

Modernism and Tradition: A Symposium

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Editors' Note

During the past seven or eight years, Western modernist literature in translation has once again become available to Chinese readers, and has provided the material for a prolonged debate, the pros and cons of which fluctuate according to the prevailing political wind. Yuan Kejia's *Selected Works of Foreign Modernism* began to appear in 1981, and is an ambitious project, as can be seen from a glance at the table of contents of the first two volumes, reprinted overleaf. Apart from this valuable compendium, countless journals publish foreign literature in translation, together with critical essays and 'potted introductions'.

Yuan, who is the senior scholar of contemporary foreign literature at the Academy of Social Sciences in Peking, suggested to the editors of *Renditions* that the most suitable introduction to the complex debate surrounding Modernism would be the lengthy article that appeared in the *People's Daily* on the 13th September 1983. We followed his advice, and invited Geremie Barmé to translate the article and add to it a commentary making the debate a little more intelligible to the uninitiated observer. To this we have appended three prose extracts by young modernist writers in China: the first is taken from Gao Xingjian's short book on contemporary fictional technique; the second is from Xu Jingya's controversial essay on Modernism in Misty Poetry; the third is what might be termed a modernist view of the Chinese tradition by Yang Lian. Gao, Xu and Yang Lian were all attacked during the Spiritual Pollution campaign of late 1983. Xu became one of its chief targets, and the extraordinarily abject self-criticism he was obliged to make (see pp. 65-8) is a reminder that however open China's economic door may be, artists and writers are as vulnerable, as easily humiliated, as expendable as ever. Finally we have translated the full text of a speech delivered by the distinguished poet and critic Yang Mu in Taiwan, which, while removed from the heat of the Mainland debate, deals with essentially the same theme. The search for a mode of expression that is both modern and authentically Chinese concerns every contemporary Chinese artist, and transcends the tendency towards a xenophobic obsession with ethnic and ideological purity ('Will the Stream-of-Consciousness flow into China'—a true title, the implication being that if it does, it may bring with it a tide of filth!).

Selected Works of Foreign Modernism, Vols. I and II (Shanghai, 1981)

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