

What Was Modernism?

Lecture 13: Conclusion:

What Was/Is Modernism

1) British Poetry in the Age of Modernism

2) Modes of Modernism in the Theatre

3) The Gist of Modernism

1) British Poetry in the Age of Modernism

[...] Modernism was not unique and self-contained, whatever Pound may have said about it; nor was it an aberration, despite Philip Larkin's attempt to make it so by tracing the true English tradition through Pound's contemporaries Hardy and Edward Thomas. Yet, as Eliot suggested, any really new literary work must alter the way in which all the rest are perceived: the non-Modernists [such as the Georgian Poets, the War Poets, and poets like Hardy and Thomas] need to be seen in the context of Modernism, and the fact that they were not Modernists is worth pursuing. After all, Hardy and Thomas were not aberrations either: they have been as influential as Pound and Eliot, and in their own ways, they were just as new. [...]

The early Georgians and Modernists alike were centrally concerned with poetic form: they wanted to wring the neck of rhetoric, and to aim for directness and unity of style and content. Romanticism was out – and yet [...] the aims of the 'New Poets' go back to Coleridge and to the German Romantics' quest for organic growth, self-determination, freedom from external forces, and an identity between work and author so perfect that the latter would be invisible. [...]

In any case, the Modernist ideal could not be fully achieved. If the 'thing' can be treated perfectly directly, there is little point in treating it. Directness is [...] 'a *theatrical* mode in denial'. Which do we see more clearly, those pale faces on the Metro platform, in Pound's famous Imagist poem – or Pound being clever? No poem can stand entirely on its own, either, nor can form ever be wholly at one with content: even free verse must have line endings, and notions of organic growth are 'not very good gardening', for plants are shaped by wind, sun and soil as well as by inner forces.

(Hibberd 2007)

2) Modes of Modernism in the Theatre

Modernism: An Anthology (1181 pages):

- poems
- fiction
- essays
- manifestos
- reportage
- drama:
 - W.B. Yeats, *At the Hawk's Well* (1916)
 - Djuna Barnes, *To the Dogs* (1923)
 - T.S. Eliot, "Sweeney Agonistes" (1932)
 - Samuel Beckett, *Endgame* (1957)

(Rainey 2005)

T.S. Eliot only turned to writing plays in the 1930s and in a string of works he searched for a new religious drama using poetic language, from *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935) to *The Cocktail Party* (1949). However, Eliot's plays, like those of Terrence Rattigan and Noel Coward, came to stand for a tired old order which was enthusiastically overthrown in the 1950s by the new realism of works such as John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* (1956). In the light of this, it is fair to say that Modernism had less impact on writing for the theatre in Britain than on fiction and poetry, to the extent that Christopher Innes has wondered if its almost anti-Modernist agenda might make a discussion of drama seem contradictory in a consideration of literary Modernism.

Yet several European dramatists had a deep impact on Modernist literature across the genres, even though their perceived radicalism was too great for contemporary theatre producers or audiences in London.

(Childs 2000, 102f.)

Modernist Aspects of Drama History: Some Key Elements

- the pre-Modernist style of naturalistic realism as in Strindberg's *Miss Julie* (1888) or Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879), *Ghosts* (1881), *The Wild Duck* (1884) and *Hedda Gabler* (1890)
- symbolist and expressionist tendencies as in Strindberg's *A Dream Play* (1902) or Ibsen's *The Master Builder* (1892) and *When We Dead Awaken* (1899)
- [Irish theatre: Yeats, Synge, O'Casey → the Romantic Legacy]
- the literary re-fashioning of British drama by G.B. Shaw
- aestheticist tendencies as in Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895)
- the dramatic, theatrical and cabaretistic activities in the context of movements like Futurism and Dadaism
- Antonin Artaud's Surrealist 'Theatre of Cruelty'
- the 'Theatre of the Absurd'
- experiment and reflexivity as in Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921)
- Brecht's political theatre (epic elements, defamiliarisation)

(cf. Childs 2000, 102-108)

- ▶ avantgardistic impulses in theatre direction
(cf. the current debate about 'Regietheater' in Germany)

But:

A modernist theatrical impulse can be prominently found in non-European theatre, e.g. in Egyptian drama of the 1960s in works such as Salah Abdul-Saboor, "Night Traveller: A Black Comedy" (1969), Trans. S. Sarhan, and "The Princess Waits" (1971), Trans. S. Megally. In: M. Enani, ed., *Salah Abdul-Saboor: The Complete Plays*. Cairo: GEBO, 2014, 153-189 and 197-243.

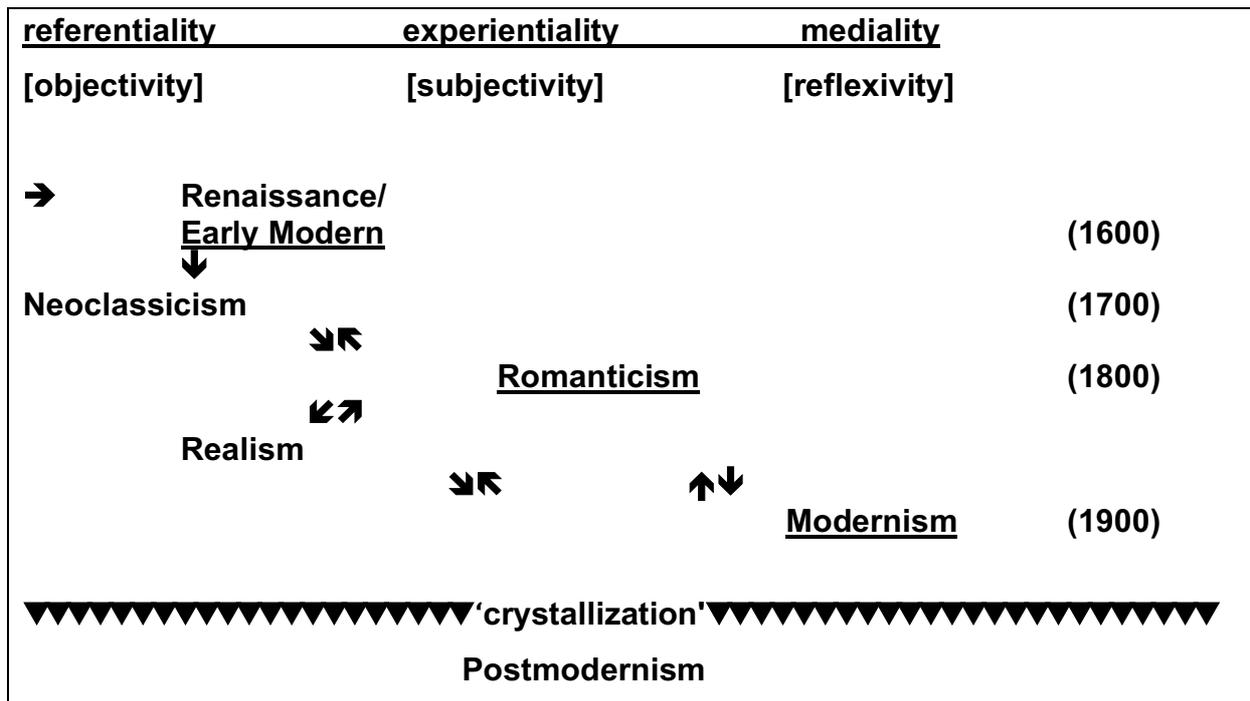
Tewfik Al Hakim, "Fate of a Cockroach" (1965). *Fate of a Cockroach: Four Plays of Freedom*. Trans. Denys Johnson-Davis. London: Heinemann, 1973. 1-76. (a video recording of an amateur performance is available under https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IAkNr_aFdOA)

Mikhail Roman, "The New Arrival" (1965). *Modern Egyptian Drama: An Anthology*. Ed. Farouk Abdel Wahab. Minneapolis : Bibliotheca Islamica, 1974. 154-205.

(cf. ElHalawani 2017)

3) The Gist of Modernism

- Lectures 1-4 Contextualising Modernism
 - theories of modernization
 - the importance of time
 - the emergence of mass culture
 - economic/technological/scientific/political developments
 - parallel developments in the arts (music, painting)
 - media history (esp. the emergence of photography)
- Lectures 5-8 Modernist Fiction
 - the emergence of *literary* fiction
- Lectures 9-12 Modernist Poetry
 - Imagism/Objectivism/Ultra-Romanticism
 - classical (canonized) 'high' modernism:
 (impersonality, the mythical method)
- Lecture 13 Modernist Drama
 - not texts but practice?



Modernism as a key 'moment' in modern culture's overall movement towards

- non-representational cultural practices
- non-foundationalist epistemology

[T]he culture of everyday life in the early twenty-first century has been profoundly influenced by the modernist avant-garde of the early twentieth century. That the formal *arts* of the late twentieth century and beyond – literature, painting, sculpture, classical music, and so forth – owe a great deal to innovations wrought by artists early in the last century is too obvious a claim to need any further comment from me. Instead, I want to argue that the culture of everyday life in our time has come to be pervaded by the culture of the early avant-garde. And not only in terms of the popular and mass arts [...] but in terms of the social life of the masses as well. This dissemination is what we sometimes mean by postmodernism.

The playfulness of the postmodern, the penchant everywhere for parody and pastiche, the pervasiveness of irony, the telescoping of history into simulacra of the past, like the theme park and the heritage industry, are the result of the spreading of the word of modernism without any of its original meanings and moods to weigh it down [...]

My question is straightforward. How have avant-garde art and styles of life – often socially marginal, countercultural, and highbrow – been acquired by the middle, the low, and every other kind of brow in capitalist society as the key cultural paradigms of the future?

(Cooper 2004, 5)

What Ever Happened to Modernism?

Let these four examples [Mallarmé, Hofmannsthal, Kafka, Beckett] stand for a century of pain, anxiety and despair on the part of writers, painters and composers, and let their words stand for what has been called the Crisis of Modernism.

How are we to respond to this? One way is to ignore it altogether, as does Peter Gay in his recent *Modernism: The Lure of Heresy*. This dreadful book exemplifies everything that is wrong with positivist history: lacking any questions to put to the past it opts for a mere account of ‘what happened’, and, needing somehow to organize the mass of material, comes up with the theory (though that is too kind to it) that modernism consisted of two strands – a desire to shock the bourgeoisie and a desire to express subjectivity. [...] The trouble with the first is that it focuses on a superficial aspect of Modernism, with the second that it is so vague as to be meaningless when it is not at odds with the observable facts. [...] Though Gay’s book is especially bad, it is typical of those studies of the subject which seek to ignore that there was a crisis at all and merely try to describe ‘what happened’ between 1880 and 1940, as they would try to describe ‘what happened’ at any other period.

More interesting, if scarcely more illuminating, are those responses which note the symptoms of a crisis only to dismiss them with various degrees of disdain or condescension. [...]

A more sophisticated critique of Modernism is the Marxist one [...] that the bourgeoisie was in crisis and that what they [Modernist writers] took to be personal and artistic problems were in fact social ones, and that once these were resolved, as one day they would be, we would look back on them and their complaints as historical curiosities.

Finally, there is a completely different kind of response which we might label the post-Modern. This takes the form of saying that we are all infinitely flexible, and that we can all choose our traditions as and where we like, so that there is no need to get into

a state about a crisis in one tradition, we simply need to let it go and jump onto another train, as it were. The anxiety, not to say obsession, evinced by the Modernists betrays, the post-Modernist suggests, and unwarranted belief in Truth and Self. There are, however, he argues, many truths and many selves, and what the angst expressed by these writers shows is how much they were still in thrall to now outdated notions which had long been dear to Western thought but which we have now thankfully laid to rest. [...]

The main point to make about [these] charges [...] is that the travails of the Modernists are so intimately bound up with their achievements that it feels simply impertinent to condescend to them, as all these responses do, as though we understood what was wrong with *them* and could set them right with a remark or two. They laid their lives on the line, after all, and though we might feel they were misguided we should think twice before presuming to tell them they were wrong.

In order to understand that there are good reasons for the difficulties they encountered in getting their work not just published but written, and that these difficulties are part and parcel of what makes them rewarding to read, we have to try and see Modernism not from without [...] but from within. That is the task of this book. [...]

In our modern age, an age without access to the transcendental and therefore an age without any sure guide, an age of geniuses but not apostles, only those who do not understand what has happened will imagine that they can give their lives (and their works) a shape and therefore a meaning, the shape and meaning conferred by an ending.

[...]

All will then depend on whether we see [...] rootlessness as pathological or as giving those who are imbued with it a certain vantage point, allowing them to see things which might otherwise have remained hidden. In other words, are we to see our own history, that which makes us what we are, as something which blinkers us or which sharpens our vision? This is, in itself, of course, a very Modernist question.

(Josipovici 2010, 5-8/68/187)

What Was/Is Modernism?

What Ever Happened to Modernism? proposes a[n] [...] uncomfortable thesis: that the dominant version of post-Reformation cultural history tries to play down or exclude any aesthetic practices that do not conform to its ideas of art [which are clinging to the Renaissance ideal of 'lifelikeness']. Josipovici aligns these accidentally dissident traditions with that feeling for the insufficiencies of representative art which eventually manifested itself in Modernism. [...] **[A]rt that lives without the safety nets of stable of recognizable genre [...] weighing the terrors of freedom against those of constraint [...]** There are critics who are brilliant at describing at how art represents: Josipovici is one of the best living writers on how art creates.

(Tandon 2011)

- “Modernism after Modernism” (Mellors 2015)
- “Modernism Aesthetics for a Warming World” (Griffiths 2017)
- “Modernism in a Global Context” (Kalliney 2016):
Imperialism <> Cosmopolitanism
Institutions <> Media
- “New Modernist Studies” (Latham/Rogers 2015)

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