Connotations
Vol. 7.1 (1997/98)

Modernism Revisited: Willi Erzgräber's Studies in Modern English and Anglo-Irish Literature*

BERNFRIED NUGEL

> "The structure is now visible."
> —Virginia Woolf[1]

By the very fact of its publication, a book of critical essays like Erzgräber's collection *nolens volens* constitutes a challenge to the contemporary state of criticism. As in most cases of this kind, the topics and critical categories of essays which were written and—with one exception—published in a period spanning more than thirty years of a critic's life are not related, let alone adjusted to present critical standards but are left in their original state, functioning rather as historical documents of the critic's development than as direct contributions to current issues. Yet beyond its distinctly retrospective character such a collection clearly demands attention to the accumulated insights of a critic's career, inasmuch as it raises the expectation that the critical findings of more than three decades will prove to possess a value of their own despite their remoteness from contemporary critical debate.

Erzgräber's collection is a case in point, since it braves the tides of poststructuralism and the Derridean legacy simply by not taking cognizance of them. And quite deliberately so, it seems, for in a short prefatory note and a two-page foreword Erzgräber merely gives a very brief and general outline of modernist tendencies in the writers his essays deal with—Hardy, Conrad, Joyce, Woolf, Huxley, Yeats, Hopkins, Eliot, Tomlinson and Hughes—and does not explain his own critical position

*Reference: Willi Erzgräber, *Von Thomas Hardy bis Ted Hughes: Studien zur modernen englischen und anglo-irischen Literatur* [From Thomas Hardy to Ted Hughes: Studies in Modern English and Anglo-Irish Literature] (Freiburg im Breisgau: Rombach, 1995).

For debates inspired by this article, please check the Connotations website at <http://www.connotations.de/debnugel00701.htm>

Connotations - A Journal for Critical Debate by the Connotations Society is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

nor discuss alternative critical approaches nor present a working definition of modernism; all this is left to the critical reader to determine.

Now such a reader, while readily granting that close text analysis is one of Erzgräber's fortes (which, however, cannot be discussed adequately within the scope of this highly selective review), is bound to raise a wider question, viz. what are the critical assumptions that underlie Erzgräber's overall view of modernism? For a tentative orientation one should first of all turn to his prefatory remarks since they represent his latest pertinent pronouncement in this book ([7], 11-12). Here Erzgräber describes modernism as an intellectual and literary movement that originated from a profound change in English and Anglo-Irish literature at the end of the nineteenth century and had its main representatives in Joyce, Woolf, Conrad and Eliot. With regard to general modernist trends, Erzgräber singles out his essay on "the moment of vision" in the modern English novel, and as far as individual novelists are concerned, he states that

— Conrad's peculiar mixture of tragic and comic aspects paved the way towards the literature of the absurd,
— Joyce's experimental use of structural schemata made *Ulysses* "the quintessence of modernism" whereas *Finnegans Wake*, with its special narrative technique and new treatment of language, became a basis for postmodern literature,
— Woolf succeeded in representing modern consciousness by employing experimental techniques in *Mrs. Dalloway* and *The Waves*,
— Huxley's *Brave New World* revealed the problematic implications of modern utopian thought by satirizing a technocratic utopia and addressing issues that are still under discussion at the end of the twentieth century, such as gene technology and test-tube babies.

As for modern poetry, Erzgräber only mentions Yeats' change of style from late romanticism to modernism, Hopkins' role as a model for poets of the twenties and thirties, and Eliot's creation of a modern style by drawing on Metaphysical Poetry as well as on French symbolism. Finally, he loosely links Tomlinson with the Eliot-Pound tradition, and associates Hughes' poetry with the "theatre of violence" of the seventies, implicitly admitting that at least Hughes is out of place in a collection devoted

to modern literature in the stricter sense adumbrated at the beginning of his foreword.

Seen together, Erzgräber's summary remarks on modernist tendencies in rather different writers and genres do not add up to a working hypothesis that could profitably be used to differentiate modernism from other literary movements, such as romanticism, symbolism or aestheticism. For neither the modernity of subject-matter (modern consciousness in Woolf, modern utopian thought in Huxley) nor that of the manner of representation (experimental methods in Joyce and Woolf, absurd mixture of tragic and comic aspects in Conrad) are specified so as to define a common ground that distinguishes this particular group of writers from others. In fact, it seems to be a general feature of avant-garde movements to claim a modernity relative to their time, which is normally couched in vague words like new, experimental or peculiar. However, it is only fair to state at the outset that, in his line of research, Erzgräber focusses much more on historical contexts and developments than on the theoretical problems of classification and terminology. So the imprecision of the term 'modernism' is not so much his fault but rather reflects a widespread dilemma of contemporary literary history, viz. the inconsistency of using a critical term which is doomed to become increasingly meaningless the farther we move away in time from the period with which it was originally connected. In my view, it has by now degenerated into an empty convention and ought—together with its derivative 'postmodernism'—to be avoided by future literary historians. Similarities between writers of the first half of the twentieth century should rather be denoted by more specific terms. A closer look at some of Erzgräber's essays may serve to identify such terms and discuss their appositeness. Following Erzgräber's own emphasis in his collection, I shall concentrate on 'modern' novelists, mainly Joyce, Woolf and Huxley, and examine four critical categories that play a constitutive role in Erzgräber's conception of modernism.

One of those fundamental categories is the treatment of time by the writers under consideration. In his important essay "'The Moment of Vision' im modernen englischen Roman ['The Moment of Vision' in the Modern English Novel]"[2] Erzgräber uses a combination of history-of-ideas method and structural analysis to determine the meaning and the

functions of the "moment of vision" in Conrad, Woolf and Joyce. In Conrad's associative rather than causal method of narration, Erzgräber argues, "moments of vision" mark the crucial points in the narrative structure where spontaneous insights into the reality of things stand out from the chaos of accidental impressions, even if truth remains mysteriously unattainable. In Woolf's novels, he notes, quasi-mystical "moments of vision" or rather "moments of being," which express a 'mysticism of life' ("Lebensmystik," 102, quoting W. Rasch) and not a religious illumination, form essential structural units in the overall narrative pattern, as can be seen in the visions of Clarissa and Septimus in *Mrs. Dalloway*, in Mrs. Ramsay's and Lily Briscoe's creative transformations of important moments in *To the Lighthouse* and in the snapshot-like structure of "moments of being" in the lives of the six characters in *The Waves*. In Joyce's *Stephen Hero* and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, he continues, so-called epiphanies, triggered off by trivial events or observations, highlight the development of Stephen's consciousness, inducing reflections on the process of perception and leading to a new attitude towards reality, language and also art. According to Erzgräber, Joyce even incorporates the concept of epiphany into Stephen's literary theory, where it is equated with the third stage of aesthetic apprehension, "radiance" ("claritas"). But this only goes for Stephen's reflections in *Stephen Hero*, since, in *Portrait*, Stephen no longer uses the term "epiphany" in his literary theory, as Erzgräber correctly observes in a special essay on *Portrait* in this collection.[3]

However, the reason he gives for this, viz. that Stephen wants to avoid any religious connotations, is debatable; in the pertinent context Stephen rather emphasizes the uniqueness of the instant of artistic creation, introducing an analogy with Shelley's romantic metaphor of "a fading coal" and thus distinguishing the artist's vision from everyday epiphanies. Moreover, Joyce later, viz. in *Ulysses*, attributes a self-ironic reflection to the maturer Stephen, implying that he may have overrated epiphanies in his earlier years.[4] Indeed it seems that, as early as in *Portrait*, Joyce began to lose interest in epiphanies, the notion of moments of insights being too narrow a concept of man's relation to time, and increasingly occupied himself with more comprehensive patterns of time. Thus the snapshot-like spatial layout of *Portrait*, which is composed in

five chapters like so many tableaux by a painter, is meant to be understood also as a temporal structure, consisting of five phases in the development of Stephen's consciousness, as "the curve of an emotion" (see Joyce's essay "A Portrait of the Artist," 1904),[5] reflecting the time-scheme of a five-act drama. And in *Ulysses*, Joyce has Stephen reflect on his personal involvement with the past, the present and the future, referring again to Shelley's metaphor (*U* 9.381-85), as well as on the larger question of man's historicity (e.g. *U* 2.277: "History, Stephen said, is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake").

Even in Woolf's works, I would argue, despite her obvious fascination with the "moment of vision," a strong interest in larger patterns of time manifests itself in the correlation between the undulating or cyclical rhythms of nature and the life rhythms of six human beings (see *The Waves*) or in the eleven time sections of a family chronicle (see *The Years*). In my view, this shift of interest, which is characteristic of the later Joyce and Woolf, is a necessary complement of the preoccupation with the "moment of vision" up to *Portrait* or *To the Lighthouse* respectively. Therefore Erzgräber's argument to the effect that interest in the "moment of vision" is an important "modernist" tendency is only convincing as far as Joyce's and Woolf's early works are concerned. If these writers shared the experience of transitoriness and longed for lasting patterns in life, as Erzgräber puts it in his conclusion, the fruitful "moment of vision" was only one possible solution to their dilemma; the fragmentation of time into a chaos of isolated moments can also be overcome by discovering structures that determine the connections between moments. That such structures necessarily entail some notion of permanence or even eternity, can even be gathered from Erzgräber's final remarks interpreting "moments of vision" as epiphanies in which time seems to stand still, and as an expression of the human endeavour to create patterns which last beyond the moment (117). As the underlying critical category one can thus detect a scale reaching from the isolated moment at one end via phases of relative permanence to timelessness or eternity at the other end, even if Erzgräber contends that the notion of eternity in the theological sense no longer exists for writers like Conrad, Woolf and Joyce. Perhaps—since Erzgräber himself justly includes Aldous Huxley in his selection of 'modern' writers—it is not

amiss in this context to refer the reader to Huxley's novel *Eyeless in Gaza* (1936), in which the protagonist Anthony Beavis starts from a literally snapshot-like kind of time experience, called "psychological atomism," passes through phases of a search for a "principle of coherence" and eventually arrives at a tentative vision of cosmic unity in variety.[6]

As the example of *Eyeless in Gaza* reveals, too, the above scale of time experience is interrelated with a corresponding concept of personality, which in Joyce, Woolf and Huxley replaces the time-honoured notion of character. If human beings, Huxley suggests, experience life as a continuous succession of separate momentary states and resulting actions, they will at a given moment not feel bound to previous psychological states and pertinent actions: their personalities will be merely "atomic."[7] If, however, such persons develop a degree of responsibility for their actions past and present, their personalities tend to become "co-ordinated" or even "completely unified."[8] Now Erzgräber's interpretation of characters in Woolf and Joyce tends—quite in accordance with the main current of contemporary criticism—to stress disintegration of character, antithetical elements and incompleteness as an expression of the instability of 'modern' consciousness, as can be seen in his essay "Form and Function of Virginia Woolf's Novels"[9] with reference to *Jacob's Room*, *Mrs. Dalloway* and *The Waves*, as well as in his article "James Joyce: Quintessenz der Moderne—Basis der Postmoderne [J. J.: Quintessence of Modernism—Basis of Postmodernism],"[10] in which he points out the continuous metamorphoses of Stephen and Bloom. But it is much to his credit that he at times also recognizes integrative tendencies towards a co-ordinated personality, particularly in *The Waves*: "The six *personae* are arranged in such a way that all their attitudes and positions supplement and correct each other; their fusion would form one complete human being. . . . Each variant of one sex has its counterpart in one of the other: . . . In the mutual relations of the pairs three possible forms of a perfect human being become visible" (251). Even if one disputes the assumption that Woolf actually depicts a "perfect human being," one cannot deny that she works within the above scale of characterization extending from fragmentation of character via typical, generally representative traits to the ideal of a complete personality.

The same, I would argue, appears to be true for Joyce's *Ulysses*, if with a different emphasis, in which what Erzgräber calls the "Entgrenzung der Persönlichkeitsstruktur" (181), i.e. the dissolution of the fixed limits of the structure of personality, also entails a transformation into a wider and more complex structure of personality ("metamorphosis") with a tendency towards generally representative traits. This becomes clear, for instance, in Joyce's technique of transpersonal characterization, i.e. in his transference of seemingly individual traits from one character to another,[11] and in his symbolic implications, which Erzgräber discusses in great detail (e.g. Bloom as Everyman and Molly as Everywoman, 182-83). Compared with Woolf and Huxley, however, Joyce is much farther away from the notion of a "unified personality" since his characters are involved in an unending process of transformation, in which any temporarily stable structure of personality is bound to be replaced with a different combination of traits. Still, there is something in Joyce that one may call a basic anthropological interest, an interest in all-inclusive patterns of personality, borne out in *Ulysses* and particularly in *Finnegans Wake* (see Erzgräber 186-88), even if Joyce refrains from any final definition of man or woman. Thus, as in Woolf and Huxley, one can see disintegrative and constructive tendencies at work in Joyce's representation of structures of personality.

A third important category that Erzgräber suggests for discussion in the context of 'modernism' is the pronounced use of irony in Huxley's *Brave New World*. Whereas many sections in Erzgräber's pertinent essay[12] serve as a basic introduction to contents, plot, characters and utopian elements, not unlike his students' coursebook *Utopie und Anti-Utopie* [Utopia and Anti-Utopia] (1980), his remarks on Huxley's principles of representation (344-46) raise the question of how 'modern' Huxley's kind of irony is. The author's prevailing attitude towards his subject is sceptical and ironical, Erzgräber argues, and, in contrast to traditional satire, presents no unshakeable norm of judgment. The reader feels invited to judge in turns in favour and against the same characters and is offered no solution at the end of the novel. *In nuce*, Huxley's pervasive irony can, according to Erzgräber, be understood in two ways: either as an expression of a playful mastery of all stylistic devices or as a sign of an unsolved dilemma in the author's philosophy of life.

Erzgräber here only touches on two important issues that Huxley scholars have discussed from the seventies till nowadays. It should at least be noted that the manner of representation Huxley developed in the twenties is characterized by his contrapuntal technique, in which starting from a multiplicity of perspectives he set incompatibles against each other in a quasi-polyphonic arrangement.[13] But Erzgräber is certainly right in observing that Huxley's playful use of irony for comic effects, which in itself, seen from nowadays, looks almost "postmodern" in its seeming self-referentiality, is closely related to his *Weltanschauung*. However, he might have specified that in those years this was "the philosophy of meaninglessness," as Huxley himself remarked in retrospect.[14] One should also add that meaninglessness as it can be found in contrariety, incompatibility and fragmentation functions as an extreme at one end of a scale that, for Huxley, clearly entailed a continuous search for meaning at the other. As Jerome Meckier recently observed, "a persistent 'hunger for certainty' . . . demanded a 'nobler hypothesis' . . . than the Pyrrhonist's ironic promotion of meaninglessness as the only meaning in life."[15] What is more, this fundamental dialectic can be detected in Huxley's intellectual development even before *Brave New World*, viz. in his poetry, especially toward the end of *The Cicadas* (1931).[16] Meckier, again, pointedly sums up Huxley's scale of thought: "The principal intellectual problems of humanity—what is this world and what business have we in it?—seemed to dictate a partnership between speculative insight and corrosive satire . . . ."[17] Erzgräber, in his way, has certainly noticed that this bi-polar category is somehow implied in *Brave New World*, since after his analysis of the novel he proceeds to quote Huxley's own criticism of the all-pervading ironic structure of *Brave New World* as well as his conception of a saner society, contained in his 1946 preface to the novel, and even mentions Huxley's positive utopia *Island* (1962) as a late result of his 'new' attitude. Yet this should not be misunderstood as a total reversal of judgment; it is rather a shift towards the positive pole of the above scale without completely foregoing the potential of irony and scepticism: even *Island* contains extended ironic passages.

Compared with Joyce and Woolf, one can see that Huxley went through his 'postmodern' phase—if this critical label is permitted here

for a moment—in the twenties and early thirties and later opted for an approximation to "Knowledge and Understanding."[18] Woolf rarely practised the ironic mode, and if so, surely not with the same consistency as Huxley, and this may be one of the reasons why she could not develop more than a comparatively vague conception of reality, whether of external nature or of human society. Joyce, on the other hand, used irony extensively from the start of his career, but, in contrast to Huxley, increasingly employed it to disqualify reality as the ultimate frame of reference, and, substituting art for reality, eventually found 'knowledge and understanding' in an unremitting aestheticism, as Erzgräber notes, too, in calling *Ulysses* 'the document of an extreme, subjective aestheticism in the modernist movement' (184) and *Finnegans Wake* a novel 'in which language gains autonomy' (194).[19]

This question of the relationship between literature and reality is closely connected with a fourth category in Erzgräber's essays, the concept of artistic design. What aspects of reality in the widest sense do Woolf and Joyce take into account and how do they transform them into the overall structure of a literary work of art? This is the issue that Erzgräber addresses, for instance, in his article "Virginia Woolf: *The Waves*—Die Struktur des Romans und ihre Beziehung zur Thematik" [V. W.: *The Waves*—The Structure of the Novel and Its Relationship with the Subject-Matter].[20] Within Woolf's general structural frame, which consists in the thorough distinction between the external reality of nature and the internal reality of human existence, Erzgräber recognizes two basic tendencies in the presentation of the six characters: a progressive differentiation of the given life pattern of each person and a tendency towards an artistic integration as reflected in Bernard's final monologue. This interpretation clearly recalls the above scales of fragmentation versus permanence in respect of time as well as of disintegrative versus constructive tendencies with regard to structures of personality and is convincing as long as it keeps to the basic ambivalence of these scales. But it becomes one-sided when Erzgräber praises Bernard's notion of design as an all-encompassing life pattern and at the same time convincing artistic model of the novel. The ending of *The Waves* surely can also be read as an expression of the feeble human effort to confront

death and solve the mystery of existence by artistic means: "*The waves broke on the shore.*"

Even in Joyce Erzgräber at times tends to over-emphasize integrative tendencies, if more cautiously, for instance when he states that 'nets of allusions' and 'systems of correspondences' lend 'a certain artistic unity' to *Ulysses* (183) or that Joyce proved a constructive novelist in *Finnegans Wake* by using Vico's cyclical conception of history and other abstract theories as structural principles (188-90). In such statements Erzgräber appears to overrate the degree of planning and the kind of unity that Joyce tried to achieve. Joyce's artistic design rather seems characterized by the awareness that every structure is liable to be superseded by other structures, that temporary stability is accompanied with instability in other respects, that seeming unity is followed by diversity and vice versa. This is what gives the reader the impression of reading a "Work in [continuous] Progress." The highest degree of planning that Joyce ever reached may well be the circular structure of *Finnegans Wake*, which suggests a perpetually identical perfect pattern but at the same time invites infinite different interpretations with each successive reading. In this sense, Joyce may be said to prefigure both structuralist and poststructuralist positions, if one for once accepts Hubert Zapf's description of the basic poststructuralist procedure: "The text is redefined from a structural model of centrified totality into a processual model of decentered plurality, into a conflictive field of signifying energies which no longer refer to meanings outside themselves but are related to each other in multiple and never fully controllable ways."[21] Even Huxley can be shown to hold a conception of literature similar to Joyce's except that he does not stop with self-referentiality but regards further insights into the reality of things as possible. Like Joyce he theoretically aims at the totality of subject-matter as well as at the totality of manner of representation, takes into account centripetal and centrifugal tendencies and employs the notions of closure and openness.[22] In comparison, it is debatable whether Woolf offers the same scope and complexity of subject-matter or the same degree of experimental openness, though, as Erzgräber justly notes, her novels present major innovations in rendering the reality of the mind and "have the function of drawing attention to their own aesthetic form" (263).

In conclusion, Erzgräber's remarks on Woolf, Huxley and Joyce do not only form a rich reservoir of stimulating observations regarding details of text analysis, but by virtue of their underlying critical categories may also serve as a basis for a future definition of the similarities between these writers once one has got rid of the misleading labels 'modernism' and 'postmodernism.'

Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität
Münster

NOTES

[1]*The Waves*, ed. J. M. Haule and P. H. Smith, Jr. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993) 104.

[2]97-117; originally published in 1984.

[3]"James Joyce: *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*," 139-74; originally published in 1971.

[4]*Ulysses*, ed. Hans Walter Gabler (2nd impression, New York: Random House, 1986) 3.141-43; cited as *U.*

[5]See Jörg W. Rademacher, *James Joyce's Own Image: Über die allmähliche Verfertigung der Begriffe "image" und "imagination" beim Schreiben in* A Portrait *und* Ulysses (Münster: Waxmann, 1993) 192-202 and 202-41.

[6]See B. Nugel, "Huxley's Response to Joyce: Literary Criticism in the Modern Novel," *Critical Essays on Aldous Huxley*, ed. Jerome Meckier (New York: G. K. Hall, 1996) 121-25.

[7]See *Eyeless in Gaza* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1936) 143: "The others [types of personality] are to a greater or less extent impersonal, because to a greater or less extent atomic."

[8]See Huxley's early essay "Personality and the Discontinuity of the Mind," *Proper Studies* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1927) 244, 245, and *Eyeless in Gaza*, especially ch. 11.

[9]247-63; originally published in 1984.

[10]175-94; originally published in 1987.

[11]See Peter te Boekhorst, *Das literarische Leitmotiv und seine Funktionen in Romanen von Aldous Huxley, Virginia Woolf und James Joyce* (Frankfurt a. M.: Lang, 1987) 177-80, 203-09.

[12]"Aldous Huxley: *Brave New World*," 331-47; originally published in 1984.

[13]See, for instance, Donald Watt, "Huxley's Aesthetic Ideal," *Modern British Literature* 3 (1978): 128-42.

[14]*Ends and Means* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1937) 273. For a detailed discussion of this "modern" outlook on life see Jerome Meckier, "Aldous Huxley's Modern Myth: 'Leda' and the Poetry of Ideas," *ELH* 58 (1991): 439-69.

[15]"Aldous Huxley, from Poet to Mystic: The Poetry of Ideas, the Idea of Poetry," *"Now More Than Ever:" Proceedings of the Aldous Huxley Centenary Symposium Münster 1994*, ed. B. Nugel (Frankfurt a. M.: Lang, 1995) 133-34.

[16]See Meckier 129.

[17]Meckier 130.

[18]Title of an essay in Huxley's *Adonis and the Alphabet* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1956) 39-72.

[19]See also Josef W. Pesch, *Wilde, About Joyce: Zur Umsetzung ästhetizistischer Kunsttheorie in der literarischen Praxis der Moderne* (Frankfurt a. M.: Lang, 1992).

[20]297-315; originally published in 1991.

[21]"Literary Theory in America between Innovation and Dogmatism: Some Reflections with a View to the Cultural Function of Literature," *Why Literature Matters: Theories and Functions of Literature*, ed. Rüdiger Ahrens and Laurenz Volkmann (Heidelberg: Winter, 1996) 396.

[22]See B. Nugel, "Aldous Huxley's Revisions in the Final Typescript of *Island*," *"Now More Than Ever"* 240-42.