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The Passions of Modernism: Eliot, Yeats, Woolf, and Mann

Anthony Cuda

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Upending the traditional view of modernism as defined by skepticism and emotional detachment, Anthony Cuda argues for a perspective that emphasizes instead its deep commitment to understanding human vulnerability, powerlessness, and the unpredictable energies of passion. In *The Passions of Modernism*, Cuda explores how four modernist writers--T. S. Eliot, W. B. Yeats, Virginia Woolf, and Thomas Mann--conceptualize passion, how they dramatize its upheavals and illuminations, and how it affects their ideas about the creative act.

Cuda argues that many literary scholars have not allowed modernism to get far enough out of control. In this work he seeks to demonstrate that it was, from its inception, an expression of the desire to relinquish the very control that its critics mistakenly attribute to it. To this end Cuda examines how several representative writers confront helplessness and passivity in their work and what this confrontation means for their conceptions of creativity, consciousness, and the life of emotions. The modernist artistic process, Cuda suggests, is a register of the mind's encounter with forces beyond its control.

Resuscitating the classical definition of passion from the Latin passio, to be moved or to be acted on, Cuda's study indicates that the modernist attraction to passivity arises from a desire to gauge the limits of the active mind and to rethink psychology and aesthetics from the perspective of the moved instead of the mover. Focusing on well-known texts as well as uncollected and archival materials--such as Yeats's letters and Eliot's prose--Cuda sheds new light on four canonical writers by examining their work in terms of "passion scenes," vivid, intense tropes, situated somewhere between exhilaration and terror, that recur with insistent regularity over an artist's entire career, exerting an unusual psychological force on the creative mind that conjures them. Cuda also offers a corrective to debates about contemporary poetry and postmodernism by showing how criticism continues to rely upon misconceptions about affect and impersonality in modernism.

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