



JEAN-MICHEL RABATÉ

MODERNISM AND TOTALITY

ABSTRACT: This article surveys the transformations and permutations of “totality” throughout the cultural and political landscapes of the twentieth century. Specifically, it explores connections between “high’ modernism” and totality by focusing on the heritage of this pairing as figured by major thinkers from both the Frankfurt school and structuralist and poststructuralist debates in France. Ultimately, I argue that modernism is an unfinishable archive, one that resists, and will never become, a closed totality.

KEYWORDS: Modernism; 1922; Totality.

I have a hard time believing that 1922 happened a century ago, for today, it seems to me that things that took place in 2018 were a century ago. A more realistic consideration of what is meant by “a hundred years ago” seems to force us to reconsider how we perceive history, more precisely, the history of the new or what we have been used to calling “modernism.” Beyond these reminders, we would have to problematize the notion of “progress” in the arts, politics, or culture. This accounts for the subtitle I had chosen for the collection I edited for Cambridge University Press in 2015, *1922: Literature, Culture, Politics*.¹ The war in Ukraine has brought us back to the cold war, that is to years following WWII, and thus we cannot take for granted that history is linear; we might have to accommodate a concept of the “return,” even if the term does not entail the ancient idea of cyclical returns. If we cannot help thinking 1952 today, it might be useful to go further back and imagine Europe in 1922.

Post-Versailles treaty Europe presented the sad sight of battered countries attempting to recapture hope for a future after such a huge slaughter and innumerable disasters. At the same time, Europe could perceive that other continents were asserting their independence and finding more autonomy in the aftermath of the conflagration. Some renewed angst came from a realization that the globalization that started at the end of the 19th century did not mean peace and cultural homogeneity, but rather a jockeying for hegemony – the French and the British, for instance, in competition when influencing a “freed” Middle East, Palestine under British control, Lebanon left to the French. Even if we take the most rapid look at 1922, we are nevertheless dazzled by the abundance of masterpieces. Most of them had lain dormant because they were delayed by the war, as was the case of *In Search of Lost Time*, *Ulysses*, *The Castle*, *The Duino Elegies*, *Wozzeck*, and

¹ Cfr. Rabaté 2015.

The Waste Land. If 1922 offers a good vantage point to redefine the rationale of “high modernism,” it leads us to wonder whether we can add the adjective “high” to “modernism,” which assumes that 1922 was an unpassable “peak.” We have learned to see how misleading the adjective can be if “high” is construed to mean a position of superiority, calling up distinction, elitism, a rejection of popular culture. Such a reproach, which has been leveled at most modernist authors at first, is founded on misguided assumptions.

What distinguishes those 1922 masterpieces from works that came before the war is not an alleged elitism but the sense of a new and important mission. Because of the staggering amount of destruction, writers and artists felt a heightened responsibility, a duty to be as relevant and as affirmative as possible. In other words, thinkers, writers, and artists, all sensed that they were obliged to give birth to something that would approach a totality of experience. Here is why one might want to replace “high modernism” with “total modernism.” I would argue that the objective of high modernism had been to shape some form of totality, a totality that keeps different shadings, a totality that we can catch just before it turns into totalitarianism.

One factor to take into consideration when mentioning totality is the wide-spread use of the adjective “total” in connection with the first world war. As Paul Virilio (2006, 90 *passim*) has shown, modern technological inventions beginning with cameras, airplanes, computers, were due to war investments. The same is true of artistic inventions. In the summer of 1914, all the belligerent powers imagined that the war would be a matter of months. When the fronts stalled and turned into machines of mechanized death and attrition, some writers, mostly from the right, started mentioning the concept of “total war.” Léon Daudet spread that notion in the pages of the nationalist periodical *L’Action Française* in 1915 and 1916. The phrase was adapted and developed by Georges Clémenceau, the French prime minister, who in 1917 addressed the National Assembly, speaking of a “guerre intégrale,” meaning a war both waged at home and on all the fronts. Clémenceau had absorbed Daudet’s ideas about *guerre totale*. Daudet symptomatically believed that the idea came from the German side: “We would have been victorious if the conception of total war – as the Germans wage it, as we should have waged it facing them – had been accepted and then realized by our successive governments” (Daudet 1918, 7). Here is how he defines it: “What is total war? It is the extension of the fight, both in its acute and chronic phases, to the political, economic, commercial, industrial, intellectual, legal and financial domains. Not only armies fight one another, but also traditions, institutions, customs, codes, minds, and especially banks” (8).

Daudet believed that Germany had begun earlier an all-over attack, striking France and its allies on all levels at once. His paranoia needed scapegoats. He found one when he pilloried the anarchist Eugène Vigò. Vigò called himself “Miguel Almereyda,” (Almereyda was his anagram for “y’a d’ la merde!” – shit is coming!) – this showed how he wanted to intervene in politics. Vigò had been jailed as a pacifist and anarchist. In August 1917, barely 34, Vigò was murdered in his jail by fellow inmates egged on by the furious denunciations of Daudet.

In 1913, Almereyda had launched *Le Bonnet rouge*, a satirical anarchist publication that was the sworn enemy of right-wing monarchist movements like *Action Française*. *Bonnet rouge* published a few articles at the request of the Minister Joseph Caillaux when Caillaux tried to defend his wife after she had murdered Gaston Calmette, the director of the daily the *Figaro*. Caillaux had been accused by Calmette of being a German agent; the same accusation was repeated for Vigo. Madame Caillaux was acquitted after having shot Calmette to death, but Vigo was murdered with the complicity of the police. The furious attacks against Vigo take up many stale and unpalatable passages of *La Guerre Totale*. Vigo's son, Jean Vigo, who would have a no less short life, nevertheless had time to produce a few cinematographic masterpieces like *Zéro de Conduite* (1933) and *L'Atalante* (1934) before his untimely death at the age of 29. The main point is that "total war" entails an ideological war against the "inner enemy," meaning the pacifists, socialists and anarchists, even much more than on the trenches or on the front. A courageous philosopher like Bertrand Russell, helped by Vivienne Eliot, ended up occupying a similar position in England during the war, and he too was jailed.

This was the context of E. E. Cummings's plight when he was arrested as a spy by the French authorities in 1917 after French censors had intercepted letters criticizing the war effort. Cummings refused to de-solidarize himself from his friend W. Slater Brown. In August 1917, Brown had written letters to his American relatives stating that everyone was sick of the war, and that he foresaw that a revolution was brewing in France. His attack on the French war effort underpins the plot and lovely details of Cummings's *The Enormous Room*, a spirited document, a thorough debunking of the myths and pieties of French nationalist warmongering.

A few years later, Daudet's conception was systematized by the German General Erich Ludendorff, a war hero. Ludendorff explained that Germany had lost the war because of evil agents, destructive elements, those traitors inside. In *Der totale Krieg* (1935) he denounced those who had stabbed in the back the German war effort: Freemasons, socialists and Jewish war-profiteers who had conspired to bring about the downfall of Germany. His scapegoating was instrumental in bringing Hitler into power. For Daudet as for Ludendorff, a moral and spiritual reawakening was an indispensable condition preliminary to victory. The main issue was civilian morale, which implied the need to deploy a strict control over ideology. *Der totale Krieg* argues moreover that a nation's physical and moral resources should be forever mobilized. Peace is an illusion, a simple interval in a never-ending war – there was never WWI followed by WWII, but a single warring continuum.

The notion of "totality" took on a different meaning when it was deployed by the left. In 1922 thinkers re-elaborated the foundations of Marxism, given the success of the Russian revolution, with new work by Georg Lukács and Karl Korsch. "Totality" was the key concept used by a Marxist thinker like Georg Lukács who insisted on the difference between bourgeois thinking and materialist theory: only the latter begins with economic production and class struggle, and deploys a historical dialectic framed by Hegel, Marx, Engels and Lenin. History should be rethought from the point of view of the proletariat

because his class consciousness is the result of an effort to understand the “concrete totality” of the historical process. This allows for the creation of a new subjectivity capable of critiquing capitalistic exploitation.

Having arrived at this point, I needed to mention the surprise that was caused when I saw where my investigations took me. If I go back my schooling in structuralist and post-structuralist philosophy, there was nothing that we hated more than the concept of totality. My generation, which was formed by reading Foucault, Derrida, Lacan, Barthes and Deleuze, was utterly contemptuous of the term. Totality belonged to a time when dialectical thinking was a weak manner of solving all problems, a sort of “anything goes.” Roland Barthes concluded his subtle and witty exercise in hyper-narcissism, his *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* of 1975, by rejecting what he called “the monster of totality” (Barthes 1977, 19). Barthes, Lacan, Deleuze and Derrida, in spite of their huge differences, all repudiated Marxist humanism and denounced the facility of an always ready dialectic. A thinker had monopolized the concept of totality at the time: Lucien Goldmann, a disciple of Georg Lukács. He was the author of important books on the sociology of literature; he had been the dissertation supervisor of Julia Kristeva. However Lacan made sport of him in a witty 1968 seminar, evoking Goldmann’s joy at seeing students’ barricades in the Latin Quarter, and calling him “Mudger Muddle,”² which betrays the idea of pure mental confusion.

In 1970, one month before his death at the age of 57, Goldmann reiterated his mantra: “The first, principal idea of dialectical thought is the category of totality. This is no accident: a dialectician cannot do the history of ideas outside the history of society [...] Totality is the idea that a phenomenon can be comprehended only by first inserting it in the broader structure of which it is part and in which it has a function [...]”³ Indeed, Goldmann had been attacked both by structuralists like Foucault and Althusser and by disciples of the Frankfurt school. Even his colleague Henri Lefebvre thought that Goldmann had “abused the concept of totality taken in itself.”⁴

However, the issue is not so simple. We need to take a closer look at the Marxist thesis on totality as presented by Goldmann’s master, the Lukács of the 1920s. It was Lukács who, in 1920, posited a number of theses on totality in the chapter on “Class Consciousness” later included in *History and Class Consciousness*. Lukács attacks bourgeois historians who are unable to produce concrete analyses. These historians go wrong because of “their belief that the concrete can be located in the empirical individual of history (‘individual’ here can refer to an individual man, class or people) and in his empirically given (and hence psychological or mass-psychological) consciousness” (Lukács 1972, 50). His repeated answer is a call for a more inclusive totality: “Concrete analysis means then: the relation to society *as a whole*” (50). Lukács then adds:

² Cfr. Lacan 2006, 42. We discover the identity of Goldmann as the object of this barb on page 415, thanks to an end note.

³ Quoted in Jay 1984, 325.

⁴ Quoted in Jay 1984, 329.

Regarded abstractly and formally, then, class consciousness implies a class-conditioned *unconsciousness* of one's own socio-historical and economic condition. This condition is given as a definite structural relation, a definite formal nexus which appears to govern the whole of life. The 'falseness', the illusion implicit in this situation is in no sense arbitrary; it is simply the intellectual reflex of the objective economic structure. (52)

Lukács was also elaborating his concept of "false consciousness" in an effort to flesh out Marx's and Engels's concept of ideology. There again, a consideration of "totality" is offered as a pre-requisite for the vexed analysis of the mystified links between ideology and economic truth or material reality. Only the proletariat can establish a "real connection with the totality" (52). In his later analysis of reification, the proletariat is called the "identical subject-object of the historical process," which means that the proletariat is "the first subject in history that is (objectively) capable of an adequate social consciousness" (199). Proletarian consciousness is endowed with a constitutive role in history, without which no genuine social revolution could take place. Lukács emphasizes that in the transformation of bourgeois society "*only the practical class consciousness of the proletariat possesses this ability to transform things*" (205), so as to highlight the concrete interconnectivity of consciousness and practice at the peak of the revolutionary process in the proletariat.

The emergence of a new subject in the transformation of the social-economic structure of society takes the form of a "leap" (*Sprung*). Interestingly, this is the term Walter Benjamin would use in his later theses on the philosophy of history.⁵ For Lukács, paradoxically, such a revolutionary "leap" entailed a lengthy and arduous historical process. The "character of a leap" (*Sprungcharakter*) derives from turning oneself in the direction of the qualitatively new. Thus, revolutionary consciousness accompanies revolutionary practice leading to a transformation of the social fabric.

As Martin Jay has pointed out in his critical genealogy of the links between Marxism and totality, unlike Korsch or Bloch, Lukács restricted his concept of totality to a social and historical whole. Lukács follows Vico's principle of "verum factum" – we can know what we have made and humanity did not make nature. "Man is the measure of all things," Lukács repeats. However Jay does not quote Lukács' subtle analysis of what he terms the "Antinomies of Bourgeois Thought" in *Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat* (1923) when he discusses "the irrationality of existence (both as a totality and as the 'ultimate' material substratum underlying the forms)," that is "the irrationality of matter" (Lukács 1972, 119). Lukács opposes the idea of a creation of content as in mathematics to the philosophical sense of "creation":

For the philosophers 'creation' means only the possibility of rationally comprehending the facts, whereas for mathematics 'creation' and the possibility of comprehension are identical. Of all the

⁵ "Fashion has a flair for the topical, no matter where it stirs in the thickets of long ago; it is a tiger's leap into the past. This jump, however, takes place in an arena where the ruling class gives the commands. The same leap in the open air of history is the dialectical one, which is how Marx understood the revolution" (Benjamin 2007, 261).

representatives of classical philosophy it was Fichte in his middle period who saw this problem most clearly and gave it the most satisfactory formulation. What is at issue, he says, is “the absolute projection of an object of *the origin of which no account can be given* with the result that *the space between projection and thing projected is dark and void*; I expressed it somewhat scholastically but, as I believe, very appropriately, as the *projectio per hiatus irrationalem*. (119)⁶

With these terms, Lukacs debunks “the grandiose conception that thought can only grasp what it has itself created” (121). Classical thought, in his view, had to strive to find the subject of thought which could be thought of as producing existence without any *hiatus irrationalis* or transcendental “thing-in-itself.” This passage had an impact on the young Jacques Lacan who quotes it in his first and last poem, the sonnet “Hiatus Irrationalis,” which can be appreciated more when we know that Lacan read essays by philosophers of the Frankfurt school when preparing his 1938 essay on the family in his most systematic Freudian synthesis.

In a somewhat different sense, the term of “totality” was used by Wittgenstein when he asserted that “the totality of facts determines what is the case” in *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Hence the famous sentence: “2. 04. The totality of existent atomic facts is the world” (Wittgenstein 2001, 9). However, Wittgenstein uses “Gesamtheit” here, which could be glossed as “entirety” – a closed collection. “2. 04. Die Gesamtheit der bestehenden Sachverhalte ist die Welt.” For him, the concept of entirety or totality includes an exception to the totality: “2. 05. The totality of existent atomic facts also determines which atomic facts do not exist” (9), which in German reads: “Die Gesamtheit der bestehenden Sachverhalte bestimmt auch, welche Sachverhalte nicht bestehen.” As Paul Livingston (2007) has argued, one does not have to wait until the *Philosophical Investigations* to see Wittgenstein launch a critique of totality via the logical structure of the first work, which nevertheless relied on a systematic use of the term.

This stress on totality is also apparent in the intellectual synthesis of modernism provided by May Sinclair, a modernist novelist and a philosopher. Sinclair understood that an expression like “total configuration of the universe” had to replace Hegel’s old “absolute.” Her 1922 survey of the recent trends in philosophy, the *New Idealism*, dismantles for good Hegel’s Absolute, an insight shared by T. S. Eliot in his pre-war poetry and Harvard philosophy papers. Sinclair was hoping that the “new realism” ushered in by Bertrand Russell would not be the only tenable position. On her view, realism would be complemented by a reconstructed idealism capable of reconciling critical pragmatism and a dynamic nature as defined by Alfred North Whitehead. Her “new idealism” also took Freud’s unconscious into account. For Sinclair, God can be defined as the sum of what we do not know and as what He might know through us. This mystical point of view, asserted in novelistic form at the end of her most accomplished and autobiographical novel, *Mary Oliver*, is congruent with Wittgenstein’s final perspective on “the mystical element” that cannot be erased from life. Accordingly,

⁶ Lukacs’s own footnote to this passage recites “Die Wissenschaftslehre of 1804, Lecture XV, Werke (Neue Ausgabe) IV, p. 288” [emphasis added].

Sinclair's concept of totality links different viewpoints while gesturing in the direction of a non-dialectical synthesis of the opposites.

Another example of the deployment of totality will be found in Hugo von Hofmannsthal's *Salzburger grosses Welttheater*. In 1919, von Hofmannsthal aimed at providing a counterweight to Wagner's Bayreuth by launching the Salzburg festival. He mobilized an Austrian heritage bridging the gap between the Middle Ages and Mozart, while including a cosmopolitan like Goethe. Salzburg would embody a society defined as a community and an "aesthetic totality," thus "Catholic" in the etymological sense as a response to the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Such a neo-classicism appears modernist in its desire to unite all aesthetic forms, as we see with *Everyman* produced in Salzburg in 1920, followed by an adaptation of Calderon's *The Great Theatre of the World* in 1922. The trope of a microcosm reproducing the macrocosm connects religious and popular features, which sends us back to medieval rituals. Von Hofmannsthal, as much a modernist as Joyce, Proust, Pound, Woolf and Eliot, was intent upon blending archaic rituals and modern cityscapes. The new totality of 1922 was neither formalist nor mystical. It aimed at overcoming the belated Wagnerism of the Symbolists harking after the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. "Totality" was too serious to be subsumed by myth, in spite of Eliot's misguided notion of a "mythical method." Even if Proust, Joyce, Eliot and even Woolf betray a certain reverence for Wagner's operatic synthesis, they wanted to create a different sort of "whole": the "whole" reconciles the everyday and the mythical, encompasses bodies in its obscure organic functions and minds in its dizzying leaps, ushering in flashes of insight, epiphanies and new sorts of neo-Platonic heights. If we agree that the specificity of modernism in 1922 is that it postulates a totality before advancing to the next stage, which would be true totalitarianism, we have to understand how it negotiates with the idea of infinity.

A critical concept of totality was brought to bear on *Ulysses*, the main novel of 1922, by no less perceptive novelist and philosopher than Hermann Broch. Discussing Joyce's masterpiece in 1936, Broch (2002, 94) sketched the features that define a generation, above all the "style of the time," an "expression of an epoch" fulfilling a "historic reality." If the style is to survive its own period, it has to overcome its temporal determinations and look to the future. This is the historical vantage-point that will usher in a "total reality" gathering the concrete lives of multitudes. The writer engaging with the idea of reproducing the "universal quotidian of the epoch" (*Welt-Alltag der Epoche*), as Joyce did in *Ulysses*, reshapes the *Zeitgeist* by giving it its artistic form. When an artist is able to produce a "universal work of art," then a "universalized everyday" coheres into a cultural "world" that remains with us forever.

For Broch, Leopold Bloom was the hero of a "universal quotidian" taking Dublin as its site, exploring everyday life in such a way that it can be shared by all. What some critics had called a "novel to end all novels" reflects the splits and struggles of a world caught up between organic muteness and the excessive loquacity of universal culture. Broch insists that Joyce's unresolved problem was that he felt he must create a totality without believing in it the idea. In other words, Joyce had shaped a whole world without being a

true Platonician: “[...] the more fundamentally the work of art undertakes the task of totality (*Totalität*) without believing in it, the more threatening the peril of the infinite becomes” (Broch 2002, 94).

As Broch repeated in his essays and novels, the rational and the irrational must blend, fuse into a totality that also includes infinity. Because science cannot provide such a complete statement at once, literature and art assuage our impatience by giving birth to the wished for and anticipated synthesis. Modernist totalities do not necessarily lead to the huge symphonic form deployed with such craft by Proust and Joyce. The concept can underpin a minimalist sense of the absent center, as one finds in the rendering of war desolation by Woolf in *Jacob's room*, or in Sinclair's *The Life and Death of Harriett Frean*, a slim sketch rewriting in the negative of *Mary Oliver*, that, as we saw, was a very long and dense autobiographical novel.

Alain Badiou has reopened the discussion of totality in a Marxist sense. What he does as well is to reject the easy opposition of totality and infinity that underpins the entire logic of Emmanuel Levinas's *Totality and Infinity* from 1961. This is quite clear when Alain Badiou ushers in an original concept of “découvrement” in *The Immanence of Truths*. In the 700 pages of this book, brief chapters devoted to René Char, Victor Hugo, Emily Dickinson, Paul Celan, Osip Mandelstam, Fernando Pessoa, Bertolt Brecht and Samuel Beckett, offer pithy and vibrant analyses interrupting long sections on mathematics and logical theory. These authors would exemplify Badiou's concept of modernist writing, a writing in which finitude is pitted against the infinite. Finally Beckett is adduced to introduce a conceptual binary: “covering over” (*recouvrement*) opposed to “uncovering” (*découvrement*). Badiou defines “covering-over” as a modern, as opposed to classical, form of finitude. His sense of the “modern” is akin to “modernism” (the authors quoted would map out Badiou's modernism). A “covering-over” may try to deny that a revolutionary situation has happened by translating its emergence in the language of the finite. The infinity that had been deployed is thus masked or distorted in order to reinstate a status quo. “Covering-over” conceals the infinite multiplicities or reduce them to constructible multiples. “Covering-over” is a mechanism by which a system's chains of infinities are inverted into finite segments. “Covering-over” refuses anything that would be excessive. It just makes the new look banal, historical, or impossible. The “covering-over” asphyxiates the possibilities contained in the infinities for it doggedly attempts to prevent a new infinity from emerging from any given situation (Badiou 2022, 193-204).

Subjects interested in such of covering-over are defined by Lacan's phrase of the “non-dupes who err” (“les non-dupes errant”) (228), those “renegades of infinite potential” (203) trying not to be deceived by reducing any infinity to an enlightened false consciousness. In the end, the non-duped repeat homophonically the “Nom-du-Père,” the name-of-the-Father whose function is to keep the symbolic order of culture as a totality under strict control. Beckett is thus called upon to bring about a breakthrough. The “covering-over” in Beckett studies would correspond to the first interpretations of his works that insisted on existential despair, nihilism, the death of God. Even if these readings were produced in the 1960s and have been rejected in our critical consensus,

Badiou does not care about the evolution of Beckett scholarship, for he remembers the “Beckett” myth that marked his generation. For Badiou, Beckett bridges the gap between the 1930s and the 1970s: he is not the “last modernist”, but the main modernist.

Beckett’s poems testify to a clash between the finite and the infinite. Beckett’s poetry shows how the infinite emerge from the finite instead of reducing the infinite to its biographical circumstances, to identity politics, or to historicist framing. Beckett’s strong saying pierces through any “covering-over”: it “goes straight to the heart of the infinite nakedness of what is true” (Badiou 2022, 206). Badiou shows that Beckett’s solution was to reject any fake infinity borrowed from science as a consolation, and opt for dynamism. Rejecting the consolation of great numbers, Beckett chose exile, moved to Paris, and then abandoned Joyce as his model. Badiou argues that the solution for a lasting modernism is to combine totalization and infinity thanks to a constant movement. Thus Beckett never found a “home” and can be contrasted with Kant who never left Königsberg. Badiou comments:

The evil that is invisible, though caught up in the “how to say,” is to be “imprisoned at home imprisoned abroad,” which means: imprisoned *tout court*, imprisoned in the finiteness of the “home,” whether it is one’s own home or that of others. Anyone who shelters in a single home is lost. Every infinity requires wandering. Otherwise, it is pointless to invoke the clichés of the greatness of the past to combat the law of the Father: the imprisoned person will be, simply because they are imprisoned, im-finitudized, defated by the worst. (Badiou 2022, 210)

Badiou’s invented verb “en-finitudiser” parallels wandering as errancy and the acceptance of risk and error. This he opposes to “non-duped” subjects who want to remain in their father’s homes and never question patriarchy. If one can reach outside, face existential pain and risk, then the “covering-over” of ideology and pseudo-science can be dismantled. One cannot and should not feel at home in Beckett’s nature: it cannot offer any consolation, but provided one be ready to reach out for the outside, also face existential pain and risk, then the “covering-over” of pseudo-science is destroyed. Badiou’s political notion of infinity bridges the gap between what Hegel called the “bad infinity” of an endless regression and the good infinity of the Absolute. If modernism peaks indeed in 1922, and if we can go back in time to try and assess when it began (some time between Baudelaire and Jarry), one cannot say when ends, a point that can be illustrated by Marcel Duchamp.

Marcel Duchamp had failed to complete his large glass *The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even*. The ambitious work consisted of two metal panels holding a double allegory in glass, the bride on top, the bachelors at the bottom, created between 1915 and 1923. Duchamp’s focus had moved from the purely machine-like representations of sexual desire to an engagement with time, speed and kinetic devices like the later *rotoreliefs*. In 1923, Duchamp, bored by the world of art and artists, decided to focus on chess. He went back to Paris with the ambition of becoming a chess champion and called

the Large Glass “definitively unfinished.”⁷ He exhibited it as such. The “nine shots,” holes whose location was found when they were shot from a toy cannon, that were to receive “emanations” from the bachelors below, are still today empty.

Duchamp allowed the glass to be exhibited at the Brooklyn Museum in 1926. Badly stored after that show, the two panels being stacked on top of each other, the glass broke. Duchamp discovered this accident five years later. He then came back to the USA and spent two months in the summer of 1936 during which he patiently reassembled the glass pieces, putting the shards and slivers together as if they were an immense puzzle. He finished work on 31 July 1936. By then, he decided to include the *Grand Verre* in a portable box that contained replicas of all his previous works. He also felt that the cracks had improved the work: “There is a symmetry in the cracking [...] There is almost an intention here – a curious extra intention that I am not responsible for, an intention made by the piece itself, what I call a ‘ready-made’ intention [...]”⁸ Duchamp released his preparatory notes for the “Glass in the Green Box” in 1934.

The happy accident of the shattered glass released an extra dimension that somehow “unfinished” the previous blockage. Duchamp produced an engraving called *The Large Glass completed* in 1965, at the request of Arturo Schwarz. Jean Suquet then published an extensive explanation of what should have been in the work had it been finished according to the “Notes”. A big spiral links the bachelors to the bride, anchored by the holes of the nine shots. In the transformation from a “definitive” to an “indefinitive” incompleteness, Duchamp invented conceptual art while inserting the fourth dimension of time, with its contradictions and metamorphoses in the work itself. Since time is by definition open and therefore infinite, it follows that in the same way as no completion is definitive, no incompleteness can appear as an ultimate end. This incomplete totality open to infinity limns the features of the complex archive we call modernism.

It is an archive that collects all sorts of curios and documents in order to recollect the past; this past is less forgotten than constantly revisited and re-read by the present so as to make newer and better sense of it. Thus, we become the curators of an always unfinished and unfinishable archive. This archive I call modernism, an archive that will never become a closed totality. Like modernism, no collection can ever be complete. Discrete objects will form a living encyclopedia. Like Benjamin’s *Arcades Project*, it has to remain unfinished, which is the condition for a truly revolutionary awakening. Just as there is no absolute language, there is no absolute collection, therefore no end to modernism. Because the absolute is lacking, the urge of the totality more pressing, the task of the collector, which includes loving all the objects included, objects that will hence be “redeemed,” is to keep open a discontinuous history of modernisms in the plural – even if we long for it in the singular.

One can argue that modernism deploys a concept of history that is neither linear nor cyclical in so far as it comes very close to the Freudian idea of deferred action or

⁷ This is the title of an excellent collection on Duchamp’s work; cf. de Duve 1992.

⁸ Quoted in Tomkins 1996, 308.

Nachträglichkeit. If the past can be rewritten by the present, as Eliot surmised in *Tradition and the Individual Talent*, one cannot keep the myth of progress in the arts, as Benjamin had argued against Adorno. Although it is “progressive,” modernism does not believe in progress – only Flaubert’s bourgeois and vulgar Marxists do. Because of all these features, modernism is now our classicism: we return to *The Waste Land* to read Petronius and Ovid, we return to *Ulysses* to read the *Odyssey* – and this is the only way these ancient texts make sense for us today. Alfred Jarry gave us an insight into this strange chronology when he dated from 1920 his “modernist novel” *The Supermale*, written in 1902, by a simple inversion. Thus, if 1922 was indeed the peak of historical modernism, Jarry would hint that modernism should last until 2192 at least...

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