

Sporting Modernism

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I'm not sure what I was expecting to turn up when I elected to investigate for you the topic of sporting modernism. I've always envied Kate Flint for being able to include in her cv an essay with the title 'Virginia Woolf and the General Strike' (Flint 1986) and won't pretend that I didn't dream a little of striking out a title on similar lines:— 'Proust and Sprinting', 'Mallarmé and the Modern Pentathlon', 'Dissociation of Sensibility and the 1923 FA Cup Final', that kind of thing.

Force Plays Grace

The very fact that to bring modernism and sport together in this way produces such a comic scrape of registers is of course the point, if a somewhat unpromising one for my purposes. Andrew Lang once wrote of the lavendered accents of Pater's *Miscellaneous Essays* that it was 'like a voice out of another world than ours; a world, I fear, where I should long to do something violently natural — to shout, and throw stones, and disarrange things in general, and talk in a boisterous manner about sporting events' (Lang 1896, 77). (Fishing or golf would probably have been Lang's choice.) Of course, there is a certain style of sternly Attic athleticism to which Pater is himself drawn, especially in a later essay like 'The Age of Athletic Prizemen', which saw that it was 'the very ideal of the quoit-player, the cricketer, not to give expression to mind, in any antagonism to, or invasion of, the body; to mind as anything more than a function of the body, whose healthful balance of functions it may so easily perturb; - to disavow that insidious enemy of the fairness of the bodily soul as such' (Pater 1903, 305). Still, one suspects that dotting on curly-haired discoboli was just the kind of thing to have made Andrew Lang's moustache bristle. Lang's counter to the steamy, preening decadence of Pater was 'King Romance', the burly popular tradition of adventurous novel-writing, exemplified in the work H. Rider Haggard, that he championed.

One might say that boisterous talk about sporting events is similarly like a voice from another world for modernism and modernist studies. Since the 1970s, when historians and sociologists began to pay serious attention to the

development of sport and its place in cultural and political life, it has become clear that mass spectator sport was one of the most salient and defining features of urban modernity. Sport was not merely modernised in the twentieth century: in a sense what we now mean by sport was the invention of the twentieth century, and, reciprocally, sport was one of the most distinctive ways in which the modernity of the twentieth century was produced. It seems odd that, when so many other features of modern leisure and popular entertainment – gramophones, radio, cinema, shopping, tourism – should have aroused the curiosity of cultural historians interested in the sometimes tense relations between artistic modernism and sociopolitical modernity, there should seem to have been so little to say about sport. The reason for this may be quite simple, namely that, Anglo-American literary and cultural modernism at least is distinguished by a conspicuous lack of interest in sport; if there really were a secret or unremarked preoccupation with sport, it would certainly have been detected before now. Still, at the very least, this consistent and, as it may seem, almost principled or definitional inattention or allergy to sport might itself repay the effort of trying to account for it. Why a room of one's own, but never, as it seems, a gym of one's own?

One can begin by suggesting two reasons for this. The first was that sport was so tied up with Victorian and more particularly Edwardian ideals of manliness and Empire against which, for example, Bloomsburyite modernism defined itself. There can indeed be little doubt of the importance of the British Empire both in codifying and spreading team games across the world, most importantly football and cricket, and no doubt either of how central a part of the inherited old world of Victorian seriousness and buttoned-up propriety sport was. Lytton Strachey ended his chapter on Thomas Arnold in his *Eminent Victorians* by reminding his readers that, for all his formative role in the establishment of the English public school ethos, Dr Arnold was no adherent of the cult of games; and yet this has been his legacy and that of his school. Strachey looks forward to a life beyond, as there was a life before, the compulsory sporting life:

The earnest enthusiast who strove to make his pupils Christian gentlemen and who governed his school according to the principles of the Old Testament has proved to be the founder of the worship of athletics and the worship of good form. Upon those two poles our public schools have turned for so long that we have almost come to believe that such is their essential nature, and that an English public schoolboy who wears the wrong clothes and takes no interest in football is a contradiction in terms. Yet it was not so before Dr Arnold; will it always be so after him? We shall see. (Strachey 2003, 168)

Strachey's book appeared in 1918, at the end of a disastrous war, which began to disestablish the link between sporting and military adventure, though for modernist writers and artists the association remained, ludicrous and contemptible. Kipling had a late Victorian's appetite for games – he is credited by the US Golf Association with inventing the game of snow golf (red balls and cups for holes) while resident in Vermont from 1892-6, and even to have introduced skiing there, with a pair of skis brought across to him by Arthur Conan Doyle. But he was also sardonic about the association between sport and Empire. The link between war, sport and poetry established by poems like Henry Newbolt's 'Vitai Lampada' ('There's a breathless hush in the Close to-night') had much to do with the discrediting of sporting ideals among anti-Edwardian modernists. Newbolt himself grew uneasy with the use that was made of his poem during the First World War: it certainly had its imitators, such as Eric Wilkinson's poem 'Rugby Football', which appeared in the anthology *The Muse in Arms* in 1918:

Can you hear the call? Can you hear the call
 That drowns the roar of Krupp?
 There are many who fight and many who fall
 Where the big guns play at the Kaiser's ball,
 But hark! - can you hear it? Over all -
 Now, School! Now, School! Play up!

Virginia Woolf was surprisingly not entirely without sporting predilections: she writes in 'A Sketch of the Past' of her early delight in sea-fishing, which was dissipated by her father's expressed dislike of it, but tells us that 'from the memory of my own passion I am still able to construct the sporting passion. It is one of those invaluable seeds – for it is impossible to have every experience, one must make do with seeds – germs of what might have been' (Woolf 1976, 116). She noted a similar passion for a solitary sport in her biography of Roger Fry that he was 'passionately fond of skating – it was indeed the only thing approaching to a sport that he cared for' (Woolf 1940, 20). But she seems to have regarded organised team games with revulsion, seeing them as an essential part of the soul-bruising *anomie* of the modern world. Septimus Smith's employer advises him to take up football to make him less delicate, and football remains closely impacted with the pathological change brought about in him by his service in the First World War: 'There in the trenches the change which Mr. Brewer desired when he advised football was produced instantly; he developed manliness; he was promoted; he drew the attention, indeed the affection of his officer, Evans by name' (Woolf 1992a, 75). He also catastrophically loses the

capacity to feel. At the centre of *The Waves* is the doomed, slightly ludicrous figure of Percival, whose single-minded concentration on the victory in the game is evoked with admiring envy by Neville:

‘Percival has gone now,’ said Neville. ‘He is thinking of nothing but the match... He will throw off his coat and stand with his legs apart, with his hands ready, watching the wicket. And he will pray, “Lord let us win”; he will think of one thing only, that they should win. (Woolf 1980, 32-3)

Another reason for the suspicion of or indifference to sport among English literary modernists was the fact that there was another kind of modernism which put sport at the centre of its overcoming of the past and overturning of inherited values. Sport was of conspicuous interest to what might be called ‘muscular modernism’, the modernism of the futurists, the Russian constructivists and of certain strains of fascist modernism. Marinetti’s first futurist manifesto of 1909 set sporting energies against the ‘pensive immobility, ecstasy, and sleep’ of the past, exalting ‘aggressive action, a feverish insomnia, the racer’s stride, the mortal leap, the punch and the slap’ (Harrison and Wood 1992, 147). Not surprisingly, it was the machinery of modern sports, bicycles, racing cars and aeroplanes, that most excited Marinetti, in his *Toad-of-Toad-Hall* autophilia: ‘A racing car whose hood is adorned with great pipes, like serpents of explosive breath – a roaring car that seems to ride on grapeshot is more beautiful than the *Victory of Samothrace*’ (Harrison and Wood 1992, 147). The equation of machines with sport runs the other way round too, encompassing the grandeur of ‘bridges that stride the rivers like giant gymnasts, flashing in the sun with a glitter of knives’ (Harrison and Wood 1992, 147-8). The only English Futurist Manifesto, ‘Vital English Art’, written by Marinetti and Christopher Nevinson, and published in the *Observer*, June 7, 1914, extolled the virtues of sport and adventure. Wyndham Lewis, whose contrarian impulses might, one would think, have led him to affirm the value of sport, in fact included it as one of the many things about the modern world to be ‘blasted’, perhaps precisely because of its associations with the old, foggy world of Victorian repression, or, alternatively, because the futurists’ embrace of it. (Or both.)

Woolf was quick to discern (it was not hard) and recoil from the valorisation of athletic strength and speed in fascism. In a passage written in preparation for *A Room of One’s Own*, she activated the chain of associations that by this time had become axiomatic with her – modernity, militarism, mechanism, masculinism:

The male is completely dominant in Italy...wherever there is a blank wall large enough {for a} to display a poster, some vast sheet proclaims {[there?]} some} the triumphs of the aviator or the general incites the sons of the state to heroism. It is all very {sterile} airless & dry (I mean to a woman) & apparently I thought, remembering Rome; but while all this {what} street drumming & trampling makes the body harder and more athletic what effect does it have upon {poetry,} the mind? (Woolf 1992b, 160)

Woolf famously found it difficult to see in fascism much more than an amplification of the patriarchal values of her own class:

It is the masculine values that prevail. Speaking crudely, football and sport are “important”; the worship of fashion, the buying of clothes “trivial.” And these values are inevitably transferred from life to fiction. This is an important book, the critic assumes, because it deals with war. This is an insignificant book because it deals with the feelings of women in a drawing-room. A scene in a battlefield is more important than a scene in a shop – everywhere and much more subtly the difference of value persists. (Woolf 1981, 73-4)

So, in one sense, the question of sport sharply divides modernism, into two quite clear, and quite familiar idioms, which might be characterised as the modernism of force and the modernism of grace. On the one hand there are the values of dynamism, speed, striving, record-breaking and Nietzschean overcoming, as expressed in futurism, Russian constructivism, in the fascist delight in ecstasy, impulse and energy, and in antirationalist cults of ecstasy, orgy and argy-bargy (Bataille, Leiris). On the other hand, there are the values of perception, sensitivity, refinement, suppleness and significant form. From the viewpoint of the brawny modernists of force, the formalists were lifeless, vapid, invertebrate, degenerate pansies. From the viewpoint of the more graceful modernists, the others were crude, bullying and robotically formalised hulks.

But though the modernists of form were opposed to most forms of athletics, they cultivated their own forms of athletic aesthetic. John Carey has observed that some of this was encouraged by the popularity of Nietzsche, whose images of icy, aerial supremacy not only encouraged the pursuit of mountaineering among intellectuals like Leslie Stephen, but also programmed a lofty and strenuous rhetoric to describe the practice of art and the person of the artist, as in Clive Bell’s evocation of ‘the austere and thrilling raptures of those who have

climbed the cold, white peaks of art', in contrast to those who cling to 'the snug foothills of warm humanity' (Bell 1914, 32-3). Quoting these words, Carey observes that 'Bell's language figures himself and fellow aesthetes as engaged upon dangerous and energetic pursuits, when in fact they are merely reading books or looking at pictures' (Carey 1992, 74-5)

There was also a more than implicit athleticism to be found in the praise of the formal tensions, the 'intricately wrought composure' formed by works of art (Richards 1926, 32). Richards was influenced by Vernon Lee's 'psychological aesthetics', a theory of art based upon the tonic or health-giving properties of complex, but formally bound movements or implied movements. The appreciation of visual art for Vernon Lee was the participation in a kind of dance. To look at a landscape aesthetically is to be 'satisfied with the wonderfully harmonised scheme of light and colour, the pattern (more and more detailed, more and more co-ordinated with every additional exploring glance) of keenly thrusting, delicately yielding lines, meeting as purposefully as if they had all been alive and executing some great, intricate dance' (Lee 1913). There is no more characteristic and expressive word in the Leavisite lexicon than the adjective 'sinewy' – which is used to suggest at once strength, endurance and flexibility. Sinews are more refined than muscles; they are livelier and more alert than bone and body mass. They represent a distinctively masculine kind of subtly-directed energy. In contrast to the musclebound colossi of the fascist phantasmagoria, an ideal Leavisite writing was agile and whippet-like, full of supple, coiled surprise.

It was this which enabled the more aestheticist kind of modernist to claim that they represented a higher kind of health, as opposed to the stunted or crudely blundering forms of emotional life represented by the brawnier embodiments of the sporting impulse. W.B. Yeats seems to make this kind of claim in some advice he gave to Olivia Shakespeare about the character of Gerald in her novel *Beauty's Hour*:

Might he not be one of the vigorous fair haired, boating, or cricket playing young men, who are very positive, & what is called manly, in external activities & energies & wholly passive & plastic in emotional & intellectual things? I met just such a man last winter. I had suspected before that those robust masks hid often and often a great emotional passivity and plasticity but this man startled me. He was of the type of those who face the cannons mouth without a tremour but kill themselves rather than face life without some girl with pink cheeks, whose character they have never understood, whose soul they have

never perceived, & whom they would have forgotten in a couple of months. Such people are very lovable for both their weakness & their strength appear pathetic; and your clever heroine might well love him. Letter to Olivia Shakespeare, 6 August 1894 (Yeats 1986, 396)

Something of the same critique is to be found in Woolf's characterisation of the cricket team in *The Waves*, which makes the associations between cricket and the dissolution of individuality in war clear.

'The boasting boys,' said Louis, 'have gone now in a vast team to play cricket. They have driven off in their great brake, singing in chorus. All their heads turn simultaneously at the corner by the laurel bushes. Now they are boasting. Larpent's brother played football for Oxford; Smith's father made a century at Lords. Archie and Hugh; Parker and Dalton; Larpent and Smith – the names repeat themselves; the names are the same always. They are the volunteers; they are the cricketers; they are the officers of the Natural History Society. They are always forming into fours and marching in troops with badges on their caps; they salute simultaneously passing the figure of their general. How majestic is their order, how beautiful is their obedience! If I could follow, if I could be with them, I would sacrifice all I know. But they also leave butterflies trembling with their wings pinched off, they throw dirty pocket-handkerchiefs clotted with blood screwed up into corners...Peeping out from behind a curtain, I note the simultaneity of their movements with delight. If my legs were reinforced by theirs, how they would run! If I had been with them and won matches and rowed in great races, and galloped all day, how I should thunder out songs at midnight! In what a torrent the words would rush from my throat! (Woolf 1980, 31-2)

But there is another kind of triumph that precedes Louis's vision of the cricketing team, and seems less tainted, though it too involves ecstatic loss of self. It is Jinny's delight at having won the game of tennis:

'I have won the game,' said Jinny. 'Now it is your turn. I must throw myself on the ground and pant. I am out of breath with running, with triumph. Everything in my body seems thinned out with running and triumph. My blood must be bright red, whipped up, slapping against my ribs. My soles tingle, as if wire rings opened and shut in my feet. I see every blade of grass very clear. But the pulse drums so in my forehead, behind my eyes, that everything dances – the net, the grass; your faces leap like butterflies; the trees seem to dance up and down. There is

nothing staid, nothing settled, in this universe. All is rippling, all is dancing; all is quickness and triumph.’ (Woolf 1980, 31)

The dichotomy between the modernism of force and the modernism of grace helps to explicate the most important of the ways in which sport was entangled with understandings of the modern, namely in the idea of the machine, and the mechanised regulation of the administered society. Many conservative, organicist and fascist writers who identified sport with energy, impulse and dynamism saw in it a response to this mechanisation. One of the most emphatic of these was José Ortega y Gasset, whose *Meditations on Hunting* affirms the aristocratic transcendence of or contempt for the realm of social necessity. In a later essay of 1940, Gasset provided a restatement of the opposition between sport and rationality, in the form of a bizarre speculation on the origins of the State itself. The central principle animating Gasset’s essay is the irreducibility of life to utility. Where utilitarian considerations bring about adaptation and the meeting of means and ends, life consists essentially in excess - ‘the first and original activity of life is always spontaneous, effusive, overflowing... in the beginning there is vigor and not utility’ (Gasset 1961, 16, 31). Gasset identifies the sportive instinct with this joyous excess, rather than with labour: ‘Sportive activity seems to us the foremost and creative, the most exalted, serious, and important part of life, while labor ranks second as its derivative and precipitate. Nay more, life, properly speaking, resides in the first alone; the rest is relatively mechanic and a mere functioning’ (Gasset 1961, 18). Gasset proposes in his essay an intriguing variation on Freud’s account in *Totem and Taboo* of the inauguration of neurotic guilt in the murder of the patriarch in the primal horde; Gasset’s focus is on the ‘erotic impetus’ which leads young males in the horde to begin to covet females of alien hordes. Since these other hordes are unlikely to give up their women for rape without demur, it is necessary for these libidinous young adolescents to band together and submit to collective planning and discipline in order to effect their purpose. For Gasset, it is these collective structures, physical as well as institutional, that constitute the beginning of the State:

The first house built by man is not a home for the family, still nonexistent, but a casino for young men. Here they prepare for their expeditions and perform their rituals; here they indulge in chanting, drinking, and wild banquets. Whether we approve of it or not, the club is older than the family, the casino older than the domestic hearth. (Gasset 1961 29)

From this, Gasset can conclude that ‘It was not the worker, the intellectual, the priest, properly speaking, or the businessman who started the great political process, but youth, preoccupied with women and resolved to fight – the lover, the warrior, the athlete’ (Gasset 1961, 32).

Others saw in sport not just an impulse that was contrary to or in excess of the utilitarian, but a specific response to the cramped instrumentalism that characterised the modern world. This line of thought perhaps finds its beginning in Hegel’s *Philosophy of History*, which argued that

Sport itself is opposed to serious business, to dependence and need. This wrestling, running, contending was no serious affair; bespoke no obligation of defence, no necessity of combat. Serious occupation is labor that has reference to some want. I or Nature must succumb; if the one is to continue, the other must fall. In contrast with this kind of seriousness, however, Sport presents the higher seriousness; for in it Nature is wrought into Spirit, and although in these contests the subject has not advanced to the highest grade of serious thought, yet in this exercise of his physical powers, man shows his Freedom, viz. that he has transformed his body to an organ of Spirit. (Hegel 2001, 260-1)

Heinz Risse wrote in his *Soziologie des Sports* of 1921 that ‘[m]echanized man has only one form in which he can express this will in everyday life: the domain of physical culture’ Risse 1921, 77, quoted Hoberman 1984, 139). Risse found in the marathon runner

a strange expression of our entire world-view, which wants to establish its dominance backwards and forwards, for which there are no limits and which is constantly reaching beyond itself. We are at all times men of the day before yesterday and the day after tomorrow. Temporally and spatially we are at every moment standing with one foot in the beyond. Into this world-view sport fits perfectly. It is only one form of thought sought by the fettered individual (Risse 1921, 78; quoted and translated Hoberman 1984, 135)

Karl Jaspers wrote in 1931 in his *Die Geistige Situation der Gegenwart* (translated as *Man in the Modern Age*) that ‘[s]port is not only play and the making of records; it is likewise a soaring and refreshment’ (Jaspers 1957, 68). As such it is ‘a defiance to the petrified present. The human body is demanding its own rights in an epoch when the apparatus is pitilessly annihilating one human being after another’ (Jaspers 1957, 70). Johan Huizinga similarly saw sport as liberating

ecstatic energies that were otherwise at risk from administered forms of play and entertainment: ‘Why is a huge crowd raised to a frenzy by a football match? This intensity of, and absorption in, play, finds no explanation in biological analysis. Yet in this intensity, this absorption, this power of maddening lies the very essence, the primordial quality of play’ (Huizinga 1955, 3).

But there was another current of thought, more identified with Marxist and leftist critique of culture, which saw in sport, not the ecstatic assertion of life, impulse or spirit, but a false and feeble compensation for the authentic joys of the bodily life, and thus actually a means of extending the mechanisation of man. Lewis Mumford summed up this line of critique when he wrote in 1933 that ‘sport, which began originally, perhaps, as a spontaneous reaction against the machine age, has become one of the mass duties of the machine age’ (Mumford 1963, 307). Robert Musil, himself an ex-athlete, saw the thwarting of the Hegelian view of sport as Spirit, writing that ‘if art which aims to show us a body finds nothing deeper or more beautiful than the bodies of athletic specialists – or of athletes period – then this is without a doubt a great triumph of sport over spirit (Musil 1955, 819-20, quoted Hoberman 1984, 146)

The most developed form of this critique is to be found in the work of T.W. Adorno. In *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer see sport as part of the apparatus of rationality – which they compare with pornography:

What Kant grounded transcendently, the affinity of knowledge and planning, which impressed the stamp of inescapable expediency on every aspect of a bourgeois existence that was wholly rationalized, even in every breathing-space, Sade realized empirically more than a century before sport was conceived. The teams of modern sport, whose interaction is so precisely regulated that no member has any doubt about his role, and which provide a reserve for every player, have their exact counterpart in the sexual teams of *Juliette*, which employ every moment usefully, neglect no human orifice, and carry out every human function. Intensive, purposeful action prevails in sport as in all branches of mass culture, while the inadequately initiated spectator cannot divine the difference in the combinations, or the meaning of variations, by the arbitrarily determined rules. (Adorno and Horkheimer 1987, 88)

Elsewhere, Adorno associates music with popular music, which

seems imaginatively to restore to the body some of the functions which in reality were taken from it by the machines – a kind of ersatz of

physical motion, in which the otherwise painfully unbridled motor energies of the young, in particular, are absorbed. In this respect the function of music today is not so very different from the self-evident and yet no less mysterious one of sports. In fact, the type of music listener with expertise on the level of the physically measurable performance approximates that of the sports fan. Intensive studies of football habitués and music-addicted listeners might yield surprising analogies. (Adorno 1972, 49-50)

Adorno approved of Veblen's view of sports as 'not so much a relic of a previous form of society as perhaps an initial adjustment to its menacing new form' (Adorno 1981, 81). This is precisely because sport regulates and industrialises the free bodily pleasures it seems to offer: 'Modern sports, one will perhaps say, seek to restore to the body some of the functions of which the machine has deprived it. But they do so only in order to train men all the more inexorably to serve the machine. Hence sports belong to the realm of unfreedom, no matter where they are organized' (Adorno 1981, 81).

Modernising Sport

Adorno is certainly right to see sport as part of the modern world, or as caught between the modern and the archaic. During the twentieth century, the very notion of sport became subject to some of the famously liquefying effects of modernity, as, during the early years of the twentieth century, sport started to become more and more organised, professional and commercial. Sport was no longer a rural, aristocratic pursuit, but an urban and working-class one. The opening of Philip Larkin's 'MCMXIV' captures something of this new status of sport as mass entertainment:

Those long uneven lines
 Standing as patiently
 As if they were stretched outside
 The Oval or Villa Park,
 The crowns of hats, the sun
 On moustached archaic faces
 Grinning as if it were all
 An August Bank Holiday lark (Larkin 1977, 28)

The lines are however not for a Test match, but to enlist in that other form of modern mass action, and one that modernists dignified with much more attention, war.

This democratisation accounts for the shift undergone by the word ‘sport’ during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Before then, the word tended to refer to various forms of hunting and the forms of horse-racing (the ‘sport of Kings’) and dog-racing that were their spectator equivalents. The *Sporting Life* newspaper, which began publication in 1859, testifies to this usage. The melancholy beginning of a review of 1899 of *The Encyclopaedia of Sport*, edited by the Earl of Suffolk and Berkshire, makes it clear that the identification between sport and hunting was still very strong right at the end of the nineteenth century: ‘The spread of civilisation is the bane of wild sport. Colonisation, conquests, annexations and spheres of influence, with firearms approaching to perfection, have been exterminating the wild animals or hunting them from their immemorial haunts to less accessible retreats’ (Anon 1899, 213-38). This accounts for the many late nineteenth-century books with what might seem like unlikely titles like *Sport in Somaliland*, *Sport in the Crimea* and *Sport on the Tibetan Steppes*, which are none of them ethnographic studies of local games and pastimes; similarly, an 1893 article on ‘Sport in the Snow’ turns out to be about bear-hunting in Russia (Anon 1893). Oscar Wilde’s famous gibe that foxhunting was ‘the pursuit by the unspeakable of the inedible’ is an example of a complex internal division between a dandaic ideal of the aesthetic aristocrat, and a cruder, rural form of squirearchy.

However, the word was beginning to shift its definition by the end of the nineteenth century. An essay of 1900 entitled ‘A Philosophy of Sport’ provides an indication of the minor turbulence which characterised understandings of sport at this time. The essay begins by observing that ‘[t]here are few words in the English language which have such a multiplicity of divergent meanings’ (Graves 1900, 877) and looking forward to the illumination promised by ‘Dr. Murray ... when he works down to the later ages of the letter S’ (Graves 1900, 877). Acknowledging that ‘some sportsmen of the old school seem disposed to restrict the term sport to such non-competitive recreations as involve killing, thus restricting the term to hunting, shooting, fishing and so forth’ (Graves 1900, 878), Graves nevertheless makes out three broad meanings in the dictionaries he consults, namely simple pastimes, the pursuit of animals, and gambling: ‘Starting from the simple notion of sport as an amusement, we come down to the curiously specialized uses of the word which tie it down on the one hand to pursuits of killing and on the other hand to games in which a money stake is involved’ (Graves 1900, 878). In what follows, Graves makes a

determined effort to defend the idea that sport is a competitive pastime undertaken for its own sake, and in particular the idea that sports ‘must be undertaken purely for the sake of recreation as distinct from business’ (Graves 1900, 879). The threat to this definition of sport comes, not at all from the tally-ho classes, but from a tension that would come to define sport in its modern form, namely that between *le sport pour le sport* and the economic and commercial powers that began to be focussed on it. Graves insists that sport must be amateur: ‘In so far as a pursuit is followed as a means of livelihood it ceases to be a sport, and becomes merely a matter of business. Sport is followed for no other end than to afford pleasure to those participating in it, and sportsman follows sport for no other reason than to enjoy that pleasure’ (Graves 1900, 880).

The most important development here is mass spectatorship, for it is this which turns a participative absorption in the game into something mediated. In part this is because it opens the prospect of making a living from sport, and ‘[o]nce the idea is imported into sport that a man’s subsistence depends upon it, then the pleasantness of sport as a recreation ceases, and we import into it the bitterness of the world’s struggle for existence’ (Graves 1900, 883). Spectator involvement encourages gambling of course, though Graves is less concerned by this, since, as he observes at the beginning of his essay, betting had become inextricably linked to the ‘sporting life’ during the previous century and perhaps even before, so that there was nothing wrong with betting ‘provided it be conducted by gentlemen or, what for the purposes of sport is synonymous, by sportsmen’ (Graves 1900, 888). The real threat to the sporting ideal, however, comes from the rationalisation of competition:

there is a strong feeling among the more thoughtful lovers of sport that the competition of to-day is overdone, that the desire for individual distinction is carried to an excess which is harmful to sport, and that the complex organization thereby necessitated acts as an incubus, and being too much of the nature of a business, robs sport of its natural character as a recreation’ (Graves 1900, 890)

Graves linked what he oddly calls ‘the Cambridge tripos system of play, of carefully grading clubs and competitors in order of merit’ (Graves 1900, 891) to the creation of

a curious class of spectators – men often incapable of appreciating the beauties of a fine game, yet inspired by the wildest enthusiasm for the success of the side which they “support”, men who know nothing of the

sport beyond the method of the computation of the championship table [891-2] and are ready to mob a hostile team should they defeat their favourites. (Graves 1900, 891-2)

There is one sport in particular which focuses these issues, the sport which had become most thoroughly systematised, namely soccer, or round-ball football. Graves enunciates a socio-economic contrast that would hereafter run through the folk sociology of British sport, namely that between the aristocratic and public-school sport of rugby and the working-class sport of football:

Most men are agreed that truer sportsmanship is to be found among the adherents of the Rugby Union than among those of the Football Association, or still more of the Northern Union [the semi-professional clubs who broke away from the Rugby Football Union in 1895] or of the Leagues. There is something brutalizing in a competition which is bound to result in the expulsion of great and historic names from the ranks of “first-class” football. (Graves 1900, 891)

The growth of the spectator both made modern sports possible and also, as it seemed to many, fatally compromised sport as such. Commentators on the first modern Olympic Games in Athens in 1892 were perplexed and affronted by the noisy partisanship of the American spectators, their numbers boosted by sailors on shore leave from the cruiser San Francisco (Guttman 2002, 18).

As they became more popular, sports were ever more precisely and elaborately codified. The most emphatic transformation that this brought about was the removal of animals, or of animals as objects or victims, from sport, and an almost exclusive concentration on intra-human competitions, even if animals might sometimes be used as accessories, as in survival sports like showjumping or dressage. This was the most important part of the process whereby sports began to approach the condition of pure play, of *sport pour le sport*. Animals here might be taken to include human beings, since what characterises the animal is that it is a mere object or instrument. As soon as one ceases to aim at the death or physical destruction of one's opponent, then the human as animal, or the reduction of the human to a mere animal, may be said to have been removed from sport. This is why boxing remains the most telling anomaly and not, in a modernist sense, a sport. For boxing resembles foxhunting and bullfighting in the fact that injury is the object of the sport, rather than an accidental outcome or accessory sign of victory or defeat. During the twentieth century, sport, like art, increasingly could only be sport if it were unreal, or real and unreal at once. Sport, in other words, has undergone something like its own modernist

transformation, and sport as we understand it is very largely the legacy of that modernisation. Indeed, perhaps one of the reasons for the inattention of aesthetic modernists to sport is that, unlike other forms of mass entertainment, sport could not simply be represented as part of the ugliness, triviality and commercialism of modern life. Sport, in short, represented a rival aesthetic to art, or might have done, had it occurred to modernists to allow its claims. In a sense, sport can be seen as an anagram or anamorphic mirror of modernism.

In the light of this, it is not at all surprising that certain avant-garde writers should have begun to look back on the earlier forms of blood-sport, not as an atrocity or vulgarity, but as a desirable self-image for the boldly unconstrained artist. The praise of hunting could become a proof of the anti-modernity of the modernist, as, for example, in Wyndham Lewis's 'Our Vortex', published in the first issue of *Blast!* in 1914, which oddly associates the hunt with a machine aesthetic: 'We are proud, handsome and predatory./We hunt machines, they are our favourite game./We invent them and then hunt them down.' (Harrison and Wood 1992, 156). Associated with the privilege given to the hunt is the fascination of a range of very different modernist artists and writers, including Hemingway, Picasso, Dali, Bataille and Leiris, with the so-called sport of bullfighting. (You can tell from my sniffy qualification my how thoroughly I am myself recruited to the modern assumption that the use or abuse of animals invalidates any claim that the activity in question can be regarded as a sport). In a world in which competitive sports were identified with democratic modernity, bullfighting seemed to offer modernist writers an identification with aristocratic values. Where sports had become mere games, bullfighting could be represented as tragic drama. These are the terms in which Michel Leiris offers his defence of 'tauromachy', which he says is

something more than a sport, on account of the tragic element inherent in it – doubly tragic since there is a death, and a death entailing an immediate risk to the life of the celebrant...tauromachy can be regarded as a sport augmented by an art in which the tragic, made explicit as it were, is particularly affecting. (Leiris 1993, 24)

On the one hand, Leiris regards sport as not enough of an art. On the other, he regards it as too aesthetic, in the sense of not real enough, since it does not really risk death or injury, does not encounter perversity and violence. The aim is not 'to banish death or hide it behind who knows what architecture of timeless perfection' but rather '[t]o incorporate death in life, to make it in some way voluptuous' (Leiris 1993, 39). Mere sport is buffered by its framework of

rules from the reality of death and suffering, while bullfighting offers a ritual bursting of the frame:

Whatever the risks and challenges it implies, no sport will cross the boundary that separates the profane from the sacred, because none is conceived in its essence as perdition or as a defiant provocation of perdition. In sport everything is wholesome; everything is straight; deviation appears only in the base form of cheating, crookedness in the rudimentary guise of a purely physical chanciness, a hazard to be reckoned with but not the basis and condition of the activity itself. Never will a boxer (however fierce his fight and formally beautiful his gestures) see his brow crowned with a storm cloud instead of the academic laurel. Never will a swimmer (no matter how at one he may be with the world summed up by the wave in which he moves, and no matter how imminent the danger that his skill enables him to escape) come as close to the crucial point as the torero does, the poet or the lover whose entire action is founded on the tiny but tragic flaw by which the unfinished (literally infinite) part of our condition shows itself. Only the acrobat – and particularly the aerial acrobat, who moves in the void and whose body seems abstracted from its environment, or at least held only by a thread – sometimes communicates his sacred vertigo, inasmuch as his work presents itself as a succession of supernatural feats running parallel to a series of provocations. (Leiris 1993, 34)

It is tempting to see in this panting after the ecstatic, which is so marked in those associated with the Collège de Sociologie, such as Bataille and Caillois, himself a writer on play and games, a kind of cultural-political hinge or chiasmus. Henceforth the exaltation of force, impulse and intensity would be the signature no longer of the fascist right but of the libertarian left, though the frank athleticism of futurism and fascism would modulate into the libidinal and epistemological energetics of Lyotard, Derrida and Deleuze, only the last-named of whom, as far as I can make out, makes mention of sport.

Winning Posts

Perhaps the best proof of the definitional indifference to sport in modernism is the fact that sport has lately given leverage to various forms and definitions of the postmodern. Modernist and postmodernist arts are sometimes distinguished as between a focus on game and a focus on sport. Nabokov, who was in fact keenly interested in mountaineering, seems modernist in the

intricate forms of ludic preoccupation and structure in his work. Robert Coover's *The Universal Baseball Association, J. Henry Waugh Proprietor*, seems like a postmodernist riposte, as does the frank interest of Don DeLillo in (American) football (*Endzone*) and baseball (*Underworld*), or Peter Handke in the *Goalkeeper's Fear of the Penalty Kick*. Claes Oldenburg's 1970 manifesto 'I Am For An Art' includes in its catalogue of anti-aestheticist affirmations 'I am for art that coils and grunts like a wrestler' and 'I am for the art of sailing on Sunday' (Harrison and Wood, 728, 729). American post-war fiction seems particularly hospitable to sporting themes or forms, for example in the work of Updike, Mailer, Roth, Malamud and Ford.

Critics like Roland Barthes began to pay serious attention to sports such as wrestling and cycling, both in his *Mythologies* and in *What is Sport?* (2007), the text he was commissioned in 1960 by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation to write for a documentary film by Hubert Aquin. Paying this kind of serious attention to sport was a central part of the irritation that Barthes's panoramic criticism cause for certain writers. Alain Finkielkraut complained in 1987 that

Not only must Shakespeare be humiliated: the bootmaker must be ennobled. It is not just that high culture must be demystified, brought remorselessly down to the level of the sort of everyday gestures which ordinary people perform in obscurity: sport, fashion and leisure now lay claim to high cultural status. (Finkielkraut 1988, 113)

We may suggest that as game is to modernism, so sport is to postmodernism. Perhaps this is an effect of that dedifferentiation of spheres that is said to be characteristic of postmodernism, though the equation can also work the other way round; just as postmodernism can gain a kind of self-definitional edge by going in for sport, so sport, or at least writing about sport, can gain extra dignity by going in for postmodernism. Robert E. Rinehart's exploration of the aesthetics of performance in contemporary sport suggests that sport 'as an institution paralleling art, may follow the pattern from modernism to post modernism that art has initiated', meaning that it undergoes a transference of responsibility for the work of art from its originator to the audience' (Rinehart 1998, 28). Many commentators on sport have caught up with it at its postmodern moment, or have wanted to accelerate it into conformity with some notion of postmodernism. Grant Jarvie's *Sport, Culture and Society* (2006) assumes so complete a parallel between sport as such and postmodernity that it scarcely even mentions modernism. The essays in Geneviève Rail's *Sport in Postmodern Times* make hay with the issues of engagement, inclusion, exclusion, empowerment that the arena of sport offers to the cultural critic. Jeffrey Hill

(1996) urged sports historians to retool with postmodernist theories of the construction of social meaning: he concludes his essay with the suggestion that

such an emphasis would steer sports history into some of the issues raised by the postmodernist epistemologies that have been fashioned outside our discipline, thereby ensuring that we maintain contact with theoretical initiatives that seem certain to be resonating throughout the humanities and social sciences in the decade to come. Instead of being Mason's "fans with typewriters," British sports historians would, in following this path, come to occupy a leading place in the development of their discipline. (Hill 1996, 19)

Whether wedded to an aesthetics of force or an aesthetics of grace, whether impelled by energy or form, modernist reflections on sport have centred on the imagination of the mass. As Susan Sontag observed, the fascist imaginary emphasises the fusing and subordination of the mass to the will of the leader, or the charismatic Idea. Sontag points to the use in Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*, of

overpopulated wide shots of massed figures alternating with close-ups that isolate a single passion, a single perfect submission; clean-cut people in uniforms group and regroup, as if they were the perfect choreography to express their fealty. In *Olympia*, the richest visually of all her films... one straining, scantily clad figure after another seeks the ecstasy of victory, cheered on by ranks of compatriots in the stands, all under the still gaze of the benign Super-Spectator, Hitler, whose presence in the stadium consecrates this effort. (Sontag 1982, 314)

Athletic displays allow for the gathering in or disciplining of the mass:

The rendering of movement in grandiose and rigid patterns is another element in common, for such choreography rehearses the very unity of the polity. The masses are made to take form, be design. Hence mass athletic demonstrations, a choreographed display of bodies, are a valued activity in all totalitarian countries; and the art of the gymnast, so popular now in Eastern Europe, also evokes recurrent features of fascist aesthetics; the holding in or confining of force; military precision. (Sontag 1982, 317)

Other modernists saw in sport – and recoiled from – precisely the subordination of individuals to the undifferentiated mass – the club, the tribe,

the class, the nation. In both cases, there seems to be no way of conceiving the crowd except in terms of the strict dichotomy between the differentiated individual and the undifferentiated crowd.

Giving the World to Men

What has happened to sport in the years since the Second World War? In many ways, it seems as though the use of sport to enforce mass discipline through the mesmerism of spectacle has proceeded uninterrupted. In fact, though, sport has undergone a subtle shift. It has begun to provide a way to conceive of a new kind of imagination of the mass, different because it is also a massified imagination.

Barthes saw sport as the domain of myth, and most especially the myth of life against matter:

What is sport? Sport answers this question by another question: who is best? But to this question of the ancient duels, sport gives a new meaning: for man's excellence is sought here only in relation to things. Who is the best man to overcome the resistance of things, the immobility of nature? Who is the best to work the world, to give it to men ... to all men? That is what sport says. (Barthes 2007, 63)

It is not so much the mythic making of the human as the giving of the world to all men that I am struck by in Barthes's words. Benjamin seems to have a rather similar intuition in his essay 'The Work of Art In The Age of Mechanical Reproduction', which first appeared in 1936 the year of the Munich Olympics. Benjamin's influential essay, in which he notes that 'in big parades and monster rallies, in sports events, and in war, all of which nowadays are captured by camera and sound recording, the masses are brought face to face with themselves' (Benjamin 1968, 251). In a thoughtful essay, which he begins by pointing out that among the spectators at the Munich Olympics was one Jacques Lacan, who would observe, in his essay on the mirror stage that 'the formation of the I is symbolised in dreams by a fortress, or a stadium' (Lacan 1977, 5), Alan Meek has spoken of the role of media in producing new versions of the 'fascistic subject' (Meek 1998). But I am not persuaded that this is now the effect of the complex forms in which sport is mediated. The ways of participating in sport have become more and various and ramified: as player, manager, administrator, investor, fan, spectator, viewer, game-player, commentator, academic, just as sports themselves have multiplied and the ways

have multiplied in which sport is meaningful or makes other things so. Sport has therefore become progressively depolarised, despecialised. Sport less and less represents a particular concretion or repository of value or meaning, or a particular kind of hinge or moment around which things may be turned or cultural force exerted. One might say of sport something similar to what Fredric Jameson has said of the sphere of culture after the Second World War, namely that it has undergone a prodigious expansion, so that everything has come to seem, in a sense, 'cultural'. Sport has equivalently radiated and ramified to such a degree that, if everything has become cultural, then everything in that culture is tending to the condition of the ludic. The two meanings of performance – namely, achievement and imposture – have come close together.

Ultimately, English modernism failed to intuit what would become the central feature of sport in the modern world, which was not that it embodied this or that aspect of the modern, not that it was the sink or carrier of this or that set of values; but that it would become the first of the great globalising forces. Sport operates on the scale of the world. It is not just accidentally a world phenomenon; it is a way of inventing the world, bringing the world into being as a world. World champions make of the world a *champ*, a Kampf, a field of striving. It is a converter of scales, a converter of times and a converter of values. (That is why sport can also be 'camp'.) Triumph and disaster; everything, nothing; important, unimportant.

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