

# The meaning of 'life' in European aesthetics at the end of the nineteenth century, with implications for a useful definition of Modernism

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No one with a working knowledge of European literatures and arts at the end of the nineteenth century could doubt the importance of "life" as a term of common reflection and discussion marking the period. But the importance of this term is obscured by two major problems: first, numerous current approaches to the history of Modernism find no place for it, and second, it is by no means easy to explain why it should have attained importance anyway. We thus confront a double shortcoming of perception and causality, a problematic that I propose to tackle in two ways: first by explaining why the term "life" was of some significance a hundred years ago, and second by arguing that it should be of some importance for historiography at the end of the twentieth century.

## **"Life" as a moment within Modernism**

What I mean by "life" is rather more than a theme or a vision of a particular kind of life. My concern here is instead with how, at a fairly precise historical moment, the term connected the aesthetic with the non-aesthetic spheres in such a way that it became a point of reference for the widest of the many streams of opinion, accord, disagreement and general dialectics that are now loosely grouped under the banner of Modernism. My ultimate hope is thus that, by fixing "life" as a point of historical reference, some more general orientation will follow. With luck, the meaning of "life" might even give a meaning to "Modernism".

This ambition is relatively rare. Visions of the precise end of the nineteenth century are often restricted to merely decorist arabesques, commonly shadowed by myths of Symbolism or of wider misnomers like Art for Art's Sake. These latter terms are even sometimes thought to have definitively separated aesthetics from social participation, and thus from "life" in its broadest sense of involvement in both the aesthetic and non-aesthetic domains. Histories are written as if major ideologies like Naturalism had followed a completely separate path, or as if the talk of "decadent" art in the 1880s and early 1890s were not a serious problem of public image provoking a substantial reaction against aestheticist separatism.

Such histories are inadequate. I believe that the aesthetics of the period were instead marked by a movement towards social participation, partly through the transformation of

Naturalism, partly in reaction to claims and then charges of decadence. But how could I prove my claim? How could it be disproved? What should one say to all those theories based on the French centre, where histories are written as if Baudelaire-Rimbaud-Mallarmé lived, worked and were front-line figures right through to 1914, indifferent to the development of French society and indeed to their own biological deaths? When I am told that Mallarmé formulated the essential elements of some kind of Modernism, how could I really insist that he was not such a dominant figure for the French artistic milieu of that time? Of course, there are a few indications in the more empirical histories: following the impact of the Belgian Renaissance, movements of the 1890s like Unanimism, Naturism and L'Art social were indeed contesting the legacy of Mallarmé, who, at the same time as he was selected "Poète des poètes", was associated in 1896 with the "...frenetic solitudes where poets enthuse over sterility" (Retté 1896:189). There was more than Mallarmé at work. But although enthusiasm for sterility could be opposed, this does not locate what it was actually opposed to.

How could I demonstrate the specific importance of "life"? Would statistics help? I once started collecting German titles like Hugo von Hofmannsthal's *Ballade des äusseren Lebens*, George's *Der Teppich des Lebens*, Rilke's *Leben und Lieder* and *Das tägliche Leben*, Sudermann's *Es lebe das Leben!*, and so on. But how many titles, how many "Leben"s would constitute proof of importance? Is history something that can be ascertained through lists?

Importance is obviously not merely statistical. If "life" had a meaning at the turn of the century, it was because it was worth discussing and arguing about directly (certain methodological implications of this point are drawn out in Pym 1989). It is thus of rather more significance that, for example, von Hofmannsthal, in an oft-cited comment, recognized life as a major point of contention: "Two things seem modern to us today: the analysis of life and the retreat from life" (1893:149). Analysis and retreat; social optimism and social pessimism. Both at once. Because these were the two approaches destined to struggle over the meaning of "life" as a semantic space to be filled. I want to call them Naturalism and Aestheticism, as general analytical terms grouping individual national and regional aesthetics.

But von Hofmannsthal's 1893 comment was still some time before the numerical end of the century (and in cases of optimism versus pessimism, numerical thresholds are highly significant). The terms of the debate were not to remain neatly separate. Indeed, Naturalism and Aestheticism had already been dissolving their differences in Jules Huret's 1891 *Enquête*, where we find not only Verlaine rejecting the Symbolists, but also general recognition of the death of Naturalism and a younger generation steadily mixing the prosodics of the two approaches through an aesthetic of the *vers libre* (Huret 1891:32, 79, 82, 156, 167, 259). This is information from commentaries made at the time, from what writers thought it was worth saying or arguing about in the press. And some quite advanced positions had been reached, not the least being Camille de Sainte-Croix's reasoning that "Writing is not a *métier*, [...] it is Life itself." (in Huret: 50). The ideal of participation was thus a dissolution of art. And this statement, worthy of the Surrealists, was made as early as 1891. It was moreover by no means alone. Let me try to evoke its turn-of-the-century

importance by stringing together a few citations from the time.

On the level of aesthetic theory, Jean-Marie Guyau had challenged Kant's intellectualized "free beauty" by insisting that all abstractions had to appear *living* in order to attain aesthetic value; art essentially expressed "condensed life" (1889:13, 64). Wilde then generalized the dissolution of art into a "life" which by no means involved hibernation: "Life imitates art," he declared in 1899, and substantiated his claim in terms that show the outward influence of art: "Things only exist because we see them, and *what* we see, *how* we see, depends on the Arts which influence us" (1899:44). For Arthur Symons, if the correct use of art lay in perception, then "...we shall not find ourselves in drawing-rooms or in museums" (1900:290). In France, the remaining Symbolists had mostly conformed, with Merrill, to an idealist appraisal of experience: "...from forms of imperfect life, the poet should recreate perfect Life" (1893). This was even echoed in Australia, where Brennan saw the role of poetry as to "exasperate" the contradiction between imperfect life and the "fact of possible perfection" (1904:68). But French poets were becoming less concerned with ideals and rather more wary of solitude. In 1895, the manifesto of "L'Art social" sought to "...destroy the myth of art's necessary isolation from human activities" (Décaudin: 40); in 1902 Fernand Gregh declared that the historical transition from the Parnassian "Beauté pour la Beauté" to the Symbolist "Beauté pour le rêve" should culminate in the Humanist "Beauté pour la vie" (Décaudin: 124). And so on through to Blaise Cendrars's 1913 dictum, published in *Der Sturm*, that "Literature is a part of life... Living is not a *métier* ; so there are no more artists" (Décaudin: 479). The logic not only looks forward to the avant-gardes but also echoes Sainte-Croix's original statement that "Writing is not a *métier*, it is Life itself." The period of these citations thus joins 1891 to 1913, straddling the turn of the century and extending beyond.

Yet does this string of references, or the numerous other possible strings, strictly reveal any historical importance? There was of course a great deal else happening in these years; it would surely be possible to put together citations about virtually any topic under the sun. Is this kind of proof a simple question of research and selection?

Happily, there is further evidence, more difficult to refute, in the histories written by those who directly experienced those years. When Proust, describing the time of the Dreyfus Affair, declares, "No more style! That's what I heard then. No more literature! Life!" (1927: 882), the testimony is real enough and difficult to discard. Or again, far more reserved and English, here is Holbrook Jackson's account of the history he had known at first hand:

Anybody who studies the moods and thoughts of the Eighteen Nineties cannot fail to observe their central characteristic in a widespread concern for the correct - that is, the most effective, the most powerful, the most righteous - mode of living. [...] Life aroused curiosity. People became enthusiastic about the way it should be used. (14)

If we move to secondary historiographies as such, we find similar forms of consensus documented in texts that nevertheless fail to perceive the full extent of what was happening. Michel Décaudin's study of the aftermath of French Symbolism makes it clear that the centre of the period can in no way be associated with the hibernation epitomized by Mallarmé (21-23), but finds no stable name for these post-Symbolists, except perhaps "ceux qui

cherchaient la Vie” (500). Similarly, the essays collected under the title *The Symbolist Movement in Literatures of European Literatures* show evidence of “life” opposing Aestheticist principles in Buenos Aires (1898), Warsaw (1902), Coimbra (1904), Madrid (1905), Prague (1906), Vienna (1906), Moscow (1906) and Budapest (1906) (see pages 676, 610, 559, 670, 621, 429, 390, 370), and yet the volume purports to describe the spread of no more than Symbolism. If this is supposed to represent an international *Symbolist* movement, then the Aestheticist tenets of French Symbolism had been significantly rewritten. There was indeed much more going on.

We nowadays hear little of the French writers who, for better or for worse, were highly esteemed at the turn of the century - Jammes, Samain, de Régnier, Gregh, and a little later Péguy -; we pay scant attention to monuments of the period such as Gide’s *Nourritures terrestres* or Claudel’s *Connaissance de l’Est*; we fail to appreciate that the literary mission carried out at the centre of European literature was a final attack on fixed verse forms and a generalization of poetic prose; and we thus fail to perceive that the undoing of fixed forms was mixing novel and poetry, Naturalism and Aestheticism, in a way that opened both sides to an ideal of participation, giving more importance to content and communication than to formal experimentation. This means that the talk of “life” cannot provide the reflection many would like to find in aesthetic history; it has very little to do with a deconstructionist view of the world. Indeed, if Modernism is defined as merely formal experimentation, the period we are concerned with could well be seen as non-Modernist, or at least as a big hole in the middle of the way Modernism was supposed to have developed. But perhaps such a definition would be looking for the wrong thing.

The turn-of-the-century was not Baudelaire-Rimbaud-Mallarmé. Nor was it a monolithic *Querelle* simply lunging towards the ever new. There was something else behind all this talk of life.

### **“Life” as a questioning of aesthetic autonomy**

A basically sociological aesthetics might want to associate an ideal of participation with events like the aftermath of Oscar Wilde’s trial, the Dreyfus Affair, the Cuban War, the Revolution of 1905, the Japanese defeat of Russia in 1905 (the first military victory of a non-European power), the Boer Wars and various responses to a major economic recession. A basic history of ideas might want to add the influence of Nietzsche, Schopenhauer and Bergson. A basic theory would be that all these events and ideas came along to shake sleeping artists out of their shells: it is worth bearing in mind that the term “intellectual” became a politicized substantive in French in the late 1890s (Idt 1969). However, although such public facts can suggest how “life” became important when and where it did, they cannot explain the nature of the importance itself. If everyone starting talking about life simply to distance themselves from previous talk about decadence, science or symbols, we would still have to explain why the notions of decadence, science and symbols became unimportant and failed to last. After all, every decade reveals a crop of at least mildly traumatic events and reasonably expansive ideas. When they fall together, they merely set off the reactions already present in the form of tensions, in the meanings already available for

possible attribution to an essentially open word like “life”.

If I can thus temporarily retreat from a history of world events and philosophers, the kind of explanation I am interested in has two possible points of departure: knowledge of what happened before the turn of the century (the post-Romantic formation of Aestheticism and Naturalism) and knowledge of what happened later (the anti-institutionalism of the European avant-gardes, usefully analyzed by Peter Bürger). This makes it possible to argue that turn-of-the-century “life” meant at once a dissolution of the prior opposition and an incipient formulation of the future problematic.

It would be convenient to approach from both these perspectives, framing a particular historical moment in terms of almost two centuries of aesthetic thought. But lack of space forces me to focus on a particular problematic, leaving aside the international aspects and the concept of progress which I have dealt with elsewhere (Pym 1988). Here I just want to add a few comments on the problem of autonomy. After all, if we take seriously the claim that “writing is a part of life”, or that “Literature is a part of life... so there are no more artists”, we are dealing with a rather developed questioning of art’s autonomy with respect to its social setting.

A sociologist of note saw part of what was happening: “Writers and scholars are citizens,” declared Durkheim, “their strict duty is thus clearly to participate in public life” (1904:279). This “public life” obviously cannot be equated with the more general uses we have seen above. And yet the conceptual geometry is the same. Whether we tie “life” to supra-national ethics (for the Zola of “J’accuse”), nationalist closure (for someone like Barrès), an anarchist nature (Retté) or Catholic inspiration (Jammes, Claudel), the term is taken to be a positive category wider than art, in such a way that art is necessarily inserted into life. In this sense, virtually all turn-of-the-century uses of “life” (with the exception of Wilde’s ironic inversion) implied this wider “public” meaning in which “life” includes art. This had not been the case previously. Naturalism presupposed an analytical-critical distance between life and art; Aestheticism had exploited the negativity of this distance. The turn-of-the-century conceptualization had as its purpose the overcoming of these previous modes of autonomy. But where would this new conceptualization lead to?

Peter Bürger has expressed the Modernist problematic as a dilemma related to the situation that existed prior to the turn-of-the-century sense of public life: on the one hand, artists required relative autonomy in order to adopt a critical stance towards their society; on the other, this same autonomy led to the institutionalization of art and thus to its isolation from social influence. As formulated, the problem was based on presupposed mutual exclusion between life and art, and could thus find no real solution in avant-gardist attacks on institutional art; its geometry had no wider space for something like a positive notion of public life.

It is a little puzzling to find Peter Bürger attributing to the historical avant-gardes - represented by Duchamp and the Surrealists - a problematic actually anterior to turn-of-the-century notions of “life”. It may well be true that the later avant-garde movements opposed artistic institutions by attempting to found what Bürger terms “a new life praxis” (49), but such an attempt can in no way define their historical specificity. The terms of the problematic existed well before them; indeed, in the geometry of a positively valued public life, a kind of

solution might also have existed before them.

I thus find Bürger's formulation inadequate to the historical development of artistic autonomy. It is a theory which, in reducing the question of autonomy to a choice for or against art as institution, selects from a complex period of history only two bearers of pertinent answers: Aestheticism and the (deceptively singular) Avant-garde. Bürger's historical categories thereby overlook two important moments. First, his selection of Aestheticism fails to account for the historical symbiosis which made Naturalism the other face of post-Romantic aesthetics. Second, his categories do not allow for the turn-of-the-century period as a moment of transition between Aestheticist isolation and the avant-gardes' treatment of institutionalization. In effect, the first oversight leads to the second, for unless one appreciates the complex duality of Aestheticism and Naturalism, it is impossible to perceive the turn of the century as a moment of unification.

However, once his unification is seen, the meaning of "life" could even give a substantial meaning to Modernism as a questioning of an earlier unity, located in Romanticism.

### **A quick vision of Modernism**

To cut many corners, here is the definition to which this logic has led me: I believe that the term "Modernism" is most useful when it covers the complex and extensive disintegration of Romantic aesthetics which began in the 1830s and was to retain its vitality for a little over a century. It is convenient to distinguish between three stages of its development: the first, which would go to the mid-1880s (in Paris, slightly later elsewhere), was marked by a highly fragmented separation of Romanticism into Aestheticism and Naturalism; the second, turn-of-the-century Modernism, would then cover the decorist and regionalist trends to about 1914; and the third, roughly the period of the historical avant-gardes, culminated in Surrealist theory and in the monuments of Pound, Eliot, Joyce and Neruda. Whether or not these divisions have a more general validity is not essential to my present argument. What is essential is that, in terms of aesthetics, the period I have located as early Modernism may be seen as a series of challenges to the fundamental Romantic category of nature. This is significant because it was only towards the end of the nineteenth century that any values were formulated which could replace such a vast unifying notion. Indeed, several of the individual movements of this period are sometimes mistakenly described as neo-Romantic. But "life" was much more than a mere return. Let me explain why, as briefly as possible.

For Romanticism, an idealized nature was adaptable both to expansive liberalism based on natural interiority and to a mystique of the optimal economic unit of the time, the nation. As Bürger intimates in his comments on Kant and Schiller (41-46), it was thanks to Romanticism that the artist gained a socially recognized form of autonomy through the liberalist individuation of subjectivity. But one should also note that the artists' use of autonomy was not free to contradict nature and nation as the wider guarantees of both their freedom and citizenship. At base, it was in nature that creative genius and national genius could meet and be confused.

Modernist aesthetics would then only be introduced after positivist science had appropriated and objectified the category of nature. Naturalism followed the objectification;

Aestheticism reacted against it; and from the Paris of Comte and Gautier to the Paris of Zola and Mallarmé, the art of the centre was effectively without a central category.

The turn of the century was obviously very different. The competing functional possibilities of Aestheticism and Naturalism as they encountered different modalities of nationalist resistance accompanied the Parisian demise of these terms as opposed movements, allowing a new total vision of the artistic domain. Whereas Romantic aesthetics spent considerable time discussing the progressiveness, universality and goodness of nature, turn-of-the-century aesthetics were concerned with the immediacy, regionality and participativeness of public life. I believe the second vision replaced the first; I believe “life” took over the ideological function of Romantic “nature”. Vegetation thus became arabesques, for the adornment and distinction of cities, such that public life and cities could no longer oppose real vegetation, or could at least conceal their real opposition. Artists opened their doors to enter the urban landscape of the new century, ostensibly offering their services in the interests of some notion of a wider cosmopolitan society, but really finding no social groups prepared to share their particular enthusiasm. As Benjamin appreciated, “the assimilation of the artist and society took place in the street” (1938:45). But once on the street, in the middle of this particular kind of life, exactly who is the artist supposed to talk to, about what, with what authority? You look, you consider your position, and then, in a few decades’ time, you find yourself applying for official subsidies. The meaning of “life” came and went.

### **Implications for a useful definition of Modernism**

The historiography of aesthetics could be seen as a kind of good housekeeping, with the task completed when all the old silver has been taken out, polished up and put away in its place. But it must be doubted that Modernism will ever lend itself to such an approach. If Romantic schools can to some extent be identified, located and interrelated, Modernist movements were too busy moving about for the rules of good housekeeping to apply to any major visions of the world; substantial places and polish can only be found for the terms of transition that marked temporary signposts along the way. This means that although it is not vain to try to identify a specific place for a signpost like “life”, the same cannot be said for the term “Modernist” and its cognates, which were used with such historical diversity that simple housekeeping is no longer enough. This is why the term “Modernism” should be seen as an explicitly analytical category, formulated in the present and projected onto the past, belonging to an approach which is not merely trying to organize the past but also wants to use history in order to think about the present. From this perspective, a definition of Modernism should respond to the problems of post-Modernism, and only secondarily to criteria of explanatory elegance in the face of limitless data. Of course, if there is no general agreement about the nature and problems of a post-Modernist situation, there is not likely to be any broad agreement about the nature and problems of Modernism either. And yet one must try to develop historical thought on both these fronts.

Although no one can suggest that the aesthetics of the end of the last century should be reproduced at the end of the present century, turn-of-the-century Modernism should

nevertheless be appreciated as a positive moment in the development of relations between art and society. Much of the value of its talk about public life is now obscured by the monuments of later Modernism and by general unawareness of its real complexity. But not all its possibilities were exploited by the avant-gardes, and a post-Modernist response to the problem of autonomy need not be reduced to a binary dilemma for or against institutions. There are more important things in the world. For while twentieth-century aesthetics have been talking about different ways of negotiating institutions, nature has been waiting, since the beginning of Romanticism, as a very fundamental reason for talking about life, displaced but not resolved.

Now that nature is saying no to the progress of human institutions, now that “life” also means survival (“la vie” has become “la survie”), should not talk about this term once again assume importance, on an even more serious and public level than at the end of the last century?

### Note

\* An application for financial assistance for the presentation of this paper was refused by Bonifacio N. Díaz Chico, Vicerrector de Investigación at the University of Las Palmas, Spain, where I am currently employed. The reason given was that the subject is “fuera de [mi] línea de trabajo”, that is, outside my line of work as a teacher in a department of Modern Philology.

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