HERETICS SOCIETY, The

The Cambridge Heretics Society (1909-1932) was a university discussion group founded by C.K. Ogden with the express aim of promoting debate “on problems of religion, philosophy, and art.” As their by-laws indicate, the Heretics sought to defy orthodoxy by rejecting “traditional a priori methods of approaching religious questions” and by exploring intellectual issues outside the demarcated limits of conventional thought. Over time, the group shifted its focus from religious concerns to artistic ones, but it remained a vital discussion forum for nearly a quarter century. The Heretics met throughout the duration of WWI and served as a bridge between Edwardian thinkers and writers and their modernist successors. The society attracted a formidable array of speakers, including George Bernard Shaw, G.K. Chesterton, Bertrand Russell, G.E. Moore, F.T. Marinetti, Rebecca West, Lytton Strachey, Wyndham Lewis, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and many others. Ironically, the most widely remembered lecture may be Virginia Woolf’s “Character in Fiction,” perhaps the best-known declaration of literary modernism’s break with the past. Woolf significantly revised the paper in light of its reception and republished it as “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown.” In its defiant stance towards orthodoxy, the essay precisely captures the spirit of heresy.

Bibliography: Damon Franke, *Modernist Heresies: British Literary History 1883-1924* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2008).

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