

寄稿論文

“How it Strikes a Contemporary”¹⁾:
Modernism and Modernity in Australia, 1920s–1930s

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Introduction: Antipodean Modernities

The purpose of this essay is to ask how modernism and modernity looked to Australians—or at least to some Australians engaged in the business of culture—in the interwar years; that is, in the years before the modernist or avant-garde movements of the early twentieth century had been aligned “inevitably” with the progressive history of western art. How did such figures understand their own contemporary moment? The broader context for such an enquiry is twofold. On one side, we have seen the emergence of the “new modernist studies” over the last two decades.²⁾ On the other, there have been parallel developments in the writing of Australian cultural history, revisionary accounts of Australian modernity, driven as much by internal pressures, such as the inadequacy of nationalist models, as by the influence of overseas developments. These new understandings of modernism and modernity have a particular resonance for places like Australia—and Japan—located at a distance from the main metropolitan centres of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century artistic and intellectual modernism, whether in London, Paris, or New York.

We can identify two key developments in the new modernist studies. First is a broadening of interest from modernism in the narrow sense of the term (focused on the most prominent literary and artistic movements) to the social and cultural impacts of modernity, including the new urban popular cultures and other social phenomena such as the rise of new forms of consumerism, new gender relations, and new patterns of work and leisure. The major journal in the field is called *Modernism/Modernity*, reflecting this new perspective. The weight has shifted from the first term to the second, from a narrow focus on modernist art and literature and their formal and intellectual histories to the broader field of the modern—in design, architecture, advertising, fashion and photography, in commercial, technological, and popular cultures.

Second, there has been a shift away from a simple center/periphery model, which sees modernism originating in the metropolitan centres and then over time finding its way out to the

¹⁾ My title is borrowed from Virginia Woolf’s essay of the same name, one of a series from the 1920s in which she reflects upon the present literary moment and its radical difference from the past. (The title had earlier been used by Robert Browning.) See David Bradshaw, ed., *Virginia Woolf: Selected Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 23–31.

²⁾ Douglas Mao and Rebecca Walkowitz, “The New Modernist Studies,” *PMLA* 123.3 (May 2008), 737–48.

“provinces” such as Australia, to something more like a network or circuit model, a distributed model in which modernism/modernity is seen to develop according to different timescales and trajectories in different parts of the world. This mode of understanding produces a picture of *multiple* modernities, in ways that are attentive to the specific cultural and social conditions of different centres across the globe. Phrases such as “vernacular modernities,” “provincial modernities,” “colonial modernities,” or “antipodean modernities” have emerged as ways of expressing this new sense of modernity’s transnational or transcultural development.³⁾

This second framework, in part a consequence of the first, offers new ways of understanding Australia’s relationship to the emergence of international modernity. Earlier approaches to modernism in Australia took their bearings from the “Greenwich Meridian” of European and Anglo-American high modernism,⁴⁾ or from a nationalist perspective tracing the slow evolution of a distinctive Australian culture that would be at once local, modern and mature. Indeed the two perspectives were often complementary, giving rise to a long history of pronouncements on the nation’s incipient modernity: the signs of modernity were gathering but had not yet, not quite, been consolidated; or alternatively, the latest successful artist or artifact was proof that the nation had finally made it.⁵⁾

These earlier models could only produce a sense of Australia’s distance and belatedness, its provincial status, in a strongly negative sense of the term. The new framework, we might say, produces a major shift in the time-space coordinates of modernity. The modernist or avant-garde paradigm can scarcely do other than produce a *deficit* model of Australian culture, as if we were condemned to be behind the times and therefore merely imitative, as if our destiny was always to be “catching up” but never fully adequate to the moment. The typical narratives produced by this formerly dominant model are those of belated emergence or of an embattled few modernist heroes, waving while drowning in a sea of reaction. In this very familiar model, itself a symptom of colonial or provincial status, geographical distance becomes cultural belatedness, as if being a long way away meant inevitably being a long way behind.

The two new perspectives in modernist studies manifest what Douglas Mao and Rebecca Walkowitz call the “spatial” and “vertical” expansion of the new modernist studies—modernism no longer restricted to the few, key metropolitan centres or to the few, key high-modernist artworks or movements.⁶⁾ Work on popular theatre and live entertainment,

³⁾ For example, Robert Dixon, *Photography, Early Cinema and Colonial Modernity: Frank Hurley’s Synchronized Lecture Entertainments* (London, Anthem, 2012); Robert Dixon and Veronica Kelly, eds, *The Impact of the Modern: Vernacular Modernities in Australia 1870s–1960s* (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2008); David Carter, “‘Literary, But Not Too Literary; Joyous, But Not Jazzy’: *Triad* Magazine, Antipodean Modernity and the Middlebrow,” *Modernism/Modernity*, forthcoming April 2018.

⁴⁾ Pascale Casanova, “Literature as a World,” *New Left Review* 31 (2005): 75.

⁵⁾ David Carter, *Always Almost Modern: Australian Print Cultures and Modernity* (Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2013), viii–x, 15–16.

⁶⁾ Mao and Walkowitz, “The New Modernist Studies,” 737.

cinema, radio and jazz, photography, craft and fine arts (especially women's engagement), architecture and design, advertising, fashion and consumption has fundamentally transformed these understandings.⁷⁾ In Susan Stanford Friedman's terms, modernism has been reframed as "a powerful domain within a particular modernity," here in its specific Australian time and place.⁸⁾

Thus the newer studies of modernity discover Australia's contemporaneity with the modernity of cultures elsewhere, its thorough implication in modernity's international networks of exchange, its "self-modernizing" capacities. As Jill Julius Matthews writes in her study of 1920s Sydney: "Rather than the last station on the line, a backwater ten years behind Europe and America as some both at the time and since have asserted, Sydney was a busy port of call in the ceaseless international ebb and flow of commerce and ideas that underpinned cosmopolitan modernity."⁹⁾ Engaged in this commerce, Australians forged identities "as modern Australians and modern citizens of the world."¹⁰⁾ Such arguments shift the time-space coordinates for understanding local, colonial or provincial modernities—antipodean modernities—even as they give more weight to just what the local or provincial might mean in a transnational framing. If Australia was provincial, there is little reason to assume it was more so than most of Britain, America or Europe (and given Australia's high levels of urbanization, some reason for assuming otherwise); and to discover Sydney or Melbourne's modernity is to discover in turn the "provincialism"—the localness rather than universality—of Paris, New York and London. Against the assumption that "modernity is first invented in the metropolitan centre and then exported to the colonial peripheries, which are always, by definition, belated," the new approaches reconfigure "the cultural landscape of empire or the world system as a set of interdependent sites, as a network of relations rather than a one-way transfer of culture and authority."¹¹⁾ Australia is revealed not simply as the passive, belated recipient of cultural imports but as an active participant in the global diffusion of popular—and unpopular—modernities. Even the imperial connection, seen merely as a constraining or corrupting factor from a cultural nationalist perspective, can be revisioned as a vector of modernity, "networking" Australians into the modern world that was in part already their own. In short, instead of the absence of modernism in early-mid 20th century Australia, we discover the presence of diverse forms of modernity, manifested not least in a busy print culture of newspapers, magazines and reviews.

⁷⁾ See Dixon, *Photography*; Dixon and Kelly, eds, *Impact of the Modern*; Jill Julius Matthews, *Dance Hall & Picture Palace: Sydney's Romance with Modernity* (Sydney: Currency, 2005); Ann Stephen, Philip Goad and Andrew McNamara, eds, *Modern Times: The Untold Story of Modernism in Australia* (Carlton: Meigunyah, 2008).

⁸⁾ Susan Stanford Friedman, *Planetary Modernisms: Provocations on Modernity Across Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 52.

⁹⁾ Matthews, *Dance Hall*, 8.

¹⁰⁾ Matthews, *Dance Hall*, 1.

¹¹⁾ Dixon, *Photography*, xxiii–xxiv.

Certainly in Australia there are many examples of anti-modernist polemic, misunderstanding, and general anxiety about modernity—as there were, of course, in all the great metropolitan centres and their immediate provinces. But to return to the archive itself, in my case to Australian periodicals of the early twentieth century and interwar years, is to be struck less by their parochialism or belatedness than by their contemporaneity and diversity. Across the range of magazines, there is much more a sense of “keeping up” (staying up-to-date) than of catching up, as modern Australian readers sought out the latest thing from London and via London the latest thing from other cultural capitals, New York, Paris and so on.

The new focus on plural and diverse modernities enables us to recover a wide range of materials previously ignored in the historical archive. Many of the general commercial magazines of the period, for example, were not especially sympathetic to modernist or avant-garde art but were nevertheless closely engaged with the modern marketplace and their own modern readers (and advertisers). Rather than simply criticising or dismissing such publications for not being fully modernist in spirit, it is much more productive to ask just how they understood and engaged with their own modern moment. Similarly, we can appreciate in new ways the “provincial modernities” of work influenced by modernism in the aesthetic realms of painting and literature. In Australia, for example, the novels of authors such as Eleanor Dark and Katharine Prichard from the 1920s and 1930s, which might once have been seen as falling short of full-blown modernist experimentation, can now be seen as local manifestations of modernist impulses. The stunningly modern artworks of painters such as Margaret Preston, Roland Wakelin or Grace Cossington-Smith, once seen as pale (or belated) imitations of European avant-gardiste works, can now be seen as modernist works in their own right, in their own cultural time and place. We can find very similar chronologies and stylistic adaptations in other provincial centres: in Scottish impressionism or Canadian modernism, in Chinese and Japanese modernism, indeed in the United States as well, before New York itself became a major centre for modernist/avant-garde art in the 1940s.

Print Culture and Modernity

My own interest in these areas began (within the old modernist paradigm) with trying to recover a buried history of avant-gardiste little magazines in Australia: magazines such as *Stream* (1931) which announced itself as a medium for “international art expression.”¹²⁾ *Stream* allied itself to Ezra Pound (being granted exclusive Australian rights to his new work); and in its final issue it announced a symposium on the “two rival aesthetics.” As the headline put it, “Paris or Moscow?” “Is individualist literature doomed? Is the collectivist idea capable

¹²⁾ *Stream* 1, no. 1 (July 1931): inside front cover. See Carter, *Always Almost Modern*, 119–23.

of supplanting it?”¹³⁾ What is revealing about this example is the sense that *these* were the questions that mattered most to artists, writers and intellectuals in Melbourne in 1931. A second wave of modernist little magazines appeared at the end of the decade, in the midst of war, most famously *Angry Penguins*, which in best modernist style published three poems called “Poem” in its first issue; or *A Comment*, which in its first issue announced proudly: “Our public, for the moment, is practically non-existent.”¹⁴⁾

More recently I have turned to more mainstream publications, the “general commercial magazines” that together with newspapers comprised print culture for most Australians. In relation to those publications that did take a sustained interest in books or art, my interest is in trying to recover what modernism or rather what the contemporary looked like from their perspective: how did the modern, the contemporary, look to writers, editors and critics in the 1920s and 1930s, *after* the first great wave of modernist experiments in literature and art, but *before* these developments had been consolidated as the mainstream, progressive history of western (or indeed global) art. How can we recapture their understanding of their own “contemporary modern” without just dismissing it from our later historical perspective, in particular from the perspective of an established, progressive “modern tradition”? What we now think of as central developments, such as cubism and futurism, might well have seemed to be marginal and fragmentary movements at the time, movements that had in fact already come and gone.

The examples I want to look at in detail for the remainder of this essay, *Art in Australia* (1916–42) and *Desiderata: A Guide to Good Books* (1929–1939) were more specialised than the general commercial magazines of the time—focused on the visual arts and books respectively—but both were pitched into this general magazine market rather than as coterie “little magazines” addressing a separate sphere of culture. They should be read as such, magazines addressing a public and a marketplace, and not as failed modernist journals, evidence only of Australia’s falling short of, falling behind, the modernist moment.

In the absence of robust book publishing and critical institutions, the magazines played a central role in mediating the diverse forms of modernity, even in their physical formats. Their heterogeneity was almost always in excess of their editorial platforms. It would not be plausible to claim that every commercial magazine is modern or modernising simply by being commercial, but some kind of pressure in that direction is exercised by their relation to their readers (and freelance contributors) and indeed by their periodicity, which attunes them to the present. In this perspective, what becomes significant is less the position of individuals or artefacts *on modernism* than their position *within modernity*, and this enables us to read the modernity of artefacts that are partly or wholly resistant to modernism, but engaged, nonetheless, with their present moment, as in the case for my two examples.

¹³⁾ *Stream* 1, no. 3 (September 1931): title page.

¹⁴⁾ *Angry Penguins* 1 (1941); *A Comment* 1 (September 1940): n.p.. Carter, *Always Almost Modern*, 139–40.

There is a danger in the new modernist studies of simply barracking for modernity—of claiming everything we can as modern and therefore as an unambiguously good thing because it was on the side of history—just as modernist studies are sometimes written as if we ourselves would always have been on the side of the progressive avant-gardes. But the least interesting approach to the material I am considering is simply to divide it into pro- and anti-modernist positions, those on the side of history and those stranded in the past. *We* know that the Irish painter William Orpen (1878–1931) did not become the great British artist of the twentieth century (although he has been reclaimed in Dublin), but how that looked in the mid-1920s, even if one were well informed about European modernism, is quite another matter. In any case, it is in part to ward off the danger of mere barracking that I am drawn to recalcitrant examples such as *Art in Australia* and *Desiderata*, neither overtly modernist, both, unequally, anti-modernist at times.

Art in Australia

When *Art in Australia* was founded in 1916 it was the first commercial magazine in Australia devoted to fine art and craft (apart from one short-lived late-nineteenth-century attempt) and it remained so across the interwar years.¹⁵⁾ Its founder-editor Sydney Ure Smith was a practising artist, art patron and entrepreneur, and, significantly, partner in Smith & Julius, Sydney's classiest advertising agency. Although the magazine reviewed art shows, its main aim was appreciation rather than criticism—although we do see the modern figure of the professional art critic emerge in its pages in later years. Despite its specialist focus, as suggested earlier it was directed at the public and the marketplace: its aim was “to bring artists into closer association with the picture buying public.”¹⁶⁾

Its significance for the present argument is its reputation, still, as the bastion of the conservative pastoral landscape tradition in Australian painting and hence the voice of anti-modernism, a reputation reinforced by the contrast with Ure Smith's other magazine of the time, the sometimes stunningly modern *Home* (1920–1942) celebrated for its vanguard role in promoting modern taste. Certainly, *Art in Australia* was central in the 1920s in establishing pastoral landscapes as the national tradition of Australian painting, but criticism has overlooked the fact that the bulk of the art works featured in the magazine's pages had no obvious connection to the nation. Landscape did not crowd out other genres, and an almost indiscriminate range of artists and styles were featured, from New Guinea shields to portraits and still lifes to artist Norman Lindsay's model ships. Still, the verdict of history

¹⁵⁾ See Nancy D. H. Underhill, *Making Australian Art 1916–49. Sydney Ure Smith as Art Patron and Publisher* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1991); Carter, *Always Almost Modern*, 45–66.

¹⁶⁾ *Art in Australia* 1 (1916): n.p.. Note that the numbering systems used by the magazine change across its life span from issue numbers to series/volume and issue numbers.

might reasonably be that the magazine is culpable in showing virtually no interest in any of the post-impressionist movements and in playing host to some of Australia's most militant anti-modernist polemicists. J. S. Macdonald's memorable phrase, that life in Australia should be lived as painter Arthur Streeton's canvases suggested, "with the maximum of flocks and the minimum of factories," found its natural home in *Art in Australia*.¹⁷⁾ Yet such views by no means add up the magazine's platform; or to put it the other way, its heterogeneity cannot be reduced to an anti-modernist position.

For the magazine also regularly aligned itself with modern tendencies in the arts, if not those tending towards abstraction. It followed the self-styled Contemporary Group in Australia, and published a special issue on the "new Australian landscape" as well as a special Margaret Preston number, celebrating (in modernist terms) the painter's "frank and primitive originality."¹⁸⁾ While it largely ignored European or American modernism, and did so consciously, it did report on emerging trends in English art and architecture and was constantly on the search for those developments in contemporary art that might give Australia a modern—or contemporary—art of its own. If its tastes were largely conservative, they were also largely contemporary. Pitched to the "picture buying public," there is little overt interest in tradition, and much more in working out the shape of the present.

Instead of simply scoring *Art in Australia* on the scale of modernity, then, I want to understand this sense of the "contemporary modern" manifested in the magazine. This understanding means returning to a moment when a wide range of different kinds of artists could all appear contemporary, if not all quite modern; to a moment when British artists such as Orpen or Augustus John could be seen as *more* contemporary than cubism or futurism, which could appear to have already come and gone. Among Australian artists, pastoral landscape painters such as Streeton, Hans Heysen and Elioth Gruner, overt anti-modernists such as Norman and Lionel Lindsay, and modernist artists such Roland Wakelin, Thea Proctor and Preston were all regulars in the magazine, although they have now been distributed on different sides of the modernist boundary-line. How did the present look in this moment—after impressionism, in a sense after post-impressionism, but before post-impressionist modernism had been consolidated as the inevitable outcome of art's progressive history? How did it strike contemporaries?

It is possible to discern a particular narrative of art's modern history across the magazine's diverse positions which defines as closely as anything its take on the present. While we might see this narrative as "always already belated" we need to take it seriously or risk our own form of anachronism. The present is defined, first, against Victorian academic painting, seen as decadent in its sentimental "picture making." Impressionism (or "realism") had provided the necessary corrective, returning art to its fundamental traditions of truth to nature and

¹⁷⁾ James S. MacDonal, *Art in Australia* 3, no. 40 (October 1931): 22.

¹⁸⁾ "A New Vision of Australian Landscape," *Art in Australia* 3, no. 17 (September 1926); Margaret Preston special issue, *Art in Australia* 3, no. 22 (December 1927).

individual vision, truth to light, form and atmosphere, rather than anecdote. This anti-academic revolution also defined the moment of Australian art, its emergence in the distinctive work of the late-nineteenth century “Australian Impressionists” (Streeton and Tom Roberts, among others), and we should not underestimate the novelty of the idea in the 1920s that Australian artists were part of this modern history of art. The notion that these still contemporary painters had established an Australian tradition was still emerging in the early twenties; and to be exercised by the question of how the landscape tradition would develop was by no means simply reactionary at this time.

But impressionism itself had eventually reached a dead end (so the story goes), losing itself in impression for its own sake, in extreme subjectivity or extreme abstraction, or, in the classic symptom of modernist excess, in the domination of theory over truth and beauty (Whistler, for example, was saved from his own theories only by his practice.) The present was in this limited sense “post-impressionist”:

The design of the impressionists was soft, fluid, vaporous, preferring atmosphere to outline. The modern movement seeks to give a rendering of nature that is firm, solid, definite. Unity, simplicity and strength are the qualities that the modern spirit seeks.¹⁹⁾

Post-impressionism at its worst took the tendency towards abstraction, subjectivity or fragmentation to extremes, but at its best it corrected the balance, rediscovering the principles of construction, form, and draughtsmanship that academic art had trivialised.

This was the moment at which *Art in Australia* positioned itself, a key moment of transition when the present was associated not with modernism or the avant-garde but with this new emphasis on draughtsmanship, design, form and “good drawing.” This was precisely the framework through which certain forms of modern art—in painting but also in craft and the decorative arts—could be valued, but also the framework within which a line could be drawn before modernism or “ultra-modernism.” On one side, it reaffirmed the traditional or universal values of good painting and drawing; on the other, it could accommodate post-impressionist experiments with colour, form and pattern in so far as these were seen as moving beyond the limits of impressionism, finding a way back to structure and draughtsmanship, but also, for some, taking them forward—clarifying true values, revivifying technique. Even Lionel Lindsay could write that “Modernism ... has been useful to art.”²⁰⁾ It was a position that could be at once post-impressionist and pre-impressionist in its tastes. The new practices, even if sometimes startling, were at best rediscovering, renewing, the common sense of the past. But exactly how this would work itself out remained an open question.

My interest, then, is to unpack this sense of contemporaneity and transition rather than simply dismiss the magazine as belated or reactionary in its anti-modernism. It aligned

¹⁹⁾ A. Radcliffe-Brown, “Margaret Preston and Transition,” *Art in Australia* 3, no. 22 (December 1927): n.p.

²⁰⁾ Lionel Lindsay, “Will Ashton,” *Art in Australia* 3, no. 6 (December 1923): n.p.

itself with certain trends in the British art world, from the Slade School and New English Art Club to contemporary painters, if not to cubism or post-impressionism (Roger Fry's essays on post-impressionism only appeared in book form in the late 1920s). It aligned itself with a still-evolving "modern" tradition in which British painting, and so potentially Australian painting, appeared to be in the mainstream. London critic P. G. Konody, a frequent correspondent for *Art in Australia*, expressed its sense of post-impressionism in describing the modern age positively as an "age of experiment," but then, in a recuperative gesture, describing its diversity of movements and *isms* as so many "experiments in beauty."²¹ Positively, there was "a rebellion into insistence on shape"; negatively, this was being pursued "through almost every exaggeration possible."

This history of the present also explains what might otherwise appear inexplicable, the magazine's championing of painter George Lambert as embodying the future direction of Australian art. Although aspects of Lambert's art have recently been reclaimed as following certain modernist principles, he probably strikes many today as primarily a painter of Edwardian-style portraits.²² Nonetheless, along with more experimental painters such as Roy de Mestre and Roland Wakelin, Lambert was seen to have corrected an imbalance in Australian art, even in the pastoral tradition. In the words of critic Basil Burdett, this was a bias towards "sensibility" at the cost of "an art of the intelligence."²³ This particular, perhaps unexpected emphasis was the characteristic note of modernity in *Art in Australia*, repeatedly dated to Lambert's return to Australia from Europe in 1921.

The message Lambert brought back from Europe was, in the simplest terms, the need for good technique: "Get your machinery first... Learn your trade... Stick to drawing and painting."²⁴ The force of this otherwise unremarkable message came from that sense of an unresolved contemporary moment suggested earlier, and the uncompromising, sometimes startlingly modern terms in which Lambert expressed it: "Forget about the mystery, and the greatness and the sacredness of art while you plug hard at learning your job, making a machine ... a human machine that can see and draw accurately."²⁵ It was this emphasis on technique and design that seemed most contemporary and that enabled Lambert, Gruner, de Mestre, Preston and others we now see in opposing camps to be taken together as representing contemporary Australian art. The new landscape painting was valued because it translated its vision "into the curt speech of the present day."²⁶ Preston sought the "utmost simplicity of form,"²⁷ again

²¹ P. G. Konody, "The Art of Gerald Moira," *Art in Australia* 11 (December 1921): n.p.

²² For a re-evaluation of Lambert's relation to modernism see Anne Gray, *George W. Lambert Retrospective: Heros and Icons* (Canberra: National Gallery of Australia, 2007), 41–43.

²³ Basil Burdett, "Roi de Mestre," *Art in Australia* 3, no. 16 (June 1926): 13.

²⁴ George W. Lambert, "A Painter's Advice to Students: A Talk by G. W. Lambert to the Students of the Sydney Art School on his Return to Sydney Recently," *Art in Australia* 2, no. 1 (February 1922): 9.

²⁵ Lambert, "Painter's Advice," 11.

²⁶ Editorial, *Art in Australia* 3, no. 17 (September 1926): 5.

²⁷ Radcliffe-Brown, "Margaret Preston," n.p.

one of the key notes of the contemporary modern, which was linked, as Lambert's words suggest, to a new sense of professionalism, separating out the serious artist from the rest, through technical training as much as vocation. The idea could be brutally unsentimental, as in Lambert's machine image or in Preston's famous essay "From Eggs to Electrolux," giving the notion of craft a distinctly modern resonance; but again it could also underwrite a conservative, representational aesthetic, pitched against "ultra-modernism."²⁸⁾

Writing of the Contemporary Group of Australian artists in 1929, Burdett drew a parallel between "the essential phase of Australian art at present and the reaction after French impressionism in Europe":

The ephemeral character of so much of the work being done ... its banality and lack of invention, has led [the Contemporary Group] to seek more permanent forms. In the search they have come to realise that observation is one thing and pictorial organisation another, a truth which was being lost sight of in the casual rendering of effects of light. So continuity is assured. Various aspects are exploited. Light, form, even movement, are analysed in the hands of divisionists, cubists, simultaneists. Disinterested art, for art's sake, is pursued until, like the divisionist's form, the semblance of things disappears entirely. But from them grow other things. Their discoveries are embodied in more traditional forms and made intelligible to a wider audience, and, through it all, we find that our apprehensions have been quickened and the world about us made more rich and vital.²⁹⁾

This is a fascinating play across the boundaries of modernity and tradition, discovering the logic of modernism *within* Australian art, while drawing it back into the logic of continuity, the renewal rather than rupture of traditional forms, and hence towards an art for a "wider audience."

Art in Australia found itself—or rather positioned itself—on the cusp of a new understanding of the contemporary. It delivered a reassuring discourse about good taste, common sense and established principles, but its editors and authors also worried away at the problem of the present, sorting out the productive possibilities of contemporary art from the merely ephemeral or dead-end. It found its moment in a set of key principles—draughtsmanship, professionalism, design, form, reduction to essentials—principles that were flexible enough to draw together a whole series of otherwise incommensurate styles, tastes, and positions. The deep history of European modernism was scarcely present to the magazine. It found its modernity, not in the avant-garde, but where tradition and modern developments intersected, folding back into each other or unfolding into something new. This set of principles cannot be reduced to a single position ("on modernism"), not only because of the magazine's

²⁸⁾ Margaret Preston, "From Eggs to Electrolux," *Art in Australia* 3, no. 22 (December 1927): n.p.

²⁹⁾ Basil Burdett, "Some Contemporary Australian Artists," *Art in Australia* 3, no. 29 (September 1929): n.p.

diverse contents, but also because of the way it was positioned institutionally, in the print culture and marketplace of its time, before the separate institutions of high modern culture had been established in Australia.

Desiderata: A Guide to Good Books

To turn to the literary field, a very similar case can be argued about my second example, *Desiderata*, a book review magazine launched in Adelaide in 1929 by the bookseller John Preece.³⁰⁾ Like Sydney Ure Smith, Preece, as a bookseller, was professionally connected to the marketplace; and, again like Ure Smith, he was close to the anti-modernist Lindsays (Norman Lindsay and Lionel Lindsay, artists as well as commentators and critics). Preece's own politics appear to have been Anglo-conservative and his literary tastes largely Edwardian, in Virginia Woolf's sense of the term.³¹⁾ He shared the common estimation of John Galsworthy as the generation's most significant novelist. Nonetheless, the magazine's constant focus was "current literature" in much the same way that *Art in Australia* focused on contemporary art. Its aim was not only to provide "guidance concerning good and important books," but also "further criticisms" to help readers in their selection of books, chosen, by the editor and his reviewers, with "thought and discrimination."³²⁾ These are unremarkable aims, and yet they have a particular period resonance—a particular middlebrow resonance—for they are symptomatic of an apprehension that good books were being squeezed on two sides: by modernist experimentation on one side and by popular fiction and bestsellerdom on the other. Worthy writing was under pressure from the narrowing of literature pursued by high modernism and its profligate broadening in the popular marketplace. The literary present was thus experienced as a time of surfeit and a time of lack simultaneously. It was a time when "too many good books lie unnoticed on the shelves ... hidden by the heavy stock of best sellers"; when "the word masterpiece ... is misapplied to everything from a cocktail to a negroid dance"; and when the "majority of modern novels" were marked by "bitter disillusionment and contempt for everything" or else by "verbal dialectics [and] vibrational reproductions of life."³³⁾ Where would the enduring works of the present and future be found?

Like *Art in Australia*, *Desiderata* constantly sought to know what the present looked like

³⁰⁾ David Carter, "Modernising Anglocentrism: *Desiderata* and Literary Time," in *Republics of Letters: Literary Communities in Australia*, ed. Peter Kirkpatrick and Robert Dixon (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2012), 85–98.

³¹⁾ Woolf, "Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown," in Bradshaw, *Virginia Woolf*, 32–36.

³²⁾ Editorial, *Desiderata* 1 (August 1929): n.p.

³³⁾ Quotations in this sentence in order from review of Elsa de Szasz, *The Temple on the Hill*, *Desiderata* 1 (August 1929): 20; review of John Galsworthy, *Maid in Waiting*, *Desiderata* 10 (November 1931): 21–22; review of Richard Hughes, *A High Wind in Jamaica*, *Desiderata* 3 (February 1930): 27–28.

and how the Australian present might relate to its progressive tendencies. It kept a watching brief on Australian literature—at a time when a series of new “modern” novels began to appear—but its concerns were scarcely nationalist. Rather, it assumes that Australian writing and reading occurs in the same contemporary time and space as current English books. In November 1929, Preece announced a new London Letter to be written by celebrity novelist, publisher and patron of modernist art, Michael Sadlier, “setting forth the latest movements in literature” (unfortunately this new feature never appeared).³⁴ In May 1932, the magazine drew readers’ attention to English critic Harold Nicolson’s BBC talk “The New Spirit in Literature.” It mediated the “new spirit” for Australian readers:

In Australia we have not been altogether neglectful of these new spirits. Among those specially cited by Mr Nicolson are Mrs Virginia Woolf, Aldous Huxley, T. S. Eliot, David Garnett, Lytton Strachey, Sacheverell Sitwell, Stella Benson, and James Joyce. All of these are known if not familiar to the Australian reading public — even James Joyce, to those who have been so fortunate as to escape the too wary eye of the censor; they are known by their more notable works, though we may have been impatient with some of their efforts that frankly have proved to be beyond our understanding.³⁵

As the last phrase suggests, the new spirit in literature could be accepted only up to a point. Nonetheless the magazine’s credentials in the field of modern literature are impressive. In the first issue it featured Sylvia Townsend Warner on T. F. Powys, and positive reviews of Eugene O’Neill (“His work is torrential, prodigal, reckless, full of colour, passion, and movement ... And with the restless violence ... goes a delight in experiment”), of *All Quiet on the Western Front* as the greatest war book, of Australian author Katharine Susannah Prichard’s *Coonardoo* (“The fact that [her] prose is not sophisticated gives her book extraordinary strength”), and of Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando*: ‘if Mrs Woolf’s exquisite prose is read in the right spirit, ... we will recognize her genius and the definite place which she has established for herself in the literature of the age.’³⁶ Woolf, indeed, was a particular favourite. An excerpt from her “Beau Brummell” appeared in the magazine’s third number, which sold out because of it; *A Room of One’s Own* was reviewed positively in May 1930 and *The Common Reader* in February 1933. It appears Preece forwarded an early issue of *Desiderata* to Woolf herself, who responded in a letter reproduced in part on a subscription flyer for the magazine: “I have read the copy of *Desiderata* with pleasure. I think it is admirably got up, and has so much of interest in it that it

³⁴ Editorial, *Desiderata* 2 (November 1929): 3.

³⁵ “Editorial: The New Spirit in Literature,” *Desiderata* 12 (May 1932): 3.

³⁶ From *Desiderata* 1 (August 1929): Warner on Powys (untitled), 9–11; Alex Symons, “Eugene O’Neill’s *Strange Interlude*,” 15–16; “*All Quiet on the Western Front*,” 23–24; review of *Coonardoo*, 28; J.L.P., “*Orlando*,” 22–23.

should certainly help people to know what books are the best at the moment.”³⁷⁾

Subsequent issues included positive appreciations of contemporary American, British and European authors such as Joseph Hergesheimer, Richard Aldington, J. B. Priestley, Norman Douglas, Thornton Wilder, Charles Morgan, Arnold Bennett, Francis Brett Young, Robert Graves, Storm Jameson, D. H. Lawrence, Robert Bridges, Henry Handel Richardson, Sinclair Lewis, Rosamund Lehmann, Ernest Hemingway (*Fiesta* was a “brilliant modern novel”), Aldous Huxley (“every phrase and idea is sharp as the dissecting knife of a scientist”), and Nobel Prize winner Sigrid Undset (“one of the greatest modern novelists”).³⁸⁾ In 1932, Preece’s bookshop published a pamphlet on T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, a poem Preece himself declared “undoubtedly the most important of our generation.”³⁹⁾

Clearly this list includes some authors who failed to become “modern classics,” indeed some, like Bennett and Priestley, against whom inter-war modernism was explicitly defined. Nonetheless, it offers an account of the literary present that is neither reactionary nor belated.

In November 1934, the magazine lists the very few “great” novels of recent years, defined, again in middlebrow terms, as “the few novels that have had the power of taking us out of ourselves, that we have talked of with pleasure to our friends, read with delight, and finished with regret.”⁴⁰⁾ The listed novels were Priestley’s *The Good Companions*, Morgan’s *The Fountain*, Undset’s *Kristin Lavransdatter*, Bennett’s *Imperial Palace*, Constance Home’s *The Lonely Plough*, Galsworthy’s *Maid in Waiting*, Mary Webb’s *Precious Bane*, and Hugh Walpole’s *Rogue Herries*. Almost all are now forgotten, but again it would be anachronistic to see such preferences as reactionary or provincial. Again we need an act of historical imagination to enter into the mind of a “discriminating” reader of the early 1930s confronted with a wide array of modern literature in a time before the verdict of history had been announced. The great modernists came to the bulk of their contemporaries as a few among many, a minor note in a crowded literary marketplace. In a review of the fiction of 1931, for example, Woolf’s *The Waves* was highlighted as a novel “deserving of mention,” but it appeared alongside works by Galsworthy, Walpole, Aldington, Brett Young, Clemence Dane, Esther Meynell, Stella Benson, Vita Sackville-West, Philip Gibbs, Edna Ferber, E. M. Delafield, G. B. Stern, Vicki Baum, and Margaret Kennedy.⁴¹⁾ This was what “modern literature” looked like in February 1932.

The magazine’s quiet modernity is present not just in its close attention to the “new spirit” but also in the way it senses a critical moment of transition across a generational divide —

³⁷⁾ Subscription flyer inserted in a copy of the magazine held in the Fryer Library, University of Queensland.

³⁸⁾ Rev. of *Fiesta*, *Desiderata* 3 (February 1930): 28; R. Brewster-Jones, “*The Cicadas*, by Aldous Huxley,” *Desiderata* 9 (August 1931): 15; Editorial, *Desiderata* 3 (February 1930): 4 (for comment on Undset).

³⁹⁾ C. R. Jury, *T. S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land”: Some Annotations* (Adelaide: F. W. Preece, 1932). Noted in *Desiderata* 14 (November 1932): 20.

⁴⁰⁾ “This Little World,” *Desiderata* 21 (November 1934): 12.

⁴¹⁾ “Editorial: English Fiction in 1932,” *Desiderata* 11 (February 1932): 5–7.

something it shares with Woolf of course.⁴²⁾ As one reviewer put it: “The old traditional world of literature has broken down. Some there are still holding the outer defences, but they are few. Men and women alike have been pursuing a policy of realism in art that long ago broke down all romantic conceptions of life and made the factual the goal.”⁴³⁾ Like *Art in Australia*, *Desiderata* expressed little nostalgia. The Victorian period, for all its great achievements, was now irrevocably on the other side of history, on the other side of modernism. But it could also appear, again, as if modernism was ephemeral rather than enduring, that it had had its impact but was now fading, that it had left the future open. This is the aspect of the magazines’ contemporaneity I want to emphasise, this sense that the modernist experiments had already happened, had come and gone (or at least were on their way out), and that the question of how literature would re-form and renew itself remained unresolved.

“After” modernism, the effect of Priestley’s *The Good Companions*, for example, was like the “clear and bracing atmosphere” after a storm breaks, “clearing English fiction after the period of novels, good and bad, of psychological analyses, of sociological problems, and of entanglements and ‘soul scratchings.’”⁴⁴⁾ The period of radical experimentation had made its mark, breaking with the decadence of late-Victorianism: “the twentieth century [had] seen great advances in the technique of the novel,” and “modern fiction [had] become the most flexible and mobile instrument ever used in literature ... the vehicle for much of the best thinking of our time.”⁴⁵⁾ But what came next? What came after modernism? And what of permanent value would remain?

While Lawrence, Joyce, Huxley and Woolf were widely acknowledged as major figures, their status as models for the future was much less certain. Despite the advances, the present seemed diminished, uncertain, suspended between old and new. Criticism had yet to find a true perspective:

New discoveries are being heaped upon us, whether they are in science or in the detailed analyses of inhibitions and the at-present fashionable abnormalities of mankind. Presumably there are fashions in science, apparently there are fashions in vice, certainly there are fashions in literature. These “new” things are thrust before our notice. To-day a fashion reigns supreme: tomorrow will find it swept into oblivion. The sound writers of a very few years back are resting in a sort of literary purgatory. There is a haze about them. They are beyond the mark of to-day’s critics whose shafts are aimed at easier

⁴²⁾ Woolf’s famous remark that “on or about December 1910 human character changed” first appeared in the essay “Character in Fiction” (1924) which was later combined with “Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown” (1923) and published under the latter title by the Hogarth Press in 1924. See Bradshaw, *Virginia Woolf*, xxvi, 38.

⁴³⁾ I. M. Foster, “Poets and Prophets,” *Desiderata* 28 (May 1936): 10.

⁴⁴⁾ Review of J. B. Priestley, *Angel Pavement*, *Desiderata* 6 (November 1930): 12.

⁴⁵⁾ “The Natural Background in Fiction,” *Desiderata* 10 (November 1931): 6; review of Esther Meynell, *Time’s Door*, *Desiderata* 24 (May 1935): 9.

victims. They are waiting to go to their rightful niches.⁴⁶⁾

In conclusion, in summing up the contemporary “Georgian” literary scene, the author, likely Preece himself, defends his position in between old and new: “Not all who are modern are pretentious, and all who are old-fashioned are not what one of Huxley’s characters calls ‘rather second-rate.’”⁴⁷⁾

Conclusion

The point of these examples is to establish that one did not need to be reactionary or merely complacent to be unconvinced about modernism’s staying power or to imagine that the future lay in continuity rather than endless disruption. The lack of a full commitment to modernism or the avant-garde was not the opposite of a committed interest in contemporary culture; for all their caution, even conservatism (and Anglocentrism), the magazines cannot simply be dismissed as anti-modernist, belated or provincial. They were closely and continuously engaged with their own contemporaneity.

Art in Australia and *Desiderata*, of course, are only two examples, and with their respective concentration on the visual arts and literature they are scarcely typical of the range of magazines with a broad interest in culture at this time in Australia. And yet I think we can generalise from them a position “within modernity” that was quite broadly shared across the commercial print world of the interwar years, one that must be taken into any account of Australia’s modernity and its provincialism, and one that complicates our own relations to the modern or modernist tradition. That tradition had yet to be fully articulated; the contemporary cultural scene was a mix of residual, dominant and emerging forms and tendencies, in Raymond Williams’s terms, and the critical institutions forming these into a modern tradition were only beginning to emerge.⁴⁸⁾ On a larger, transnational scale, these examples will also find many resonances in magazines and cognate forms of cultural engagement in other “provincial” settings in this period, in other times and places beyond the metropolitan centres, and indeed in many publications from within those very centres.

⁴⁶⁾ “The Georgian Literary Scene,” *Desiderata* 25 (August 1935): 12.

⁴⁷⁾ “Georgian Literary Scene,” 12.

⁴⁸⁾ Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 121–27.