arendt sets out a double time in the time sense of revolutions in European and American history. In a classical past extending into and through the political cultures of early modernity, from Cicero to Machiavelli, the verbal concept of revolution includes the sense of return or realignment with primary conditions, earlier and better times, more than a turn forward into improved futurities. For reasons we'll take up here in short course, this emphasis changes, utterly, in the mid-late eighteenth century, when the new ideas are

coming out of a motivated need, an overwhelmingly motivated need, for newness. What is new and primary now is the prime time of Now, which Arendt documents convincingly in the political as well as literary writing of the time. In its most evident and ready senses, this revolutionary Now wants to accomplish an apocalyptic transformation in the present, in effect, to end history as it exists and begin it anew—from the pivot point of a special, intensified, expectant present.

For the fate as well as the formation of this new sense of revolutionary time it's useful to remember what is perhaps its most indicative, telling representation. The attempt at the *renovation* of historical time, which extends into the memory of a twentieth-century avant-garde from the pan-European revolutionary movements of 1789 through 1848-1851 and 1870, this push for a new revolutionary time finds its original and signal instance of course in the revolutionary calendar of early Republican France, which renames the months of the calendar year as the most explicit sign of the imaginative aspiration for a *new* time: the old words just won't work now. This impulse comes to term in the condensed, bitter eloquence of the title of Marx's 1852 documentary memoir of revolutions lapsing now (again) across Europe as well as in France: *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. Where the word from the revolutionary calendar of Republican France sounds *ahead* to the next *Bonaparte*, we hear the token of a new present closing *down* around a name that is not just dynastic and so institutionalized but recurring, not unique, not new. By the end of this phrase, as by the end of the period the title frames, the quality of improvisational time in revolutionary temporality has run down to the ironic diminuendo "Bonaparte" sounds in the title, as in the mind of the temporal imaginary of revolution. Here is the collapsed absolute of ideal revolutionary time. Expectant time has its own history of disappointment.

I want to pause on disappointment, since the long and lengthening story of failure in a European experience of revolution, which is also the failure of the radical time of revolution, will provide the historical memory that is brought forward into wartime, a time which the avant-garde will tell most revealingly. Here, again, Arendt offers a useful understanding. For the failure of revolution in Europe, as opposed to its success (in her somewhat idealized sense) in America (her adopted country), she works a two-word binary: "liberation" and "freedom." For her, and her sense is extensively historicized as well as theorized, the word "liberation" and its cognates involve the sheer experience of exhilaration in being freed, while "freedom," in the understanding she documents, is the condition in which individuals liberated from existing conditions devise the systems and structures of government, constituting philosophically the political forms under which they choose to govern this freedom. In America, she points out, though her America has left the institutional history of slavery utterly out of the account, in her America those existing conditions and systems were not nearly so oppressive as in Europe. Here, especially in France, it was the liberation of an astonishing volume of impoverished bodies, the vast pathos of les misèrables or les malheureux, that provided the decisive turn. It turned the insurgent energy away from the necessary work of political constitution. The needs of this liberated populace, that is, subdued the project of constituting freedom in well-judged, consensus structures and subordinated it to the work of immediate and immense necessity, engendering an administrative state that out-regimented *l'ancien régime*. So too, more than a century earlier than Arendt, in *L'Ancien régime et la revolution*, de Tocqueville had come to the same understanding, showing how this compensatory effort of administrative regulation in an immediately post-revolutionary period came to appear increasingly like the product of counter-revolution and, so, generated the lengthening, increasingly wearily predictable series of

revolutions and/or counter-revolutions (and/or being the conjunction of those constantly trading sides).

Within this political history of failed revolution there is also and especially the "inside time" of revolutionary temporality, where the need and feeling for new time is stimulated even—especially—by the failures of constitutional embodiment, especially when the work of constitutional embodiment appeared like a return to old times. As witnessed, indeed, as late as 1918, when Rosa Luxemburg writes from Germany on the need to *keep the revolution going* in Russia as the only embodied promise of a newness that must struggle ever to outrun the residue of constituted structures, that must never settle for a system of government in regular, regulation, reiterative time. This is the sensibility cresting out of the memory of the nineteenth century into and through the turn of the century, drawing towards the immediately prewar moment I focused on earlier. For it's at least in part that history of failed revolutions and its collapsed absolute of time, with the particular memory and feeling of absconded political promise, that we can recover and reclaim as the prehistory and special dimension of memory in the time-mind of a prewar avant-garde. Here the feeling of crisis time shifts its center of prospective expectations towards *war*, turning (as we may now see in the longer historical view) from that history of failed revolutions and their collapsed absolutes of time into the equally totalized time of apocalyptic war, into the prospects of Lichtenstein's "Prophecy," and, most cogently, into Heym's "War." Now, whether or not the prosody of Apocalypse Now, like Yeats's play in his own mind, will send certain men out to be shot, it is certain that the long deferred realization of the time of the apocalypse in the European revolutionary mind fed equally the resentment of mass humanity and the measures of experimental poets, who, as in Pound's praising epithet, are serving here indeed as the antennae of the race.

So, if those two poems of Heym and Georg gain a volume and depth and resonance from the political history of failed revolutions in the preceding century, they also turn us forward into an understanding of the sources of war feeling in the earliest moments of the 1914 conflict. For there is a feeling of revolutionary liberation in the early days of the war. This is the emotional apprehension, the imaginative understanding, of the inaugural force of the war, which is recorded *again and again and again and again* in the literary prose of the war, in the stories told in dozens and I now think hundreds of French and German and British war novels and memoirs. To cite just a few of the many score recordings of this presentiment, one which is sometimes indulged, sometimes just noted, but usually, especially in retrospect, heavily censored—against its now obvious consequences. In *Karl and Rosa*, for example, the third and final volume in Alfred Döblin's trilogy *November 1918: A German Revolution* (the first volume is titled, indicatively, *A People Betrayed*), Rosa Luxemburg recasts the first moments of postwar revolution, already failing if failing for the right ideals, against the surge of pseudo-revolutionary movement in the inaugural war of 1914, when, in a kind of triple pivoting of Marx's famous axiom, 1789 and 1918 look like the tragedies enacted against the second-time farce of 1914. True or pseudo, this farce of history was the forcing energy of the moment so powerful that commentators such as Thomas Mann, in *Reflections of Non-Political Man*, a collection of his own wartime journalism and journaling, had, in his work of justifying the war, relentlessly to discount its meaning as a new German Revolution. And in *Le Temps Retrouvé*, final volume in *À La Recherche du Temps Perdu*, Proust's narrator, even in discounting the relation between his narrative and the reality of wartime, cannot help but observe how the *union sacrée* in the cultural coalition for war coopted the feelings of long deferred revolution to the much longer-ago mythology of *l'ancienne France*. Not a revolution coming out of war, as is the experience and understanding recorded in most of

the Russian literature of the war, then, this is *war coming out of the long derailed passions of revolution*. In this otherwise unrecorded story in the literary history of the war, which I'll be retelling in my own book, is working in a longer political history of Europe. And here we can read the record and representation and recognition of *the lie* lived out and, in postwar writing, outlived and recognized: the enthusiasm of these early days is a *pseudo*-revolutionary movement, it *feels like* freedom, it is the exhilaration of the feeling of liberation from a history of moments that have failed to be what this illusory moment will soon prove itself to be: one more illusory moment of revolutionary liberation. There is also the tragic irony of mass populations being mobilized for a war that serves the very powers the revolution would overturn. That is the fate spelled out in the longer range, in books that take longer than poems to write, and longer than I've got here to encompass in any satisfactory fashion.

But the truth of that longer story is written out, and borne out, already and first of all, by Apollinaire. As he goes into and through the war, this poet offers us a history-in- miniature and –in-advance of the consciousness evolved over those decades of postwar prose—not as a propositional understanding of political history, of course, but as a record of the fate of revolution as an imaginative time, a temporality of possibility, which is told in the tempos of his verse. He tells that story of political expectation and historical disappointment, that is, in the way these poems tell time.

"August 31, 1914": so opens "The Little Car," Apollinaire's poem of the early days of the war. The date inscribes the time of the special present. And the feeling of Apocalypse Now and Now again and again Now is scored strongly into the compound of imagery and rhythm in the third verse paragraph.

We said farewell to a whole era

Furious giants were rising over Europe

Eagles flew from their eyrie to wait for the sun

Voracious fish ascended from abysses

Nations hurled together so they might learn to know one

another

The dead trembled fearfully in their dark dwellings

Figures of gigantism swell within and against the atomic constraints of each tightly circumscribed line. So this prosody of Now fills up its special and expectant present with the immensity of its referent. The urgency of the surging moment is at once the establishing and vanishing circumstance of Apocalypse Now, the time signature of the time mind of the avant-garde.

In the brute calculus of the long and lengthening *durée* of this war, this momentous moment is going to be outlasted. And you can hear the fading echo of this special present in the refrain chain of Apollinaire's identity tag for the time sense of his generation. It is first "the class of 1914"; then it is "the class of 1915"; then it is "the class of 1916." By 1917, I think, Apollinaire has graduated, he has gotten the point that this war's history lesson kept repeating to his advancing class: the war was not always already over, as it would need to be in this imaginative episteme, which changes, changes utterly, as the war goes on. The Great Apocalypse of Time hollows itself out in imagination, disembodies itself in prosody, as we can see and hear when, across historical time, it has to *repeat* itself.

Already in 1915, just the second year of war, the special present distends its moment of poetic compression noticeably in "The Sighs of the Gunner from Dakar." The poem can't hold the line, the compressed moment sags, and a periodic syntax goes its surprisingly windy way across spans that range from two to five lines, as already in the overture:

In the log dugout by osiers

Near grey cannons turned towards the north

I dream of the African village

Where we danced and made love

And made long speeches . . .

I take these lines as a marker of change in a manifold sense. Where the individual line is blending its special present into the not so special past and future of extended syntactic time, there is a shift from Now to Then in this poetic fiction of a dreamt memory, which takes us as well from the Here and Now of France to the There and Then of Dakar. There are of course larger issues of local and colonial history at work in this configuration, which is indeed the site of a likelier revolution, but that is a possibility whose eclipse coincides with the collapse of absolute time in the poem, where, it is fair to say, this distant memory lives, if "lives" is not too strong a word, in the tense of a lapsed avant-garde.

It goes on lapsing, but it lapses decisively and, for us, finally and conclusively, in a later war poem, written like a valedictory address for that otherwise unnamed class of 1917. Apollinaire's title invokes the temporal imaginary of the avant-garde at its most exhilarating,

"*Simultaneities*," but, by 1917, memory is the refuge from the lived out and outlived moment of Apocalypse Now: so, in the third verse paragraph:

He holds his helmet in his hands

And salutes the *memory*

Of lilies of roses and of jasmine

Flowering in French gardens. . . . . .

And then in the last verse paragraph:

Oh beacon-blossom *my memories*

Madeleine's black hair

The atrocious blaze of gunfire

Adds its sudden clarity

To your lovely eyes my Madeleine

Not forward to the apocalyptic moment of wartime but backward to the extended time of romantic reverie, the motion of desire offers its own shortened story of the fate of the avant-garde in wartime.

What's left us then? There may be other ways of following the avant-garde, other avant-gardes, through this war. What I've been looking at is an avant-garde sense of time potential, in the prewar moment, turning into an avant-garde wartime. Here the prepotency of prewar political possibility, which is instinct with the history and memory of great revolutionary time in

the European cultural imaginary, compels a development of war as a new revolutionary movement. In retrospect, we see this as a confusion of enthusiasms. In a way befitting an avant-garde, however, that retrospect began early, it began on time. For Apollinaire's is a consciousness evolving through wartime into its own tragic recognition, however obliquely that recognition is spoken. It is a recognition told in backwards time, it is told in the search for lost time that he records in the poems of the second and third and fourth years of war, it is told in his failing grasp on what was now Apocalypse Then. This is not sardonic farce, though, it is tragedy, the tragedy of lost possibility—the possibility embodied already and first of all in the poetry of the momentous moment, where the idea of turning history around comes through not as an abstract but as a realized idea, as an idea made real in the physical feeling of that poetic line.