"On or about December 1910," Virginia Woolf famously claimed, "human nature changed." Woolf did not specify what happened, but she was surely referring to the phenomenon in philosophy and aesthetics called "modernism." More a mind-set than a movement, modernism entailed a revolt against the reign of absolute truth. Champions of contingency and creative freedom, modernists assailed Victorian social, cultural, and sexual constraints. They discredited the canon and deconstructed artistic criteria of coherence and closure. And they challenged "realistic" and "rational" conceptions of time as an orderly sequence of events and of space as an organized composition of figure and background. At its peak, in the first half of the twentieth century, modernism dominated the visual arts, architecture, poetry, fiction, drama, dance, music, and movies.

In *Modernism*, Peter Gay provides an elegantly written, accessible survey of the stimulating, scandalous, and unsettling rebellion that shaped our contemporary world. An emeritus professor of Yale and the author of more than two dozen books on the intellectual and cultural history of Europe and the United States, Gay brings a lifetime of learning to his subject. Acknowledging that "generalizations are indispensable," he looks for a modernist style, for representative thoughts, feelings, and opinions, by returning, again and again, "to a single talent at work." *Modernism* is not catalog of all the leading figures in modernism. Faulkner and Yeats are among the missing in action. Nonetheless, it's a splendid introduction to modernism's distinctive and divergent strands.

Gay highlights two familiar features of modernism as defining qualities. Modernists, he suggests, derived emotional satisfaction from their status as heretics, defying established
authorities. James Joyce, Woolf wrote, exhibited in *Ulysses* "the conscious and calculated indecency of a desperate man who feels that in order to breathe he must break the windows." As modernism gained momentum, Gay implies, defiance replaced desperation. "If I want to, I can," Igor Stravinsky proclaimed. Insisting that traffic noise was more beautiful than classical compositions, John Cage vowed that when audiences accepted his work, he would move on until they didn’t.

The lure of heresy, however, animates all apostles of radical change. More important to modernism is Gay's second characteristic. Convinced that the self was "the great, veiled mystery of existence," he indicates, modernists committed themselves to explorations of inwardness and the sovereignty of human subjectivity. Refusing to prettify, Van Gogh painted himself forty-one times. Gauguin's self-portraits took him perilously close "to a madhouse." Beginning with Proust and Joyce, novelists probed the interior lives and streams of consciousness of their characters.

On many issues, Gay demonstrates, modernists were not unified. Although some modernists were democrats, modernism was, in its essence, elitist. Many modernists were contemptuous of the intelligence, insight, and taste of the masses and the middle classes. Composer Claude Debussy inveighed against "the mediocrity of the herd mind." Architect Ludwig Mies Van der Rohe treated "bourgeois" and "philistine" as synonyms. Playwright August Strindberg obsessively opposed equal rights for women.

Although Jews were often linked to modernism, some modernists were anti-Semitic. T.S. Eliot did not think modernism incompatible with his reactionary politics, baptism in the Church of England, or his characterization of Jews as "underneath the lot/ Money in furs." Norwegian Nobel Laureate Knut Hamsun praised Hitler as a "warrior for mankind," deemed Franklin
Roosevelt "a Jew in the pay of Jews," and vowed in 1936 that if he had ten votes, he would cast every one of them for Vidkun Quisling.

Despite the "almost unlimited varieties of avant-garde politics," Gay points out, modernists actually needed a liberal state to function. Some modernists learned this lesson the hard way, from Adolph Hitler and Joseph Stalin. Equally ironic is the extent to which modernists depended on "the absorptive gifts of the middle class" and the willingness of conventional bourgeois burghers to "embrace the unconventional." Modernists often exploited the implications of "art for art's sake" without fully subscribing to its principles. Fortunately for them, modernism could be—and was—liberating for consumers as well as the artists themselves. Capitalists, Gay observes, often have a pecuniary interest in educating the public.

After World War II, Gay concludes, the modernist wave began to recede. Pop artists Jasper Johns and Andy Warhol seized center stage. Converting flags and soup cans into artistic subjects, they "vetoed any imagination." As it spread to fiction, drama, architecture, and film, Pop Art destroyed two indispensable ingredients of modernism: a separation of high and low art; and a concern with inwardness and the subjective self. Mocking all efforts to define the nature of art, Pop Art's progeny, Performance Art and Video Art, Gay writes, "smell suspiciously like death waiting in the wings."

And so, in the latter part of the twentieth century, modernism presented "much talent and little genius." There were a few notable exceptions. Playwrights Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter dissected isolation, without the hope of salvation, as a core component of the human condition. And in One Hundred Years of Solitude, Gabriel Garcia Marquez used the modernist technique of "magical realism" to illuminate "solitary sadness" in the settlement he named Macondo, Colombia. Marquez, Gay maintains, has "few competitors at the summit of
literature." These days, modernist writers "find their audience in French departments in American colleges."

Although not original, Gay's critique of the contemporary scene is compelling. So is his obituary for modernism. "Often exquisite and always new," modernism has provoked, perplexed, pleased, and upset millions of people. It had a "good long run."

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