

discouraging task! "They have constantly been searching for and never quite finding their starting -- the end of Victorianism, the beginning of romanticism, the mid-seventeenth century, the end of the Middle Ages."¹¹ Suppose, nonetheless, we too engage in that discouraging task. What is the starting-point of the modern mind? Pushing our way backward, we pause momentarily at 1910, arrested by Virginia Woolf's cryptic statement, "On or about December 1910 human nature changed." And lest we take that statement with undue literality, we had better listen to Irving Howe's interpretation of it.

Through this vivid hyperbole, Virginia Woolf meant to suggest that there is a frightening discontinuity between the traditional past and the shaken present; that the line of history has been bent, perhaps broken. Modernist literature goes on the tacit assumption that human nature has indeed changed, probably a few decades before the date given by Mrs. Woolf; or, as Stephen Spender remarks, that the circumstances under which we live, forever being transformed by nature, have been so radically altered that people feel human nature to have changed and thereby behave as though it has.¹²

So instead of stopping at 1910, we are evidently compelled to push back at least a few decades before that. A few decades? No, we must push back as far as a whole century. For Howe, differentiating between modern and contemporary, says this:

In the past hundred years, we have had a special kind of literature. We call it modern and distinguish it from the merely contemporary; for where the contemporary refers to time, the modern refers to sensibility and style, and where the contemporary us a term of neutral reference, the modern is a term of critical placement and judgment.¹³

Literature is, of course, one of the chief shaping-influences and recording-devices of any cultural era, a kind of barometer or even seismograph of any historical era, reflecting the impact of the most creative and formative individuals. "The artist", Ezra Pound remarks, "is the antennae of the race."¹⁴ Equally so is the writer. Yet it is extremely difficult for a literary historian like Howe to determine when the modern tradition began. He simply asserts that for the past hundred years a new style and sensibility, a new outlook and mood have manifested themselves in the significant writers of the Western world. And they, we may assume, have not only been shapers of the modern mind but likewise been shaped by it -- whenever the modern mind but started to emerge.

Karl Löwith agrees that we are engaged in an elusive quest. He also agrees that we must move back into the nineteenth century in order to locate the headwaters of that surging cultural current labeled modernity. Löwith, whose studies of *Nature, History and Existentialism* are profound and exciting, deserves to be heard *in extenso*.

It is very difficult to say exactly what this "modernity" is and when it began to appear. Goethe thought that Balzac was abominably modern and "ultra", presenting in his novels "the ugly, the hideous and depraved" instead of the wholesome. Baudelaire thought that Flaubert's *Madam Bovary* was "profoundly." Our grandfathers thought that impressionism was terribly modern and our fathers that Van Gogh was ultra modern. Now, for us, the human comedy of Balzac has become rather antiquated in comparison with the human hell in Dostoevski's novels: poor Madame Bovary's problem no longer impresses us as profoundly