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1910: The Emancipation of Dissonance

Tom Harrison's *1910* is an analysis of European culture in the years preceding W.W.I. This is a crucial age in which ideas and values that had been at the foundation of Western culture begin to lose their credibility. Harrison's analysis combines the focus on a short span of time and on a limited geographical area—East Central Europe—with a broad research that includes all of the intellectual figures of the turn of the century. Harrison's research, which smoothly crosses national as well as cultural borders, deals mostly with philosophers and artists working in Italy, Germany, and the Austrian-Hungarian Empire. The cultural atmosphere of the first decade of the twentieth century is aptly recreated through references to literature, philosophy, music, fine arts, and historical events.

Such a range of diversified sources can be handled only if the author's goals and methods are well-defined from the beginning, as in Harrison's *1910*. The introduction states that the goal of the book is to create "a space in consciousness" for an intellectual experience, 1910 expressionism, that is viewed by Harrison as a turning point in the evolution of Western Culture. The same introduction also lays out the structure of the book by outlining the four characteristics of expressionism that, in a noteworthy correspondence between content and expression, are the subject matter of the four chapters of the book. The first pages of *1910* also disclose the essence of Harrison's method: an endless questioning of texts and works of art. In each stage of its development this relentless inquiry displays the two polarities of Harrison's research, the sources and their interpreter.

The goals stated by Harrison in the introduction to *1910* are achieved. At the end of the book the reader gains consciousness of the cultural importance of what happened in East Central Europe during the first decade of our century. *Persuasion and Rhetoric*—Carlo Michelstaedter's up until now not well-known dissertation—stands out as one of the most disquieting and uncompromising works of the age preceding W.W.I. At the end of Harrison's book the traditional perception of Europe's cultural geography is altered as well, with forgotten corners such as Gorizia or Budapest gaining the relevance usually granted to Paris or Moscow. Furthermore, through his relentless cross-examination of the sources Harrison is able to portray the cultural climate of 1910 as well as to position expressionism in Europe's intellectual history. Finally, appropriately reminding his reader of the critic's function, Harrison conveys his judgment on qualities and limits of expressionism.

This book explains how 1910 idealists were able to challenge some of the oldest truths of the European tradition, such as the distinction between subject and object, the existence of universal forms, or the identity of the self. The reader also learns that expressionism gave birth to modernity as we know it: an age in which opposite principles appear to coexist and any established truth is shattered. This display of our present through the interpretation of our pasts is, in conclusion, the most remarkable feat achieved by Harrison's *1910*.

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