

“That Place Where the Wave Finally Broke and Rolled Back”¹

Modernism and adolescent psychological development

The analysis of Modernism involves a healthy dose of understanding crisis and conflict in the dialectical sense. At the level of the individual, writers like Marshall Berman (1988) have identified a phenomenological entity in the modern subject, who exists in a constant state of becoming as they seek to develop a coherent sense of identity and belonging on the shifting sands of the modern world (p. 5). The overriding paradigm is that the restructuring of the modern world, opposed to that of its ridged predecessor, the Gothic, coincides with the potentiality for an expansion of consciousness. The acquisition of this broader and liminal modern consciousness marks the metamorphosis of the subject from recognition as a unit of being to one of becoming; this constitutes its modern pedigree. Here, both the structure of society and the available roles within it expand. Meanwhile, existing roles either undergo change or are pruned away. The crisis of modernity, then, revolves around the dialectic of old, new, and the multiple potentials for the new, bringing about the struggle to establish the changed relationships of the subject, both internal and external.

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The crisis of modern consciousness—a consciousness of becoming—is in one respect a crisis of development—a keystone of Modernism itself. There is a similar stage of an aggravated subject becoming dialectic during human psychological development: that of adolescence. It may very well be that the *modern period* is the stage at which Western civilization engaged with the issues confronted during individual adolescent development on the civilizational scale. Therefore, it may be possible to gain a more thorough understanding of the expansion of consciousness and resultant experiences of crisis within modernity by examining the degree of analogy present between Modernism and the experiences of the modern subject, and those of adolescent psychological development.

First, however, the recognition of adolescence itself and the understanding of psychology as a scientific field are both products of modernity. Before going any further, it is important to clarify one aspect of the relationship between modernity and adolescence: the adolescent experience as it is contemporarily known is essentially only possible in the modern world. Particularly, the imposition of mandatory education and training needed to navigate the modern world during adulthood (literacy, technical skills, etc.) allows for an extension of the *psychosocial moratorium*, where the subject has few responsibilities and is able to engage a creatively exploratory stage of developmental experimentation with different roles and personalities: the pursuit of self-discovery (Steinberg, 2011, p. 260). This is made possible in an industrialized society by the creation of wealth and mass availability of leisure, particularly in connection to the growth of the middle class. Moreover, to reiterate, the industrial world necessitates this period of suspended responsibility and identity in order for the subject to acquire the knowledge required to sustain its complex organization. Such a trial period is simply not necessary or profitable in an agrarian society—it would in fact be detrimental. It is a mistake, however, to assume that the process of adolescent development in and of itself is dependent upon the modern world. A chicken-and-egg debate would be fruitless. The psychological processes during adolescent development are effects of the human brain's hardwiring that predate Western civilization itself. For this reason, Freud (1930/2010) commented that “we cannot fail to be struck by the similarity between the process of civilization and the libidinal development of the individual” (p. 74), surrounding an argument on the necessity of sublimation of the libidinal instinct within the

prevailing social order. In context of the proposed framework for this paper, Modernism did not create adolescence, but rather is sympathetic to such development. This accounts for modernity's ability to support and expand the process of adolescent development in a way that was not possible in previous eras.

A reconnaissance into the matter by the comparison of several facets of the adolescent's development against a number of modernist texts seems most effective as a way of breaking the soil. At least it is as good a place to open up the field as any, since the texts employed can be read as examples of the modern consciousness—as possessed by their composers—trying to express itself. Consider the methodology as a neurologist probing different areas of the (collective) brain to measure its response. A logical point of entry then would be to look to some of the changes in cognition brought about during adolescence and to see if they can be identified within the texts. Among these, Goethe's *Faust* will serve as the primary example based on Berman's (1988) conclusion that its protagonist may serve for an archetype of modern consciousness on both individual and civilizational levels (pp. 38-39).

Adolescents undergo five primary changes in cognition (Steinberg, 2011, p. 58). These changes are not to be understood as sequentially dependant but rather as broad facets of a simultaneous, interrelated process. Though there is insufficient space here to address all five of these areas of change, central to the adolescent's expansion of consciousness is the change from dealing with the world in terms of the concrete to thinking about the possible: "What is real [becomes] just a subset of what is possible" (Steinberg, 2011, p. 58). This destabilization of absolutes is completely necessary for adolescents' ability to capitalize on the opportunities of the *psychosocial moratorium* as it allows for the conception of *possible selves*² and for a shift towards a *future orientation* (Steinberg, 2011, p. 247).³ Goethe's *Faust*, composed over six decades (1770-1831) that, as Berman (1988) observes, witnessed the transition into the *modern era* (p. 39), reflects just such a shift in cognition.

Berman (1988) writes, "Goethe's hero and the characters around him experience, with great personal intensity, many of the world-historical dramas and traumas that Goethe and his contemporaries went through; the whole movement of the work enacts the larger movement of western society" (p. 39). He observes in *Faust* what he calls the "desire for development" (p. 39), a *dynamic process* that will assimilate all modes of human experience as a part of *Faust's* own personal growth (p. 40). In the Faustian metaphor, this desire for development functions on both the individual and civilizational level. *Faust's* personal development is doubled by his interaction with and influence over the world around him—a sort of industrialized pathetic fallacy. He invokes the modern age as a means to enable his further personal development.

The *psychosocial moratorium* arrives in the form of Mephistopheles, who offers *Faust* the freedom from responsibility. He provides *Faust* with money, allowing him

to abandon his occupation without concern for supporting himself; magical powers to make action of Faust's will; and, most importantly, the time for the already-middle-aged Faust to experiment with his newly opened desires and potential in the form of a youth-restoring potion (Berman, 1988, p. 40). The middle-aged once again becomes the late adolescent, or scarcely older.⁴ Berman's (1988) analysis identifies Faust experimenting with three possible selves. He begins as "The Dreamer": a scholar and paragon introvert (pp. 41-50). With the self-assurance of youth and the resources of Mephistopheles at his command, Faust transforms himself into "The Lover": a personality contrived in his desire to be someone irresistible to the lovely Gretchen (pp. 51-60). The final Faust is that of "The Developer": Berman's ultimate modern figure, whose function in the allegory is to take Faust's internal dialectic of possibilities and create an external world in that image (pp. 61-71), where individuals will be "*tätig-frei*," essentially 'free-to-action' (Berman, 1988, p. 66), in a community that does not require "the repression of free individuality in order to maintain a closed social system"; as a consequence, "the process of economic and social development generates new modes of self-development, ideal for men and women who can grow into the emerging new world" (p. 66).

Goethe draws together the conquering of unchanging nature and overcoming the stagnant Gothic consciousness through Faust's massive infrastructure projects: building dikes, draining marshes, erecting homes, and constructing a new community to reflect this value of development. Faust literally builds the modern world on the moral blueprint of his own thirst for personal development; it is a relentless upscale of his own *psychosocial moratorium*. The modern world is not free of responsibilities, but it is freed from the important responsibility of tradition, which heretofore has ruled society: "This is the highest wisdom that I own, / The best that mankind ever knew; / Freedom and life are earned by those alone / Who conquer them each day anew" (Goethe, 1832/1961, pp. 467, 469, as cited in Berman, 1988, p. 65). Not only is Goethe's modern man free to confront and change the world around him, he is free to transform *himself* anew each day. The Faustian ideal is freedom of the subject to match the mutability of a dynamic world that fosters an inner growth in tandem with external development.

All three personalities—Dreamer, Lover, and Developer—are not created by Faust's moratorium but are aspects of his self. His modern consciousness allows him to imagine the possibilities of each and to explore the different roles therein, though he is never confined to one or the other. The adolescent brain undergoes a process of *synaptic pruning*, trimming down unneeded pathways in the brain while strengthening those more used to increase its efficiency (Steinberg, 2011, p. 69). In the same way, Baron Haussmann's boulevards connected one end of Paris directly to the other; in the process, many of the existing labyrinthine medieval street networks were demolished. Faust likewise preserves and prunes aspects of these personalities or modes of cognition towards shaping an evolving integrated self.

Though his tragedy is that he fails to complete the process and is in due course destroyed, there is enough to go on for a brief and simplified example of this process. As The Dreamer, Faust desires a way in which to grow towards the ultimate potential of his being and at the same time to unify or to reconcile this rich and dynamic inner life with the outside world. But his focus has been the inner journey. Metamorphosed into The Lover, he turns outward to pursue external relationships. His romance with Gretchen can easily be seen as an attempt to join aspects of his former inner life (lust, love, striving, yearning) and outer life by attaching these emotions and desires to another human being. Quickly, Faust discovers this alone to be insufficient. He abandons his role as The Lover and adopts that of The Developer, preoccupied again by his initial lust for limitless personal growth, which would naturally be limited by the selection of a personality as specific as The Lover. His new role provides an alternative means of satisfaction for his drive to bridge the inner/outer divide by expressing himself via industrial development, which, as already described above, serves his potential for inner growth. The interpersonal path of The Lover no longer seems necessary to Faust and is pruned away. Berman (1988) notes, "He has finally achieved a synthesis of thought and action, used his mind to transform the world" (p. 65). Indeed, according to Steinberg's (2011) text, agency—in the sense of feeling that one has influence over one's life and environment; that one is not helpless to circumstance—is one of the definitive characteristics in attaining a coherent sense of identity (p. 263). Faust's journey is, in one regard, a quest for agency.

During adolescence, the subject shifts from perceiving the world in absolute terms to a world of relativities (Steinberg, 2011, p. 63). This can extend to the point where "once adolescents begin to doubt the certainty of things that they had previously believed, they may come to believe that everything is uncertain, that no knowledge is completely reliable" (p. 63). It is therefore necessary to test everything while previous boundaries dissolve. For example, the values taught by the adolescent's parents and practiced in society can come to be seen as completely relative, perhaps anachronistic (p. 63). It is even possible to conceptualize Faust's design for the modern world as the adolescent mind's struggle for identity made manifest. Why then did Faust ultimately succumb to a fate not much different from that of poor Gretchen, whom he leaves behind?

There are two potential ways to answer this question. One reading is simply that as The Developer, Faust achieves his full potential and has no more reason for being in the modern world, one that he has created much in his own image. Berman (1988) seems to think so and says that the tragedy of Faust as The Developer lies with the irony that, with the triumph of the modern over its predecessor, there is simply "nothing left for him to do" (p. 70). According to Erik Erikson's seminal theories on adolescent development, "the adolescent's identity is the result of a mutual recognition between the young person and society: The adolescent forges an identity, but, at the same time, society identifies the adolescent" (as cited in Steinberg, 2011,

p. 259). In that case, Erikson and Berman agree: Faust has potentially crossed the threshold of adolescence into adulthood. He is to himself “Faust, The Developer” and society recognizes him as such. He has achieved his full potential within the moratorium; therefore, within the modernist dialectic of creation and destruction, his death as an adolescent signifies his birth into the world of adulthood—at the very least, his exit from the adolescent world.

In this discussion, however, such an answer oversimplifies matters. Engels (1880/1999) called the modern world’s becoming state as part of “the process of evolution of man himself” (p. 697) and described its present form as a series of escalating crises until the point at which “this circle . . . gradually narrowing . . . becomes more and more a spiral, and must come to an end, like the movement of the planets, by collision with the centre” (p. 707). The dialectic of becoming as creation and destruction, and its consequences for the subject, have been worked over by many of the writers already featured. Baudelaire (1855/1965) puts it perhaps most resonantly:

a system is a kind of damnation which forces one to a perpetual recantation; it is always necessary to be inventing a new one, and the drudgery involved is a cruel punishment. Now my system was always beautiful, spacious, vast, convenient, neat and, above all, water-tight; at least so it seemed to me. But always some spontaneous, unexpected product of universal vitality would come to give the lie to my childish and superannuated wisdom—that lamentable child of Utopia! (p. 123)

And so, “progress takes the stage with a gigantic absurdity, a grotesqueness which reaches nightmare heights. The theory can no longer be upheld” (p. 127). This is Baudelaire’s critique of social progress; its systematization and dismantling is not so different from the continuous conjuring and dismissing of possible selves and associated value systems with which the adolescent grapples. The irony he touts being that “progress” by this model is self-defeating, requiring one to continually begin anew; it is difficult to recognize what is gained. With this, it is time now to return attention to the crisis of Modernism, which, for the subject, delineates a crisis of identity.

Erikson’s theoretical framework of an adolescent crisis of *identity versus identity diffusion* (Steinberg, 2011, p. 261)⁵ addresses this pattern of coalescence and crisis. He identifies one of the threats to a stable sense of identity (Steinberg, 2011, p. 248)⁶ as that of *identity foreclosure*, which is when an individual establishes a fixed sense of identity before having the opportunity for sufficient role experimentation (Steinberg, 2011, p. 261). A healthy sense of identity is never fully resolved once and for all but is open to revision throughout life. The *psychosocial moratorium* is a violently concentrated performance of this practice as, ideally, the subject is free to

build up and tear down personalities to suit their needs, striving towards an elusive sense of self (Steinberg, 2011, p. 264). The modernists' sometimes-utopian quest for progress, shares in this violent concentration and carries with it similar hazards, such as what Baudelaire describes above as the trap of systematization that cuts off progress unless one is willing to smash it down and start fresh. Baudelaire, in effect, is also issuing a warning against *identity foreclosure*.

Returning to Faust as an archetype of the modern, the second possible answer to my earlier question is that Faust The Developer is destroyed when he becomes trapped in a state of *identity foreclosure*. Faust makes his deal with the devil; it is a contract signed in his own blood. Their arrangement depends on the condition that, in exchange for Mephistopheles's services, Faust agrees "That all my striving I unloose / Is the whole purpose of the pact," and that "as I grow stagnant I shall be a slave" (Goethe, 1832/1961, pp. 187, 185). In other words, the moment he rests in his development, he is condemned as a slave to Mephistopheles. Faust traps himself in the same systematization that Baudelaire describes and thereby cuts off his own potential for growth as The Developer: "The word dies when we seize the pen, / And wax and leather lord it then" (Goethe, 1832/1961, p. 187). Faust has already rewritten the opening of the Book of John as "In the beginning was the Deed." Substituting "Word" for "Deed," he imagines himself in the image of a God "who defines himself through action, through the primal act of creating" (Berman, 1988, p. 46). Goethe connects the Word and the Deed in such a way as to represent Faust's struggle to reconcile his inner life with the outer world. Faust's modernist ideal is to make the Word (the inner experience and self) the Deed (expression through action that will make the Word exist in the outer world). But when the Word dies on the pen, and is so mummified in the binding of a book or the bind of a written and signed contract, how can the Deed not be similarly bound? Remembering that Faust has chosen to define himself by deed, he has hereby signed himself into a state of foreclosure once he achieves his original target identity.

Admittedly, identity is a somewhat ambivalent example. Gretchen too is the victim of *identity foreclosure*. However, in her case it is not a product of a Faustian deal, but rather its supposed antithesis: tradition. A paradox like this highlights another complication of this study, since psychological development issues and modernity are not mutually exclusive. Modern consciousness is rife with impending self-contradiction and the becoming dialectic itself is, in fact, reliant upon the clash of such oppositions and the joining of the paradoxical. It is worth a moment, then, to probe into further detail.

Faust awakens within Gretchen's modern consciousness (Berman, 1988, p. 53), yet, unlike Faust, Gretchen does not have the advantage of a *psychosocial moratorium*. She is still locked in the traditional world of the Gothic: denounced by her brother, shunned by her neighbours, crushed by morality, confined by the courts, and sentenced to die (Berman, 1988, pp. 55-56). Where Faust rejected the old

world's available roles and its notions of virtue, Berman (1988) notes that Gretchen instead chooses to uphold the old values to an unsustainable extreme (p. 58). Faust throws the Gothic halo to the ground whereas Gretchen burns it out in an extraordinary display. Faust will do the same later when he inexorably achieves his own destruction, blinded by the glow of the halo placed over the head of The Developer. Clearly, *identity foreclosure* is not an obstacle exclusive to the modern world; however, it is a major issue as a threat to modern consciousness that is constantly redefined by "progress."

There is then the possibility that the proposed consonance between Modernism and adolescence may actually have paradoxical properties of amplification. On the one hand, civilization is grappling with the same or similar issues confronting growth, survival, and gratification as the adolescent. That would suggest that the historical context of modernity presents adolescents with increased opportunities of development. On the other hand, if society functions in a state of adolescence or, at the very least, advocates an extended *psychosocial moratorium*, then there is the possibility that the social necessity that would provide a major impetus to resolve the adolescent identity crisis may be absent. On the contrary, a stable society might depend upon its subjects' inability and complete disinterest in developing past a certain point of early adolescence and therefore curb their opportunity to define themselves as subjects to their optimum potential.

In his introduction to Nietzsche's panegyric to the Faustian modern man, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Walter Kaufmann (1982) makes the following observation:

often painfully adolescent emotions distract our attention from ideas that we cannot dismiss as immature at all. For that matter, adolescence is not simply immaturity; it also marks a breakdown of communication, a failure in human relations, and generally the first deep taste of solitude. And what we find again and again in *Zarathustra* are the typical emotions with which a boy tries to compensate himself. (p. 106)

This offers a line of inquiry towards part of the dialectic between marginality and agency, which can pose as a barrier to development. The marginal figure is a common trope among modern literature: Faust (and the Devil for that matter); the revolutionaries of Zamyatin's *We*; Tonio Köger, Thomas Mann's poet of mixed geographic and class origin who is at home nowhere; the proletariat of Marx and Engels, estranged from labour and thereby from themselves; Bazarov, the nihilist in *Fathers and Sons*; Shelly's Dr. Victor Frankenstein; and, of course, Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*, among many others.

Steinberg's (2011) text identifies adolescence as a marginal period. Adolescents are separated from adults and many times "are prohibited from occupying meaningful roles in society and therefore experience frustration and restlessness" (p.

15); additionally, “that marginality is an inherent feature of adolescence because adults always control more resources and have more power than young people” (p. 15). The terms “adolescent” and “adult” could easily be substituted for “proletariat” and “bourgeoisie,” respectively, and Steinberg’s argument would begin to sound a lot like Marx’s. A certain degree of this marginality should be noted as necessary to the *psychosocial moratorium* since “meaningful roles” and the control of powers come with the consuming responsibilities of managing them. Without a certain marginal status, adolescents would lack the freedom to question and to experiment outside of the existing social values and roles. At the same time, the responsibility is an experience itself and crucial to development. Should it be withheld completely or for too long, the danger of a sort of *mass adolescence* approaches as eventually the frustrated and restless adolescent learns to sublimate their desires more or less successfully within adolescent liminality and forfeits their agency, disengaging from the dialectic—and thereby perpetuating an unresolved state—of identity crisis.⁷

By now this appraisal of the characteristics of development in modernity and adolescence has taken on the nature of a knife-edge: boundless potential along the straight and narrow—but to the left lies the snare of *identity foreclosure* and, to the right, a mausoleum of liminality. So be it; in the words of Zamyatin’s dystopian protagonist D-503, “a knife is the most permanent, the most immortal, the most ingenious of all man’s creations. The knife was a guillotine, the knife is a universal means of resolving all knots, and the path of paradox lies along the blade of a knife—the only path worthy of the mind without fear” (Zamyatin, 1924/1993, p. 113). The knife is the path of the French Revolution; it is the technology that split the atom and unlocked the Pandora’s box of nuclear energy. For D-503, it is the path for the mind without fear. What he never thinks to ask is if the mind without fear is the proper mind to make the final call.

That is perhaps one of the defining relationships between Modernism and adolescence: the willingness to walk the knife’s edge, to make the Faustian bargain, to seek experience to fill the gaps left by cold reason. *Behavioural decision theory* does not recognize these types of judgement calls as the product of madness, as Doctor Frankenstein would blame for his compulsion under which he created a monster. Nor would its theorists agree that they constitute the path of the mind without fear.⁸ *Behavioural decision theory* understands the risk-taking of adolescents, quite often to fulfill the urge for *sensation seeking* (Steinberg, 2011, p. 84), to be the result of a calculated process (Steinberg, 2011, p. 82). Put simply, when adolescents evaluate the risks and rewards of a potentially dangerous course of action, they often tend to weigh the rewards more heavily than the potential dangers (Steinberg, 2011, p. 83). If there is something to be gained in experience, it is worth the risk—and even if it proves foolhardy, it is worth it just to know. This is an eerie echo of the nineteenth-century ethos of progress for progress’s sake, in which pushing the

boundaries of discovery inherently advanced the human race. It is the same naivety that, as Berman (1988) declares, led the Italian Futurists to sing:

of great crowds excited by work, by pleasure and by riot; . . . of multi-colored, polyphonic tides of revolution in the modern capitals; . . . of the nightly fervour of arsenals and shipyards blazing with violent electric moons; greedy railway stations that devour smoke-plumed serpents; factories hung on clouds by the crooked lines of their smoke; bridges that stride the rivers like giant gymnasts, flashing in the sun with the glitter of knives; adventurous steamers . . . deep chested locomotives . . . and the sleek light of planes (Marinetti, 1909/1973, p. 22, as cited in Berman, 1988, p. 25)

Though in the early twenty-first century we are generally labelled as a “post-modern” society, or even at a post-post-modern stage, the becoming dialectic is an intrinsic human experience and one that has only come upon broader vistas of even greater unknown quantity at the civilizational scale. Psychologists recognize that the identity crisis of adolescence is never fully resolved but is a living process, and even that adolescence in the neurological sense continues on several years into adulthood (Steinberg, 2011, p. 71). The perspective herein argued should be seen as a way of not only further understanding the crisis of the modern subject, it should be considered as offering an alternative approach to addressing the crisis in which Western Civilization still finds itself, and into which it may possibly still be sinking deeper. While it is impossible to predict the future with any certainty, a thorough understanding of a process—to which I have aimed to contribute—is the surest method to confidently decide on a means of influencing it that will affect the intended positive result. This does not answer, however, the bigger question of what a positive result is, and what is an acceptable means of attaining it.

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¹ Thompson, 1998, p. 67.

² "Possible selves": "The various identities an adolescent might imagine for him- or herself" (Steinberg, 2011, p. 247).

³ "Future orientation": "The extent to which an individual is able and inclined to think about the potential consequences of decisions and choices" (Steinberg, 2011, p. 247).

⁴ This disruption of the linear correspondence between age and growth is like that which I suggest of civilization. At any "age" a civilization may experience an analogous process to any given stage of individual human development. The order is not set.

⁵ "Identity diffusion": "The incoherent, disjointed, incomplete sense of self characteristic of not having resolved the crisis of identity" (Steinberg, 2011, p. 261).

⁶ "Sense of identity": "The extent to which individuals felt secure about who they are *and who they are becoming*" (Steinberg, 2011, p. 248).

⁷ Though I am not equipped to comment thoroughly, at this point in time I feel obligated to mention that a prolonged state of mass-moratorium sounds very similar to how Ortega y Gasset (1930/1994) described the disposition of "the masses."

⁸ Studies show that adolescents are no more likely to underestimate potential risk factors than adults; younger adolescents tend to *overestimate* the involved risk (Steinberg, 2011, p. 83).