

The Anatomy of Moments

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Abstract:

Aesthetic moments of revelation—intense, sensual, internal, and individual—are so key to modernist culture that the idea of them in criticism has become commonplace. Here I seek to breath life into this humdrum formula of modernist criticism by exploring multiple responses to an alternative moment amongst British cultural figures: the declaration of War against Germany at 11.15 on September 3rd, 1939. This was also an intense moment, but it was social, political, communal, mediated and disseminated publicly by new technologies. As my archival research here reveals, a wide spectrum of responses were recorded, so we can think of such a moment as ‘prismatic’. I will also show how this moment was a shock to culture, which went into a state of suspended animation. As well as offering critiques of the moment as a fetishised form, I argue that modernist culture and the idea of the moment would never be the same again.

Keywords: World War 2; voice; epiphany; Powys; Spender; Gabo; Picasso; Joyce; Pater; Bergson

My title, *The Anatomy of Moments* is a way, first, of providing an idea of my current research project, which in part explores responses to a particular historical moment; and, second, of conjuring questions about how we experience and think about ‘moments’ generally, in particular intense sensual transformative personal moments, the kind often associated with modernism.¹ Think of Marcel sipping his infusion of lime blossom, James Joyce’s epiphanies, the ‘complex in an instant of time’ that Imagist poems were, for Ezra Pound, supposed

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to represent; Woolf's moments of being; the loaded conclusions of Katharine Mansfield's short stories, Eliot's 'echoing moments'. Roots for these can be found in lyric poetry, conversion narratives, Romanticism, Walter Pater's aestheticism, Bergson's philosophy. It is a rich field.

I hope to understand or *anatomise* these 'modernist' moments in the light of another moment, which I'm calling a prismatic social historical moment. I want to supplement, not replace, the modernist moment with this prismatic moment, a phrase I'll explain shortly.

In my current research, I am gathering and analysing what cultural figures in Britain (or of British origin but overseas) were doing on the day that a state of War was declared between Britain and Germany, on the 3rd of September 1939. I am exploring the various ways this can be seen as a pivot around which multiple cultural activities, attitudes, networks, and institutions turned. My interest stems from a long-held sense that the reception of Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, which came out on May 4, 1939, was profoundly affected by the state of imminent war and then by an actual world war. I knew that stories were already told about this era: that all of culture was affected by these conditions, especially avant-garde or modernist culture in Europe, which was put on hold. And in these stories, 1939 is frequently used as a terminal point marking an end of modernist culture, or at least a phase of it, the end of a certain relation between art and society. The project originally set out to examine a year, roughly from September 1939 to the London blitz in 1940. My aim was to present a wide and detailed mosaic of cultural activity. But an archival approach produced too much detail, and so my focus narrowed to a day. I realised, with some excitement, that I would have to experiment with historical methods, especially around questions of narrative, and that I might have to develop new models for thinking about cultural networks.

In this article I narrow my focus still further to a *moment*: if modernism is associated with a certain cult of the personal transformative moment, then I'm looking at the moment around which modernism – and this cult along with it – underwent a significant transformation. I will first analyse diverse responses among cultural figures to the moment that war was declared, which will produce a perspective from which we will sense the 'prismatic social moment'. After that I will return to the contrasting idea of the transformative moment.

Here, then, is the historical moment, before it split among the various responses to it. It is 11.15 am on September 3rd 1939. The

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moment is embedded within a speech many readers of this journal will know:

This morning the British Ambassador in Berlin handed the German Government a final Note stating that, unless we heard from them by 11 o'clock that they were prepared at once to withdraw their troops from Poland, a state of war would exist between us. I have to tell you now that no such undertaking has been received, and that consequently this country is at war with Germany. You can imagine what a bitter blow it is to me that all my long struggle to win peace has failed. Yet I cannot believe that there is anything more or anything different that I could have done and that would have been more successful.²

If I had to pick one precise moment here, it would lie in the brief pause between the words 'this country is at war with Germany' (an impersonal statement) and Chamberlain saying 'You can imagine what a bitter blow it is to me' (a personal plea). We move from the state of a nation and an audience to the state of the speaker's soul.

In that momentary silence, carefully gauged in his delivery, Chamberlain's announcement can begin to sink in, and the effects of the emerging state just described can be felt by the audience. But before they can sink in much, we get to hear Chamberlain's own response, as if he takes back what he has just given. The authority of the fact shifts to the vulnerability of a feeling. It is a delicate moment, a moment of danger, of national crisis, in which the leader and the land may – perilously – be perceived as one. In fact, such mythical thinking proves to be rare at the time; rather than identify with Chamberlain, people objectified him, as we will see. In any case Chamberlain knows that his reputation and the country he represents are, internationally, in the balance. He asks for sympathy, admits failure, says he did the best he could, and concludes by saying that he – and France also – have a clear conscience. He had to authorise himself as guiltless in order to give authority to the rest of his statement: that people should carry on with their jobs, accept the new conditions (which included vast new powers given to the state), and prepare to fight and prevail against 'brute force, bad faith, injustice, oppression and persecution'. For the audience, the announcement was not a surprise, although some did think matters might still go the other way. It seems only to a very small degree to have been a sudden moment of private consciousness awakening to a new state; mostly, it was the confirmation of an expectation or apprehension. With this moment the fear of air-raids that had been stoked by the recent bombing campaigns in the Spanish Civil War and, before that, H. G. Wells's fictions, rose to a

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pitch. Sirens were heard in London within the hour. They proved to be a false alarm, signs of the phoney war to come. But in any case war had arrived.

Chamberlain's words and silences do not signal the precise moment at which the state of war came into being. This had occurred fifteen minutes earlier, through an *absence* of action: nothing happened and everything changed, a modernist moment of sorts. War was not declared by one country or one person on another. The responsibility for the new state of war existing was being managed very carefully. It came into being because there was no response to the 'final Note', handed to the German Government by the British Ambassador in Berlin. This 'note' is a euphemism for an ultimatum that contained a conditional declaration of war. Once it was submitted, the moment at which a state of peace became a state of war is traversed as a result of neither side doing anything. A declaration of War is one of the instances J. L. Austin gives of a performative statement, in which by saying a certain thing, you show that you have *decided* that that thing is so (rather than simply judging that it is so). But in this case, it is doing *nothing* which is performative. It is as if the ticks of the clock, moving towards 11.00 am, renamed zero hour, constitute the performative action. Responsibility is handed over to time itself.

The performance and perception of time is one of the extraordinary things in people's responses throughout that day. Harold Nicolson, MP and commentator for the *New Statesman*, married to Vita Sackville-West, was waiting at a friend's house near the Houses of Parliament: 'Top Wolmer has his gold watch open on the table and I watch the minutes creeping towards 11 when we will be at war. When the watch reaches that point we pay no attention.' But shortly afterwards they made sure they could get to a radio. 'We listen to the P.M. at 11.15. He is quite good and tells us that war is on. But he puts in a personal note which shocks us.'³

Among those who tuned in, a focus on the voice was widespread. It gave people a chance to characterise the style and mood of the moment. Furthermore, it allowed them to side-step the harder question of what the commitment to the new condition of war would entail. And it also meant they were putting a distance between themselves and Chamberlain, stalling any attempt to identify Chamberlain with the state of the nation.

The actor, director, and playwright, Noël Coward, highly attuned to tones of voice, described Chamberlain as 'lachrymose'.⁴ The novelist Compton Mackenzie said he heard a 'tired sad voice'.⁵ The socialist writer and activist Storm Jameson provided more detail, hearing:

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‘An old man’s dry croaking voice, full of bitterness—more it seemed, because he had been duped than for any other reason.’⁶

The writer E. M. Delafield gave a community context for her lightly fictionalised diary of a Provincial Lady. She was in a

busy little café by the roadside. It was packed. When the Prime Minister had uttered his solemn words there was dead silence, until one man, giving a sigh of relief said in a quiet voice: ‘So it’s come.’

‘Yes, it’s come,’ said another, ‘and, thank God, there’s no appeasement *this* time.’ ‘Poor old Chamberlain,’ remarked a woman with several children, ‘he’s done his bit—sorry for him I am: his idol of Peace shattered and fallen to the ground in pieces.’⁷

Silence, this time ‘dead’, is present again and is used to register the moment at which the news is sinking in. The packed café leads easily to the sense of a communal and prismatic moment: ‘a voice [...] another [...] a woman.’

Tom Driberg, the founder within Beaverbook’s *Daily Express*, of the modern gossip column, a man who knew everyone, remembered hearing that ‘sombre, throaty voice croaking the declaration that sunny Sunday morning’.⁸ He also retrospectively underplayed the moment’s importance, suggesting that it was not particularly significant, but ‘merely punctuated the eighteen-month tale of Chamberlain’s decline from Munich to Narvik’—Narvik, where the British defeat would lead to Chamberlain’s resignation. And yet in the newspaper column which he wrote that evening, and published the next day—on Monday the 4th—the whole weekend stood out as too momentous to describe: ‘If only I had room to print all that we have thought, heard, felt in the last day or two’.⁹ Such a density of experience, requiring an expansion of time or a compression of representation, resembles a stereotypical modernist condition which leads in turn to the modernist moment of compression.

One of Driberg’s acquaintances was Evelyn Waugh, whose response is striking in being poker-faced and loyally reflecting his Tory support for the Prime Minister: ‘Mass. Communion. After breakfast I listened to Chamberlain declare war: he did it rather well’.¹⁰ In his dry acceptance Waugh is supportive and fatalistic; why waste emotion on something so predictable? James Agate, a columnist like Driberg, but, like Waugh, much more conservative, noted Chamberlain’s ‘intensely English accent, unassailable dignity, and legitimate emotion’.¹¹ Agate’s pride borders on nationalistic identification. Contrast these views from the Right with Vera Brittain, the peace activist, who was far less

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impressed, although she had some room for sympathy. She heard ‘an old voice, harsh and arrogant, though now it trembles’.¹²

We have a wide spectrum of adjectives here: solemn, sombre, old, tired, sad, lachrymose, dry, croaking, trembly, bitter, harsh, arrogant—and English. The moment is shared, and the means of describing it coincide, via the voice, but the judgement of that voice is diverse. There is a common sub-text to nearly all of them, however, something that can hardly be said at the time: weakness.

Of course not everyone could get to a radio so they couldn’t judge the voice. But they knew something was about to happen, and waited on tenterhooks. The novelist John Cowper Powys was failing to distract himself by learning Welsh, while his wife, in order to hear the latest, had gone to hear the neighbours’ radio. Powys was, around that time, in the middle of writing a vast rambling historical epic called *Owen Glendower*. He wrote of himself as split: ‘My Feelings & my Reason divided. My feelings followed the Masses of my Fellow-Subjects of the King—wishing to see the blow struck For Poland & for Our Honour & our Word. But—but—but—my Reason wondered steadily . . . in detached sympathy with Old Chamberlain’s Fanaticism for Peace. Will this astonishing old Gentleman who obstinately adheres in spite of all to PEACE stop the War after all? Will he? Can he? With all of us straining at the Leash?’ His wife returned to bring the news. He put down his pen to listen, then picked it up again. One can actually see the point—a line—at which this happens in the manuscript of his diary. The moment of war’s declaration is being disseminated, re-presented and passed from one moment into another:

It is now exactly 11–25 am Sunday morn—I have brought down all my lessons & my — It is now noon. .. As I was saying I brought down all my lesson-books [...] thinking that it would be a long speech announcing a Treaty, a Pause, a Conference, & dragging us all back with a jerk of the leash—But soon the T.T. [his wife] came back and said Chamberlain had spoken [...] from the inner room of the Cabinet [...] WAR WAS DECLARED. So feeling has conquered reason in us all. Our enemies feel they are right and we feel we are right & Poland feels she is right—Whether the cynical Stalin, like a humorous little Drill-Sergeant thinks he is right, the God of Mongols alone knows.¹³

Powys’s writing brilliantly witnesses a moment of disruption to its flow from the nightmare of history, and when he follows up with ‘as I was saying’, it is as if he is reasserting his right to speak of his private individual life after the nightmare’s rude interruption. It is also an example of people who did not believe war was inevitable.

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This was more widespread than people think. For example, it included people like Driberg and his appeasement editor, Lord Beaverbrook, who actually believed that, as he said later, 'if I had I been [in London rather than Canada] I might have been able to strengthen the hands of Chamberlain.'¹⁴ Even John Maynard Keynes thought there was a chance of peace.

When Powys imagines responses to this moment among different peoples, he is seeing it prismatically as a social historical moment. Although they are on different sides, everyone has the same conviction of 'rightness' (with a slight variation about Stalin). Powys is able to get outside himself and see the delusions of national self-belief that war immediately brings to all sides, for how can everyone be right?

Powys had for several years been a seasoned diary writer. But for many the new condition of war was a moment that led people to *start* diaries. W. H. Auden, for example, started one on August 30th, Naomi Mitchison on the 1st of September, Stephen Spender and Naum Gabo both on September the 3rd. Starting a diary is often to indicate a new phase of one's own life. Prompted to do so by a historical rather than a personal event is to admit how historical forces threaten to take a primary role in shaping the forms that one's expressive life takes. But it is not necessarily a surrender to that history: the diary writing may equally be an attempt to wrest back control of the means of representation just when the state of war looks as though it will give to the state a hegemony over representation. The Ministry of Information, planned for a while, had been established in preparation only a few days before, and would oversee censorship of the Press. University courses were cut; art schools closed or they were evacuated. Theatres, music-halls, cinemas, the nascent T.V. service were closed down. The remaining thirty-five Proms Concerts were all cancelled. The cricket season was curtailed. Much of this was, as with evacuation and blackouts, part of a defensive policy – to avoid crowds in urban areas that could suffer from any aerial bombardment. But it's hard not to see it also as the state flexing its muscles, showing a new executive power, and communicating its commitment to the engagement in the new style of warfare: total war. Many had feared – like Orwell – that the British State at war would 'go fascist'. An illiberal lack of constructive policy towards culture and the arts made it appear to be doing just that.

This conflict between self and state or self and history is present in the diary of Stephen Spender, the poet friend of Auden and Isherwood, which he started that day: 'I am going to keep a journal because I cannot accept the fact that I feel so shattered that I cannot

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write at all. [...] I feel as if I could not write again. Words seem to break in my mind like sticks when I put them down on paper.' For Spender tragedies of political history and private concerns were coinciding, as his wife Inez had just left him to go off with the founder of Mass Observation, Charles Madge: 'It so happens that the world has broken just at the moment when my own life has broken. I mean not my life but my wife who has left me.' Writing will paradoxically cure the condition of writer's block. 'The best thing is to write anything, anything at all that comes into your head [...] all the words have broken into the separate letters of the alphabet & cannot be put together again [...] I must put out my hands and grasp the handfuls of facts'.¹⁵ Spender struggles across the lines drawn between silence, expression, and representation. He will also soon blur the lines between the public and the private when he commodifies the contents of the journal and publishes it, with a few light edits, in *Horizon*, the journal he sets up shortly with Cyril Connolly.

This moment invaded and reshaped individuals' private spaces. It was not just a rupture in international relations: it seemed to produce a rupture in time, darkening any sense of the future. This sense was one that modernist culture had always depended upon being able to seize and to animate through formal experimentation.

The constructivist sculptor Naum Gabo, for instance, began a diary on this day with the following words:

I am not writing for future generations. In our troubled times it would be ridiculous to speculate about the future. The future is like an unreliable horse. It could arrive on time, but it could also not arrive at all.

In other words, it may arrive in such a different form, that if we saw it, we would not recognise it as the future.

We will put aside the future.¹⁶

All the futurist constructivist rhetoric of Gabo's youth was now ringing hollow, or could find no purchase in the present. The absence of a future provided an opportunity to envisage the end of time because the threat of aerial bombardment led to a paradoxically creative sense of apocalypse. In his journal, the young surrealist poet David Gascoyne sees an end – in the form of a transcendence – of the individual: 'Today is the day on which the outbreak of the *Last War* has occurred, [...] a day of such immeasurable historical significance, that it seems that to write anything more than 'Today is the 3rd of September, 1939, – the day Great Britain and France declared war on Hitler', would only be irrelevant and unnecessary. Today, the individual is transcended.'¹⁷ Apocalypse comes through in a poem he writes shortly after called

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‘zero’. This poem is less well known than Auden’s ‘September 1st 1939’, but there are remarkable similarities:

ZERO

September, 1939

Who can by now not hear
The hollow and annihilating roar
Of final disillusion; or not know
How our condition is uncertain and obscure
And difficult to bear? Yet through
The blackness of his dungeon there still peer
Man’s eyes, unmoving, lit by their desire
To see the worst, and yet not die
Of their lucid despair
But in such vision persevere
Through time into Eternity
For this is Zero-hour
When the most penetrating gaze can see
Only the Void, the emptier than air,
The incoherent Nada of the seer:
Who blind is yet not blind, being aware
Of the Negation’s double mystery!

Tomb of what was, womb of what is to be.¹⁸

Even at the moment of despair, the fear of annihilation, it is possible to have a vision that will persevere, even to Eternity. But then a paradox appears. In the zero-hour of the now, all that can be seen is a nothing—a Void, or Nada—so how is nothing going to guarantee the vision persevering eternally? The dream-vision of nothing has something positive to it; that is the Negation’s ‘double mystery’ which negates itself. The now is mysteriously double, a contradiction, both tomb and womb, cancelling itself out. Gascoyne’s exclamation mark feels like a naïve mystical enthusiasm. He is only twenty-three. His anti-rationalist roots in surrealism suggest strongly that this free verse abstract prophecy is in a *modernist* tradition. It contrasts with Auden’s famous opening line: ‘I sit in one of the dives / On Fifty-Second Street’, which, like the title specifying the date, has a documentary particularity.¹⁹

Although it is prompted by a particular moment, Gascoyne’s poem is unlike the other responses in not containing particular

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elements: none of the ‘facts’ that Spender wanted to grasp in order to stay sane (as if facts are concrete objects, which of course they’re not) are present. Gascoyne wants to grasp something universal, transcending the particular, now that the individual, as his diary puts it, had been transcended. The universal idea is that the present is always zero-hour, with the void of time on either side, visible to those willing to see in the dark and to see the dark. This paradoxical affirmation of a presence within nothingness stems from a vision of endlessly fluctuating transformation. It coincides with Walter Pater’s view of time and his cult of ‘the present moment’, a crucial document, as we will see, for understanding the modernist moment.

Gascoyne’s poem expresses the fears and hopes for the survival of culture. Culture will be annihilated, but it will persevere. It is melodramatic, not yet tempered by any perspective that will be brought by the passing of time, in which the disappointingly phoney war will unfold. Such ‘tempering’ emerges in several fictional responses written during the war, in which the declaration of war became a meme, as it were. It appears in Patrick Hamilton’s *Hangover Square* (1941), Evelyn Waugh’s *Put Out More Flags* (1942), and Nancy Mitford’s *The Pursuit of Love* (1945). In *Hangover Square*, the declaration of war occurs at the end of the novel, which tunes into Chamberlain’s words coming over a radio, just as a crazed murderer obsessively decorates the murder-scene. He has just strangled a treacherous femme fatale who had associated with fascists. Two climaxes coincide around a single moment, and the coincidence invites allegorical interpretations: the murder is the tragic revenge of a doomed and duped romantic liberal on a fascist sympathiser. The coincidence of public and private events is an attempt to thicken the significance of both moments, making them illuminate one another. In Waugh’s *Put Out More Flags*, the declaration of war happens at the very beginning, lies at the root of the narrative, establishes its background, and yet has no intensity and, having done its work, is left safely behind. In Mitford’s *The Pursuit of Love*, it takes place quietly in the middle, an inevitability, the novel taking a longer view, so the declaration of war is key but also another in a series of events on which the narrative turns.

In these three illustrations, the moment has been carried forward and is being viewed retrospectively. In the next two responses, the last two refractions in the prismatic moment, I will examine the pressure of the future when the moment is imminent.

First, we encounter the painter, patron, and surrealist Roland Penrose. When war was declared he was on a train from Southampton to London with the photographer Lee Miller. As they arrived at

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Waterloo Station, at about 11.45, he heard ‘the first air-raid alarm’ and saw ‘the novel sight of barrage balloons rising into a clear blue sky.’ The night before they had been crossing from St Malo after a holiday in France. At St Malo, Penrose had bumped into the surrealist painter Julian Trevelyan. Trevelyan says in his memoirs that Penrose on the eve of war was willing to surrender to the new situation: ‘We talked of the future and what it would have in store for us, and Roland declared that for his part he would make no move to get himself a job, but would wait to be caught up automatically in the great machine of war, and would let himself be pushed where it wanted to push him.’ But overnight, Penrose changed his mind: ‘Next morning in the train to London, Roland came into our compartment, and rather charmingly and shamefacedly confessed that he had not meant quite what he had said the night before [. . .] Our lives and the lives of all our friends and neighbours were changing almost overnight.’²⁰ Penrose’s recollection differs from Trevelyan’s, covering up his change of heart. He says simply that they discussed how their ‘knowledge of painting could find some application in camouflage.’²¹ Sure enough Penrose became a teacher of camouflage and produced the *Home Guard Manual of Camouflage* in 1941.

This is a perfect illustration of the moment as pivotal, of how artists had to shift their focus: from the individual’s dreams to the pragmatism of the state; from a harmless art to the violence of war; from a revolutionary socialist deployment of fantasy as a means to tear away the veil of the real, to the use of disguise to conceal reality and so protect a capitalist state. After the war Penrose would help set up the ICA and would later be knighted, much to the disgust of the late Surrealist young Turk, George Melly.²²

That summer, Penrose and Lee Miller had been in the South of France, staying with Picasso in Antibes. This brings me to my second sense of imminence—in this case an all too easy premonition. We go back to August, the month of anxiety and expectation, a holiday month: the moment of war beginning is nervously anticipated as ushering in total war.

Picasso was attuned to the mounting anxiety. His greatest recent success was his outraged representation of the horrifying fascist bombing of Guernica. Penrose had in fact arranged for *Guernica* to come to the Whitechapel Gallery in London in January 1939. Penrose recalled that that August Picasso was working at ‘incredible speed’ to complete the painting *Night Fishing at Antibes*, his first major work since *Guernica*, clearly showing its influence (see Figure 1).²³ In the centre are two fishermen in a small black boat. It seems smaller than both of

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them together. One has just missed a small fish that is getting away, the other is on the point of spearing what looks like a big skate with a trident. The sharp tips are hovering ominously right on its pale innocent skin. This proximity of the moment of truth is replicated by one of the two women spectators on the right who is just on the point of licking an ice-cream. In this time of holidays and of imminent conflict, a reactionary essentialism seems forced upon the subjects: women, at leisure, are decadent consumers; men, in labour, are violent despoilers of nature.

As with *Guernica*, the painting is framed darkly, and the light source is artificial. But unlike *Guernica*'s monochrome, it glows with a full spectrum of colours: a distant violet town in the twilight, magenta and muddy beige skirts on the women, a blue-trousered fisherman, a green sea and harbour walls, yellow and orange spirals of arc-lights, a brown crab. Is that a French flag in the French sky? These are the gawdy fair-ground colours of a summer spectacle. Like *Guernica* it is a painting of violent action, involving aggressive humans and hunted animals (although it has fewer suffering humans). A little brown crab, a refugee, tries to scuttle away from the scene. But it is cornered.

This is a quotidian event, a common enough scene in Antibes (still a spectacle for tourists), and not necessarily a fantasy or nightmare. It is far less politically direct than *Guernica*, which was put on display to raise funds. By including spectators savouring ice-cream it is more cynical about us as consumers. Yet it expresses a broader mood than an inconsequential occasion might harbour, and it invites allegorical readings, as *Hangover Square* does. Here are two. Firstly, these are Homeric gods, flawed, but toying with humans (the fish) who are subject to the forces of history. Secondly, these are humans compelled to a violent economy by need (for food) and desire (for spectacle); if Gods, they will win, presumably, and the fish will be speared, but if they are humans, they might—at least the fishermen might—*fail*, and the fish might be *spared*—the boat is precarious, dwarfed by their over-powered (militarised) forms. As a tiny ship of state, it may well tip up at the moment the trident makes its lunge. The times are unstable. Will this lead to chaos? Or will the belligerents over-reach, their projects fail? It is an unresolved moment before a moment.

These instances provide, I trust, a sufficiently broad spectrum of responses to the moment, and give you a glimpse of my larger mosaic. I now want to address the topic in my title, via another painting: Rembrandt's *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Tulp*, housed in the Mauritshuis in Den Hague (see Figure 2). We move from Picasso's dramatic narrative painting of Southern heat to a cooler group portrait

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Fig. 1. : Picasso, Pablo (1881–1973): *Night Fishing at Antibes* (Antibes, August 1939). New York, Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). Oil on canvas, 6' 9" x 11' 4" (205.8 x 345.4 cm). Mrs. Simon Guggenheim Fund. 13.1952 © 2018. Digital image, The Museum of Modern Art, New York/Scala, Florence
MOMA New York, © Photo SCALA Florence

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Fig. 2. : Rembrandt van Rijn, *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Nicolaes Tulp*, 1632. Mauritshuis, Den Hague.

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of the North. We move from a moment *before* the piercing of flesh to a moment after it.

Rembrandt's painting is a classic case of the tricks that large paintings play, and have to play, whether they are dramatic narratives or group portraits. They bring different moments in time together as one, producing an intense instant of coincidence and synchronicity. This is what we want from moments. The painting spreads before us a plausible moment: men are gathered round to see the handiwork of a master anatomist at the instant he delicately lifts the tendons out from the forearm of a corpse. But it is in fact a composite—or synthetic—moment, made up of many distinct portraits brought together into the illusion of one plausible moment. None of them could hold their pose long enough while Rembrandt completed the work, as individuals let alone as a group. The duration of the composition of such paintings is concealed magically beneath the single moment that is represented.

It is strange—or it gives away the magic trick—that none of the faces is looking all that sharply at what they are gathered to see, as if they are missing the main event. They are not quite of the moment. Has Rembrandt given up the challenge of arranging the perspective and these faces so that they are all focused on one thing? Or is he saying, like Auden in his 'Musée des Beaux Arts', something about how whatever we focus on, we should remember the many other perspectives of life going on elsewhere? That we are never paying the kind of total rapt attention we like to think—or that painters would like to think—we do.

The effect is one of dispersal. *Our* eyes may be drawn to the gash in the centre, but the longer we look, the more our attention is drawn away to see that the attention of the spectators is elsewhere. The special moment, it turns out, is not determined by a single event unfolding at a single point in space at a single point in time; rather, it is determined by other points of space which are tantalisingly not even in the picture. With a variety of perspectives around a single event, it is a prismatic social historical moment—another mosaic.

Anatomies of bodies are hard to do: bodies are scarce. The moment of the anatomy is hard to catch in paint, a challenge Rembrandt leaps at. But anatomies of moments are perhaps harder still, even if moments, unlike bodies, are everywhere. For it is hard to find the outer edge of moments, the skin for incision. They are not bodies, since their borders are indefinite, more vague. The term itself is stretchy; it ranges from signalling something indivisibly small (as Newton defined them for his calculus), to being able to contain

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everything (as they were for Blake), to meaning a period (the ‘moment’ of *Scrutiny*). In this they are the small charmed things of the magician’s bench that promise expansion, and unexpected contents. And each one is so different: no two moments are the same in consciousness, writes Bergson.²⁴ Given this infinite variability, the whole purpose of an anatomy—to find qualities that are common to all bodies—will be amputated. So, as abstractions, they may not have any inside. Being both ubiquitous and ephemeral, moments are paradoxical. They are always changing, and yet they are also always the same, unified in their essence, made up constantly, for Aristotle, of time.

So our anatomy will be, at best, metaphorical. But that’s pardonable. There is precedence from Rembrandt’s period itself, exactly the period when actual anatomies were becoming all the rage. From 1580 to 1680, as library catalogues reveal, there were dozens of books with the word ‘anatomy’ in the title: *The Anatomy of Wit*, *The Anatomy of the World*, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, *The Anatomy of Independency*, *The Anatomy of Pestilence*, *The Anatomy of Popery* and, finally, in 1680, *The Anatomy of a Porpoise* and *The Anatomy of A Horse*. At last, actual physical anatomies are brought to the table, laid down, and opened up. These metaphorical anatomies had not been unrespectable. They were, in practice, simply ‘analyses’, involving the sorting of their subjects into different categories. The use of the new term, even if metaphorically, was a fashionable way to mark the power and modernity of the user, as all the men attending Dr Tulp’s lesson were marking theirs by being there.

So we could try to anatomise the moment and its different kinds: the ‘modernist moment’, the watercooler moment, the Marlboro moment, the eternal moment, the senior moment. But we soon come to realise that we are simply sorting all of experience—an interminable process. The infinity of moments, and the endlessness of their analyses, however, as with the analysis of all vague concepts, comes to be their discursive advantage: interminable analysis benefits the concept, and the institutions that carry it out.

In the endless process of sorting them, certain kinds of moment nevertheless come to stand out and may be used to typify culture at different times. The intense transformative aesthetic sensual personal moment crops up frequently, for instance, and it has become a staple for the study of modernism, one of its key symptoms. This modernist variety is private, quotidian, and may be the target of irony. This moment stands out for several reasons. I will discuss just a couple of these, with illustrations from Joyce, before offering a critique of the cult of this intense moment.

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The first reason is as a simple device for narrative climax: the moment embodies sudden compressed psychological action and an excitement that several things are happening simultaneously. It signals a turn in the story. My example of this comes from *Ulysses*. We are in the dining room of Dublin's Ormonde Hotel, where Leopold Bloom is having a late lunch. He has just been writing a note to a woman called Martha (an assumed name). In the adjacent ball-room, some Dubliners are making music. Simon Dedalus, an acquaintance of Bloom's, is singing an aria from the romantic opera *Martha*. The character Lionel is longing to meet once again a woman called Martha (an assumed name, again), who came suddenly into Lionel's life and then mysteriously disappeared. The singer, Simon, has recently lost his wife. Bloom is potentially losing his wife at this moment, as she is on the point of consummating a new love affair. Her new lover has arrived and is at this moment in the Blooms' bedroom. The aria reaches a climax on a long high note, an extended ecstatic aesthetic moment, in which the word 'Come' is sung. Bloom or the narrator or both offer a commentary:

Quitting all languor Lionel cried in grief, in cry of passion
dominant to love to return with deepening yet with rising chords of
harmony. In cry of lionel loneliness that she should know, must Martha
feel. For only her he waited. Where? Here there try there here all try
where. Somewhere.

—*Co-ome, thou lost one!*

Co-ome, thou dear one!

Alone. One love. One hope. One comfort me. Martha, chestnote,
return!

—*Come . . . !*

It soared, a bird, it held its flight, a swift pure cry, soar silver orb it
leaped serene, speeding, sustained, to come, don't spin it out too long
long breath he breath long life, soaring high, high resplendent, aflame,
crowned, high in the effulgence symbolic, high, of the etherial bosom,
high, of the high vast irradiation everywhere all soaring all around about
the all, the endlessnessness

—*To me!*

Siopold!

Consumed.

Come. Well sung. All clapped. She ought to. Come. To me, to him,
to her, you too, me, us.

—Bravo! Clapclap.²⁵

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If you are reading this, make sure you listen to a recording of the aria. It is important to see how the extended moment of the high note is in actual performance not extended enough to cover the stream of aesthetic consciousness supposedly flowing through Bloom's mind. The duration of that flow has to be awkwardly compressed to fit into the life of that 'too long long' note. Or the note has to be imagined as heroically long.

The three characters Simon, Lionel, and Leopold Bloom—protagonist, performer and audience—become one, fused in a single ideal moment of melodramatic pathos: 'Consumed'. A profound fantasy of communication, communion, and consumation (and coming) brought about by the art of powerfully dramatic operatic song, it is an example of a super dense moment of narrative climax, thick with significance and feeling. The quotidian highpoint of the musical moment—that strain again, it had a dying fall—is made epic through coincidence.

I propose to turn now to a second function of the intense moment, which is an 'ordering' of chaos, or disorder, through illumination. The illustration is from Joyce again, this time from the end of *The Dead*. It's an intense sentence, itself embodying an intense imagistic moment. It contains the ardent, regretful consciousness of Gabriel Conroy, fearing that his life and his marriage are part of a 'dull existence'. He is trying to console himself: 'Like the tender fires of stars, moments of their life together that no one knew of or would ever know of, broke upon and illumined his memory.'²⁶ The illumination these remembered moments offer, temporary though they are, makes it possible to navigate through memory and the past. Moments from the past come to us, and we build stories and narratives of our lives around and between them.

Both of these moments in Joyce show the influence of Pater. In Pater we can identify, but also mount a critique of, the 'cult of the moment', which has come down into teaching English, especially through the teaching of the lyric poem. Pater's Conclusion to his *Studies in the Italian Renaissance* was, we know, a hugely influential text. It was also, moreover, obsessed with 'moments', the word cascading through his prose:

The service of philosophy, of speculative culture, towards the human spirit, is to rouse, to startle it to a life of *constant and eager observation*. Every moment some form grows perfect in hand or face; [etc. etc.] for that moment only [...] Not to discriminate every moment some passionate attitude in those about us, [etc. etc.] is to sleep before evening

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[...] For art comes to you proposing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments' sake.²⁷

At the time, Pater's pursuit of intensifying experience was criticised for being too purely hedonistic and insufficiently moral. This seems an uptight response—all too Victorian. As a programme it was also criticised for being excessively wearisome. I agree with this entirely. Pater says our observation must be 'constant and eager'. We must *at every moment* be busy looking for and 'discriminating between' passionate attitudes in people around us. If we're not, then it is as though we're sleeping in the afternoon, missing instead of seizing the moment, missing instead of seizing the potential for vivid perception at every point in time. This call to action is also uptight and Victorian. I want to push this criticism further. Within Pater's cultivation of extending the intense compressed moment of fleeting sensory experience, of a nervy never-ending pursuit of happiness, resides also, unintentionally perhaps, a handy discourse for consumerism.

A route from Pater to consumerism can be mapped via one of Pater's disciples, that shopaholic Oscar Wilde. From Pater's burning gemlike flame we turn to the glowing embers of the cigarette, that glimmering object of desire. In *Dorian Gray*, Lord Henry instructs Dorian: 'You must have a cigarette. A cigarette is the perfect type of a perfect pleasure. It is exquisite, and it leaves one unsatisfied. What more can one want?'²⁸ The brevity of the cigarette is crucial. In simple little moments, the desired object can be activated, drawn on, and discarded. The object of *satisfying* desire is never achieved, however. So one must have another, and another. Wilde's paradox must have been pinned on the walls of advertising executives, of New York's Mad Men: what more could *they* want than something which leaves the consumer wanting more? The condition of constant and eager yearning is the goal.

Modernism draws on the power of the moment, but it can also ironize it in its relation to consumerism (as the word 'Consumed' in *Ulysses* indicates) and its ephemeral quality: Lionel's song dies down, the embers of Gabriel's moments 'break' and are extinguished. If an antidote to the cult of the moment is needed, it would be in forms of pleasure produced in longer durations, for example of narrative. But I don't have the space to draw this out in this article.

This essay is intended to show a sample of a vision of a different way of imagining 'the intense moment'. The vision is not of a moment that exists solely and privately for an individual in time, but of one that

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exists diversely in the minds and actions of many individuals—across communities spread out in space. At the level at which the moment exists as such across space, it is in fact available for being anatomised. So an anatomy of the moment is possible when the moment has in this way commonality. To give unity and breadth to the moment, it needs to be a widely reported event of which many become suddenly aware. Where were you when Kennedy was shot, at the lunar landing, when the Berlin wall or the twin towers fell? These are all of course a function of an intensifying global media. One peak of this intensification happened around the declaration of war in 1939. The gaze was turned outwards to a broader darker horizon. This qualified the modernist moment, threatened it, even, made the pursuit of such moments antiquarian or only assimilable through irony.

I put such moments in the context of each other for mutual illumination. There is an element of ‘antidote’, of looking for balance between the social and the individual, but they are not intended to cancel each other out. In fact, the dispersed variety of the ‘prismatic social moment’ can *contain* an individual’s expression of the intense modernist transformative moment, as we found in David Gascoyne’s poem. The modernist moment shaped many responses to that moment.

We keep having to process contemporary political history as a series of momentous shocks, which we all experience. We need to keep the imagination of diverse responses alive in order to prevent limited constructions of those responses. Inhabiting imaginatively these simultaneous if different responses to the same event helps produce a social imaginary. This is not easy. Piecing together my broad mosaic has been at times a considerable challenge.

The intense modernist moment, in which the diverse feelings of an individual are compressed in a single instant, can feel like a solution to, or an escape from, the difficulty of inhabiting the broader social imaginary. We keep the modernist moment alive in teaching, as we should. Perhaps the modernist moment survives as a response to empathy fatigue from the social imaginary. But an anatomy of historical moments enables an articulation of the past in which we see how people ‘seize hold of a memory, as it flashes up at a moment of danger’, to quote Walter Benjamin’s words, written when he was interned in France, in the Autumn of 1939.²⁹ By anatomising the prismatic social moment I hope we can see resistances at the moment the nightmare of history threatens to take control of our memory, and the means of representation. And I hope the moments I have anatomised in this article inaugurate new ways of imagining moments

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in time and across space, of them coming together, and illuminating one another.

Notes

1. This article is based on my Inaugural Professorial Lecture, given at the University of London, on the 28th of April 2017. I am grateful to the British Academy and the Leverhulme Trust for funding which made much of the research for it possible. I am also grateful to Andrzej Gasiorek for invaluable editorial assistance. The Inaugural was filmed and can be seen here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sjIH6y2oqV0>
2. Chamberlain's full speech can be heard here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rtJ_zbz1NyY
3. I am quoting from the typescript diaries held in the Special Collections of Balliol College, Oxford. I am very grateful to Juliet Nicolson for granting me permission to do so. See Harold Nicolson, *Diaries and Letters, 1930–1964* ed. by Stanley Olson (London: Collins, 1980), p. 159, for a slightly edited version.
4. Noël Coward, *Autobiography* (London: Mandarin, 1992), p. 330.
5. Compton Mackenzie, *My Life and Times: Octave 8: 1939–1946* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1969), p. 54.
6. Margaret Storm Jameson, *Journey from the North, II* (London: Virago, 1984), p. 27.
7. E. M. Delafield, 'Diary of a Provincial Lady' in *Nineteenth Century*, October 1939, p. 495. Compare the version in *The Provincial Lady in War Time* (London: Macmillan, 1940), pp. 13–14, from which the slighting reference to Chamberlain has been extracted.
8. Tom Driberg, *Guy Burgess, a Portrait with Background* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1956), p. 49.
9. Tom Driberg, *Colonnade* (London: The Pilot Press, 1949), p. 169.
10. *The Diaries of Evelyn Waugh*, ed. by Michael Davie (London: Phoenix, 1995), pp. 449–50.
11. James Agate, *Ego 4, Yet More of the Autobiography of James Agate* (London: Harrap, 1940), p. 118.
12. Vera Brittain, *England's Hour* (London: Macmillan, 1940), p. 8.
13. John Cowper Powys, *Diaries*, September 3rd 1939, viewable at <https://www.llgc.org.uk/en/discover/digital-gallery/manuscripts/modern-period/john-cowper-powys/> (p. 261). I am grateful to Christopher Sinclair-Stevenson, acting on behalf of the Estate of John Cowper Powys, for permission to quote from these diaries and to reproduce the image of the diary.
14. Anne Chisholm and Michael Davie, *Beaverbrook: A Life* (London: Pimlico, 1993), p. 370.
15. Stephen Spender 'September Journal'. The hitherto unpublished extracts from Spender's diaries are quoted by kind permission of the Stephen Spender Estate. The originals are held at the Bancroft Library at University of California, Berkeley; copies can be consulted at the Bodleian Library, Oxford in the Weston Reading Room (MS. Photogr.d.192). Extracts of Spender's diaries, edited and condensed, were first published in 1940 in the early issues of *Horizon*. They were then edited by John Goldsmith for Faber and appeared as *Journals: 1939–1983* in 1985 (see pp. 23–4 for September 3rd 1939). They were then re-edited for Faber by Lara Feigel and John Sutherland in 2012 as *New Selected Journals, 1939–1995*. There is still unpublished material in the originals.

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16. Naum Gabo, 'My Diary', translated anonymously. Tate Gallery Archive 9313/2/4/1. The extract here is quoted with kind permission from Nina and Graham Williams in cooperation with the Tate Gallery.
17. David Gascoyne, *Collected Journals: 1936–1942* (London: Skoob Books Publishing, 1991), p. 261.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 265.
19. 'September 1, 1939', in *The English Auden*, ed. by Edward Mendelson (London: Faber & Faber, 1977), p. 245.
20. Julian Trevelyan, *Indigo Days* (London: Macgibbon & Kee, 1957), p. 109.
21. Roland Penrose, *Scrap Book: 1900–1981* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1981), p. 124.
22. George Melly, *Don't Tell Sybil: An Intimate Memoir of ELT Mesens* (London: Random House, 1997), p. 58.
23. Pablo Picasso, *Night Fishing at Antibes*, 1939, MOMA.
24. Henri Bergson, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. by T. E. Hulme (London: Macmillan, 1913), p. 11.
25. James Joyce, *Ulysses*, ed. by Jeri Johnson (Oxford: Oxford World Classics, 1999), pp. 264–65. A recording of this aria can be heard here: http://www.james-joyce-music.com/song12_discussion.html
26. James Joyce, *Dubliners*, ed. by Hans Walter Gabler and Walter Hettche (London: Garland Publishing, 1993) p. 374.
27. Walter Pater, *Studies in the Italian Renaissance* (London: Macmillan, 1888), pp. 249–252.
28. Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Grey*, ed. by Robert Ross (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 126.
29. Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' in *Illuminations* ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. by Harry Zorn (London: Pimlico 1999), p. 247.