



## Aliens invade culture

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Melinda Camber Porter

The American writers and artists who emerge from Robert Crunden's hefty volume are a sad lot. Born into a country that was suspicious of artists, and valued, above all, religious propriety and business acumen, these "modernists" were actually misfits, unable to make money and usually unable to believe. The likes of T.S. Eliot, Hilda Doolittle (HD) and Robert Frost ended up in London or Paris, and found themselves treated with disdain as ugly Americans abroad. Lady Ottoline Morrell thought T.S. Eliot "dull, dull, dull...I felt him monotonous without and within...he's obviously very ignorant of England."

Pound, who managed to worm his way into W.B. Yeats's literary gatherings and hold court, was described by D.H. Lawrence as "a detestable person but needs watching" and by Wyndham Lewis as someone who was and always would be violently American." Henry James, on breakfasting with the painter James Whistler, a fellow American expatriate in London, described him a "queer little Londonized Southerner."

Professor Crunden is no more understanding of the endless array of writers, painters, photographer and musicians whom he terms "modernist" and dumps into his melting pot of anecdotes. From Alfred Stieglitz's 291 Gallery in New York to the jazz musicians of New Orleans; from William James' philosophy to Eugene O'Neill's debut at the Provincetown Playhouse; from D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* to Edgard Varses's symphonies, almost every notable artist and artistic event is curiously summarized and added to this chronicle of elevated gossip.

Crunden does hanker after a theme that will give some cohesion to his potted biographies of Henry James, William James and James Whistler, to his drab evocations of Mabel Dodge's New York salon, and the Stein clan's influential Parisian salons, or the salons of Walter and Louis Arensberg where Man Ray, Wallace Stevens and William Carlos Williams met.

He finds his theme in the term modernism. But little understanding of the aesthetics of modernism, or of the kind of world that inspired and infuriated these artists, is forthcoming. Mainly, Crunden terms them outsiders and "neurotics." A predilection for psychosomatic complaints could be considered as a useful defining characteristic of his collection modernist misfits such H.L. Mencken and William James.

Crunden's favored definition of modernism is "a collection of various new languages, or means of expression, which outsiders developed to express their sense of alienation." But the famous credos of ro-



manticism were also the views of proud pariahs from society who rejected the materialistic values of their age. From Ovid to Voltaire, from Socrates to Oscar Wilde, has it not often been the chosen fate of the writer and artist to be an outsider? Certainly the fate of Crunden's modernists was a good deal kinder than those of their forebears who chose to question the assumptions of their age.

Similarly, the seminal influence of salons and their truly magnetic appeal is never explored in depth. "Salons, charming as they are," writes Crunden, "come and go." One longs to delve into the very nature of salon life, to understand the inspirational support that a community of like minds could offer to the dispossessed experimental artist who often had no audience, except for his salon confreres.

Crunden's reductionist criticism, his habit of categorizing without elucidating his categories, points to the serious defects implicit in much academic terminology. For the critical label, be it "modernism" or "romanticism" never does come close to evoking the work of the creative artist. When members of the so-called *Nouvelle Vague* of film makers heard that they had been classified as a group with a label, they protested. It was the invention of journalist, they said. Unwittingly, Crunden has done us a service by making us wonder whether such terms as "modernism" really mean anything at all.

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