Books

Review: *Modernism*

The Lure of Heresy, by Peter Gay '51GSAS (W.W. Norton).

By
Marshall Berman '61CC
|
Spring 2008



Charlie Chaplin digs into a boot in "The Gold Rush" (1925). (Bettmann / Corbis)

Peter Gay '51GSAS has had a remarkable scholarly career. He has written about many different things, and he has always been smart and serious, vivid and nuanced. He knows a lot, but wears it lightly. *Modernism* is his 26th book.

There are many accounts of modernism, and they all accept as part of modernism's core the idea that art and thought are shaped by the artist's or thinker's perspective. (Disclosure: I wrote a book on modernism called *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity*.) Gay was my teacher at Columbia half a century ago, starting with my freshman Gen Ed course, CCA2, ending with a senior seminar on the Enlightenment. My first book, The Politics of Authenticity (1971), on Montesquieu and Rousseau, cites him as a prime influence.

Gay taught at Columbia from 1948 to 1969 (when he moved to Yale) and *Modernism* is very much a "Columbia book," a recognizable product of the ambience that pervaded the University in the 1950s. What was special in those years wasn't just the brilliance of the faculty; American universities were flourishing then, and there were many brilliant faculties. What was different at Columbia was the shared obsession of many of its best minds with modernity. Old heads like Lionel Trilling, Margaret Mead, Meyer Schapiro, Karl Polanyi, younger ones like C. Wright Mills, Steven Marcus, Daniel Bell, Jacob Taubes, and Susan Sontag were all expending their best energy on what it means to be modern.

Gay enriched this discourse in two ways. First, in a long series of works on the Enlightenment, he argued powerfully that any attempt to live decently in modern times had to start from Enlightenment ideas of humanity and human rights. Second, in his short study, Weimar Culture (1968), he portrayed the disastrous trajectory of two very strong currents in Weimar life, "hunger for wholeness" and "fear of modernity." Much of the strength of this portrait sprang from Gay's clear love for Berlin, the place where he was born in 1923. But for many of his late 1960s readers who were born in the USA, his vision of "a precarious glory, a dance on the edge of a volcano," echoed ominously close to home.

One of the thrills of doing intellectual history, as Gay did in his youth, is a feeling of intimacy with brilliant and creative people. Spending years working with the Enlightenment philosophes, and more years with Freud — which yielded a Freud biography and anthology, and the five books that formed The Bourgeois Experience, Victoria to Freud — Gay got used to being with the very best. Then he left this road and spent years with ordinary people, producing a harvest of exciting and original books. But as the series unfolds, a reader can sense a certain strain and impatience. Maybe Gay was tired of these people; maybe he felt nostalgia for the company of the best, and wanted a chance to be with them again, to connect with the most creative spirits in many countries, in many disciplines, over a span of more than a

century. Maybe, too, he felt nostalgic for his years at Columbia, where modernity was a central organizing idea. It's easy to see how the idea of a big book on modernism could sound like an alluring dream.

And yet, like many dreams, it's hard to realize in the morning light. *Modernism: The Lure of Heresy* comes out sounding like a modernism without people. In his preface, Gay tells us he is going to present "painters and playwrights, architects and novelists, composers and sculptors as exemplars of indispensable elements in the modernist period." What's wrong with this? Nothing, if artists and works of art are all you know. Plenty, if you have written masterpieces about the adventures and traumas and intimacies and disappointments of ordinary men and women thrown into modern life. Part of this book's back story, not in the preface, is that at some point, before the book got started, Gay apparently made a decision to drastically narrow his scope. Modernism in *Modernism* is an exclusive artists' ball, and the rest of us aren't invited; like the peasants in Madame Bovary, we press our noses against the glass and wonder why we got left out. Alas, Gay's exclusive guest list may spoil the party.

The best parts of *Modernism* are Gay's readings of works and the creators of works he loves. The stars are familiar: Baudelaire, James Joyce — especially Ulysses and the world of Leopold Bloom — Schoenberg, the architects and artists of the Bauhaus, Picasso, Eliot, Chaplin, Orson Welles, Virginia Woolf, Frank Lloyd Wright. Some readers have complained that we all know these guys already. I don't think that's a problem. The point of a book like this is to put the author's mark on people and works we know, to relate them to one another, and to situate them all in a larger historical context that the author understands. When Gay writes about what he loves, his historical understanding nourishes his empathy, and it's a delight to be there.

Some of *Modernism*'s best moments revolve around Chaplin and Leopold Bloom. Gay stresses Chaplin's emotional complexity: "his mobile, expressive face . . . was masterly in registering ambivalence, the coexistence of contradictory feelings that makes up so much of mental life." Bloom is "son, father, lover, friend, warrior, companion at arms, a man of wisdom, and a good man into the bargain" — an entirely ordinary man, yet also "the complete human being"; Bloom contains both Everyman and Faust within himself. These homages generate some of Modernism's emotional climaxes. Ironically, these objects of Gay's love are incarnations of the

very “ordinary people” he has dismissed from his modernist world. For him, they may represent a return of the repressed.

The last third of the book, the world after World War II, is a problem. After lively pages on Beckett, Sartre, and French existentialism, Gay seems to get tired. Once the 1960s begin, he just doesn’t like what’s out there. He translates his distaste into an insistence that nothing is out there, and nothing ever was. Thus the existence of pop art is said to “signal . . . the death knell of modernism.” I was startled to see this theological metaphor carrying so much weight in the diction of a man who has always prided himself on his critical secularism. The next sentence features another startling metaphor, appropriated from biology: Modernism seems to have reached the end of its “life cycle.” But is biology an appropriate model for human history and culture? How long are these cycles supposed to be? Says who? And how do they know?

Gay the longtime teacher of historiography would surely have alerted his students to sound instant alarms when giant metaphors get wheeled into the foreground like great siege machines — not to mention, when theology and biology appear on the page as sudden allies.

And Gay the partisan of the Enlightenment would have been enraged at diction shaped to convince us that there’s nothing human beings can do. In Modernism’s last chapters, fatalistic metaphors substitute for direct engagement with culture. Gay’s wonderful empathy and curiosity abruptly shut down. His voice sounds increasingly like that of a book I would never have picked as one of his faves: Oswald Spengler’s *The Decline of the West*. Anyone who lived through the 1960s will remember this voice of doom. But there were other voices in other rooms.

Read more from ***Marshall Berman '61CC***



Guide to school abbreviations

All categories >
Read more from ***Marshall Berman '61CC***