

Modernism in American Literature (Part I)

Newness and nowness

« Make it New »

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As a literary movement:

- **Modernism** is characterized by opacity and complexity.
- Any contribution to its definition is tentative and not definitive.

It should be noted that for who search to pin down all modernism's characteristics once and for all is in vain.

Modernism: Beginnings & Ends

In *Modernisms: A literary Guide* (1995/2009), Peter Nicholls describes the beginnings of modernism:

“the beginnings of modernism, like its endings, are largely indeterminate, a matter of traces rather than of clearly defined historical moments” (1)

Nicholls suggests a historical moment at which these traces can first be glimpsed: “in pursuit of those **traces** of modernism, then, we might return to **Paris** in the early **1840s**, and specifically to a moment when visitors to the Champs Elysées were entertained by **the music of two girls** who begged their way between cafés, **singing and playing the guitar**. The striking beauty of one of them fascinated **the writers and artists** who frequented this part of **the city**” (1)



La petite mendiane rousse 1843

Theodore de Banville wrote a poem about her, and Emile Deroy, a friend of Charles Baudelaire, painted her portrait. Baudelaire himself devised his own poetic tribute, 'To a Red-haired Beggar Girl' (probably composed around 1845/6) in which he praises her beauty and imagines her in courtly dress.

- The nature of modernism: the urban setting, the emphasis on the power and the complexity of **the momentary** or **evanescent** (vanishing) experience, **the invoking** of different and **disturbing social milieus and characters**.
- The story Nicholls tells here is of **a cultural form** that is driven by **new forms** of **social experience**, that responds to this through the creation of new poetic diction and idiom to produce a literary text that can be read as distinctively modern.



Period Delimitation

The beginnings of modernism are, unsurprisingly, the subject of extensive critical debate and many different stories have been told about when and why modernism began. Partly this is because the term embraces different forms of art. It is related to art, music, architecture, painting, sculpture, poetry. It refers to cultural works from a variety of different national traditions, each of which has its own requirements and constraints of periodization. The choice of an ending for the story of modernism is also a matter of controversy, though the Second World War is commonly identified as the end of it. The deaths of both Joyce and Woolf during the war have been seen as bringing to an abrupt end the most distinctive phase of the modernist novel in English; but the choice of the WWII as the possible end of modernism.

To sum up:

Between the 1880s and the 1930s, a new fertile discourse on the art of fiction emerged alongside the extensive reshaping of fictional form itself.

There can be no question that many writers in the early decades of the twentieth century, inside and outside the United States, believed in the occurrence of a rupture or break from what had gone before and felt that art must somehow recognize the change. The American poet John Gould Fletcher announced in 1915, “It is time to create something new.” Willa Cather dated the world’s breaking in two to “1922 or thereabouts.” These and many comparable expressions of seismic change are echoes of Virginia Woolf’s famous declaration that human nature changed “on or about December 1910.” For some it felt like a breakdown, for others a breakthrough. The two perceptions are related

Modern, Modernism, Modernization and Modernity: Conceptualization

In *Landscapes of Abandonment* (2003), the sociologist Roger A. Salerno explains that modernity takes many forms, but as a term it generally describes a type of social landscape arising through a process of modernization. In philosophy, it is linked to the ideas promoted by thinkers as Descartes, Bacon, and Hobbes who dealt with issues such as the nature of knowledge, reason, and the use of science. Its definitions are countless, diverse, abstruse to serve any common purpose. If modernity is an era, there is a disagreement on its beginning and ending (the Renaissance, the 18th, the 19th...). In short, modernity represents human progress predicated on technological advances (26).

Michael Dear agrees with Salerno's opinion and summarizes the term of modernity as follows:

Modernity is the experience of contemporary life that has been fed by numerous movements including science, industrialization, demographic change, urban growth, mass communication, nation states, social movements, and the rise of a worldwide capitalism. *Modernization* refers to a state of perpetual becoming, a process which brought modernity into being. *Modernism* is a discussion about a changing visions and values that accompany modernization (96, emphasis in original).

To simply explain the difference between modernity and postmodernity, John Duvall makes an analogy between F.S Fitzgerald, who wrote about modernity and the impact of the new on industrial society such as automobiles, telephones, and jazz recordings and postmodernity in DeLillo's – what it feels like to live in the contemporary moment, in other words, the impact of new media and technology on the society. According to Duvall, the difference is simply related to the impact of the industrial society in each epoch – a chronological logical division related to technology.

American Modernism:

To explore the American novel and its transformation one would definitely refer to William Bradbury's *The Modern American Novel*. In the book, Bradbury focuses on the development of both the American city and the novel and considers 1893, the year of the World's Columbian Exposition, a decisive phase for both the American history and the novel. During that year, the American historian Henry Adams reflected on the great celebration of American resources held in the new skyscraper city of Chicago, the emblematic American “shock-city”, the city of sudden growth – a village of 250 inhabitants in 1833, was now the “Second City” with population over a million and high business skyscrapers rising in celebration of American industrialism and corporation (1-2).

An apparent move toward the modern metropolis was about to see light where modernization was most accelerated; technological innovation and social change were advancing at an unprecedented rate. The World's Exposition was not only a celebration of technological achievements but also a meeting space for many cultural manifestations. Many writers, thinkers, architects, and historians visited this fair and exchanged ideas. They introduced what Bradbury called “a fresh American character who was being formed in the urban melting pot” (3)

From the 1910s to the end of World War I, modernism in the United States was synonymous with experimentation, creative ambition, and an aggressive disregard for social, moral, political, and aesthetic conventions. For those who welcomed such innovation, such as the literary critic Alfred Kazin, the emergence of modernism in the U.S. represented a “joyous season,” an efflorescence of youthful energy and fresh ideas that seemed to renovate both aesthetic traditions and daily life (Kazin 165).

- Yet, it should be noted that the modernist works were shocking, trickery, and pretentious
- it is difficult for a number of reasons to talk about “American modernist fiction” as a discrete entity. First, the spirit of modernism was in no way confined to fiction as a medium. Modernism encompassed all genres and formats in literature, the plastic arts, painting, film, photography, music, dance, theater, and architecture, and modernist artists frequently combined media and genres in surprising ways.
- For instance, While Gertrude Stein, a famous art collector, wrote short prose “portraits” of friends and acquaintances, other literary modernists were interested in the visual elements of literature, including typography and illustration, or found inspiration in art forms such as jazz, photography, and the cinema.

Moreover, certain radically innovative projects in the intellectual history of the early twentieth century are also often characterized as modernist, among them the uncertainty principle and the theory of relativity in physics; Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung ' s psychoanalysis; the participant - observer anthropology of Bronislaw Malinowski and Franz Boas; the language philosophy of Bertrand Russell, Gottlob Frege, and Ludwig Wittgenstein; Frederick Winslow Taylor and Henry Ford ' s techniques of labor management; and the economics of John Maynard Keynes. All of these thinkers may be said to have imbibed some of the spirit of modernism, even while they influenced their artistic contemporaries in important ways.

While most indicators pointed the way toward an increasingly pluralist society, receptive to change and open to experiment, the years following World War I saw a backlash of racism, isolationism, nativism, and puritanism. The Ku Klux Klan was revived, and by 1923 had attracted a membership in the millions. Race riots erupted in Chicago in 1919. The US Senate, despite President Wilson's urging, refused to ratify the nation's entrance into the League of Nations. The "Red Scare," a national hysteria about immigrants and anarchists, was in full cry. Immigration quotas were imposed in 1924: no more than 3 percent of any nationality was to be admitted, and even this admission was limited to nationalities already represented in the United States. Congress passed the Prohibition Act in 1919 in a quixotic attempt to eradicate the drinking of alcohol. The famous "Scopes Monkey Trial" of 1925, in which a Tennessee high school biology teacher was convicted of teaching the theory of evolution, proved that acceptance of "foreign" ideas was by no means widespread.

Increasing numbers of labor-saving devices, with streamlined design that embodied the beauties of efficiency, were introduced into American homes. There were movies to go to, radio programs to tune into, jazz bands to dance to, Victrola record-players on which to play their tunes at home. By the end of the 1920s, some 700 radio stations and 8,000 movie theaters served a population of about 123 million. Automobiles were affordable, and miles of good roads were being laid to drive them on; the Ford Motor Company made its fifteen-millionth car in 1927. In Yankee Stadium, Babe Ruth was hitting home runs. You could work a crossword or peruse the “funny papers,” read a Book of the Month Club selection, take photos with your personal Kodak camera, or go to one of the recently opened art museums. Between 1920 and 1930 there was a 56 percent increase in the number of art museums across the country: the Museum of Modern Art opened in 1929; the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1931. With a little cash to spare and a bit of leisure time, an American could choose among novelties galore, all along the spectrum of “high” and “low” culture, to edify and amuse.

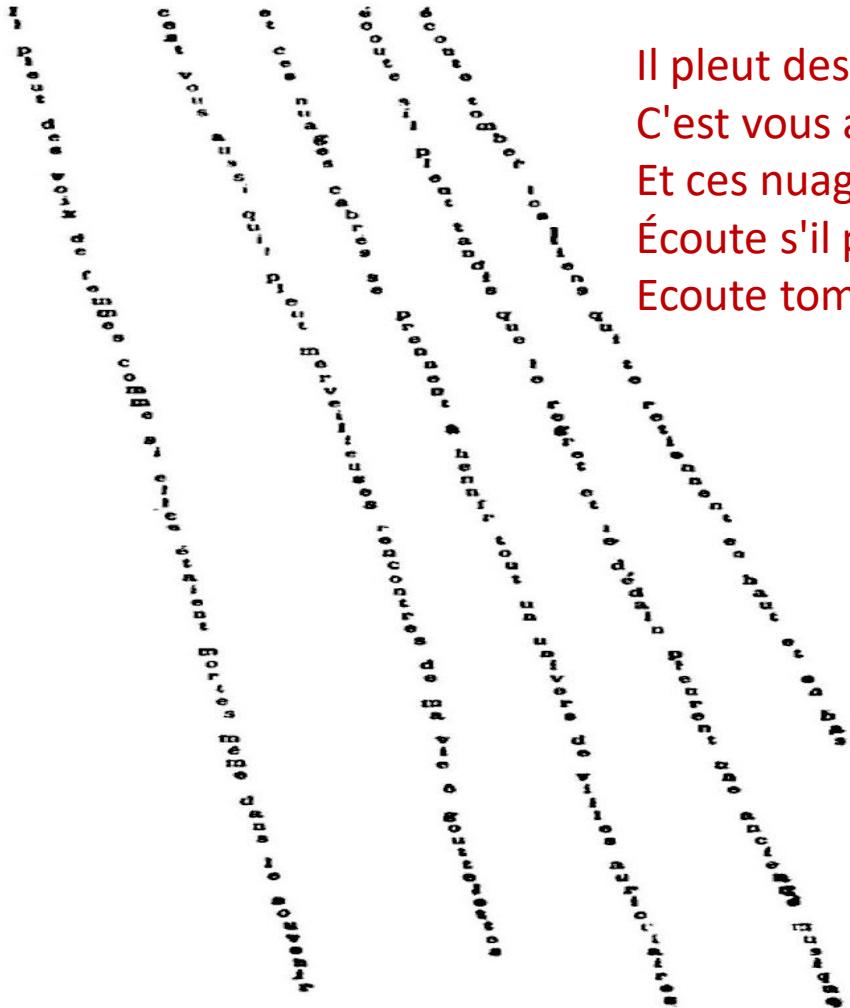
To sum up the historical context: In addition to political and economic upheaval, this period witnessed significant changes of other kinds. In this general moment, such quintessential modern technologies as electric lighting, the automobile, the airplane, radio, telephone, sound recording, typewriting, photography, and film all came into widespread use. These technologies, in turn, radically transformed the way in which people lived, perceived their surroundings, and created art.

Modernist Forms:

Modernist fiction writers shared with artists of other genres both the view that new forms were needed to express the experience of the modern world and the sense of liberation from the requirements of realistic representation. For fiction writers, this departure from verisimilitude entailed the abandonment of several conventions of realist fiction, including an unobtrusive and omniscient narrative perspective and an emphasis on the complexities of character, social context, and ethical situations. But, in a larger sense, it broke as well from what one might see as the social premise behind literary realism: the idea that one could represent a character's social environment as a coherent and complex totality.

Modernist fiction, then, would be characterized not only by experiments in narrative mode and perspective, genre, characterization, and plot, but also by a sense of the larger fragmentation of fiction's social vision: for the modernists, the complex and chaotic world of the twentieth century was no longer understood as fully representable in the confident and complete way of the nineteenth -century realists.

Il Pleut



Il pleut des voix de femmes comme si elles étaient mortes même dans le souvenir
C'est vous aussi qu'il pleut merveilleuses rencontres de ma vie ô gouttelettes
Et ces nuages cabrés se prennent à hennir tout un univers de villes auriculaires
Écoute s'il pleut tandis que le regret et le dédain pleurent une ancienne musique
Ecoute tomber les liens qui te retiennent en haut et en bas

Calligramme: words arranged to form a picture

The poem is composed of five propositions, lines without punctuation and rhyme, No verses as they are known: Free-verse

Introduced by Apollinaire, a French Poet

If there was general agreement that the world had reached a pivotal moment, there was no clarity about how people might live in this changed world, nor was there a uniform artistic strategy of response.

Nevertheless, at least within the arts, we can identify at least three key moves. The first is to imitate or reflect the chaos: put another way, modern life is hard; therefore, art should be hard, too. Here is Eliot's diagnosis of the situation:

“We can only say that it appears likely that poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be *difficult*. Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results.” (“Metaphysical Poets”)

- 1- An artist with a crazy mixture of thoughts and feelings, surrounded by stimuli of every sort, can reproduce and express the jumble by various means – among them, disjunction, open-endedness, disorderly presentation, non-linear development, and so forth. These approaches tend to result in forms that recapitulate the *processes* of experiencing, thinking, and making.
- 2- A second move is to sort, arrange, and balance disorderly elements to form a logical pattern, thus expressing the outcome or *product* of thought in a form polished and rounded. By this strategy art becomes a kind of antidote to, or respite from, chaos. It serves not merely to amuse or divert and not necessarily to suppress contradiction and confusion but rather to manage and contain them by recourse to paradox, temporary balance, or closed poetic forms.
- 3- To the first strategy of a difficult disorder and the second of a delicate balance of order and disorder, we may add a third: radical simplicity.

Pound's "A Few Don'ts by An Imagist" (1913) insists upon "direct treatment of the thing" without ornamentation or the imposition of artificial structures. Imagism as a movement employed an approach characterized by sparseness.

Make it strange, make it different, make it surprising, make it mysterious, make it elliptical, make it discontinuous, make it kaleidoscopic – these were all ways to “make it new,” as Pound exhorted his peers.

Examination of three techniques – ***multiple perspectives, juxtaposition, and allusion*** – will introduce the much larger range of invention that characterizes many modernist texts. As will become clear, the three techniques are often interdependent.

Juxtaposition

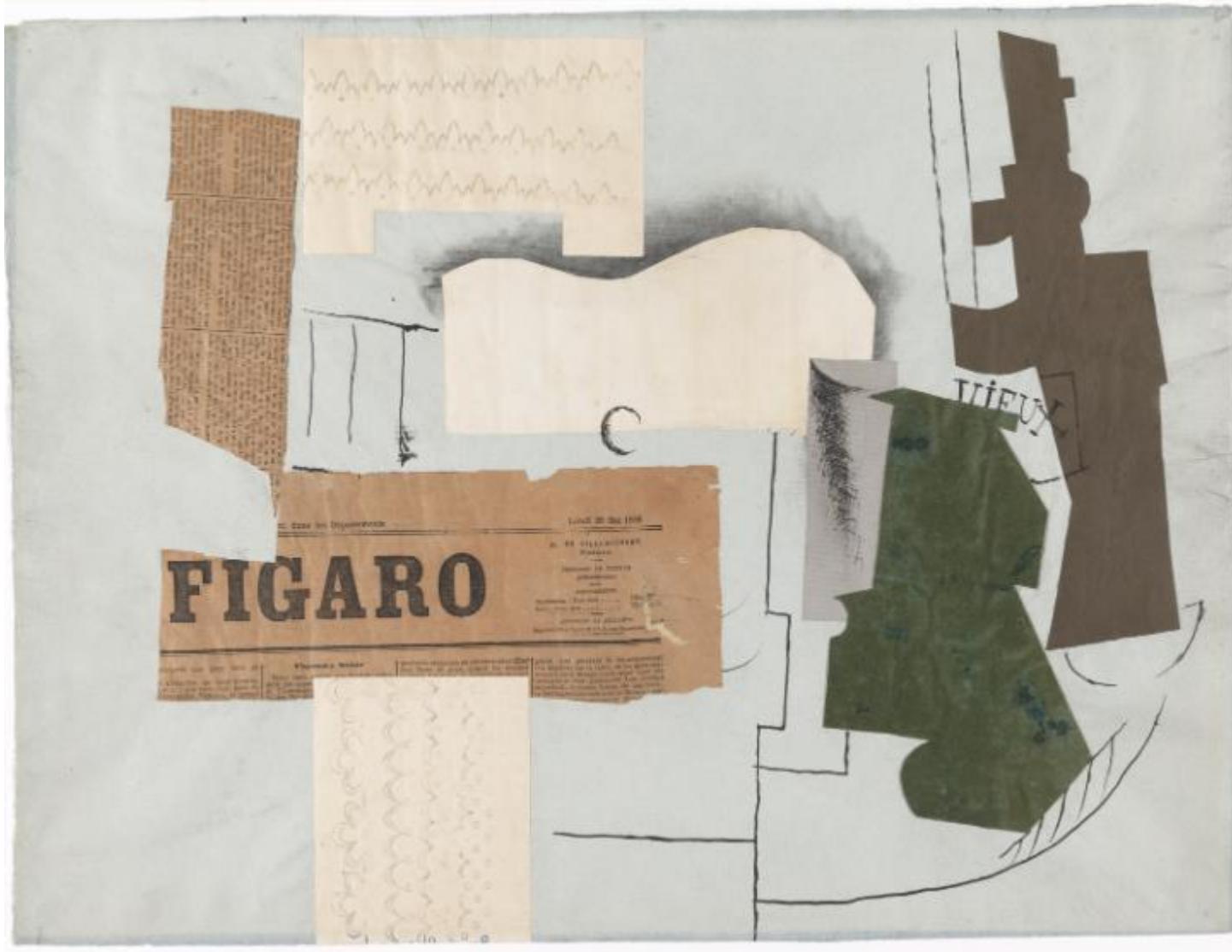
Placing two or more things side by side can create an effect or tell a story. Thus, for example, the juxtaposition of images in a film (usually called *montage*) is a method of narration. Indeed, the placing of any two things next to one another invites the spectator to compare or imagine connections between them. An example of juxtaposition at work in prose can be found in John Dos Passos's *USA* trilogy combines pieces of biography, stream-of-consciousness writing, "newsreels" of headlines, advertisements, and song lyrics, and narratives about several different characters whose lives intersect. His methods are in the service of an ambitious project to represent change and continuity, success and failure, and a nation divided by class and ethnic tensions at a particular moment in American history.

Juxtaposition as a literary technique is like and unlike putting together a puzzle, assembling a whole from parts. Fragments are themselves suggestive, especially when not yet fitted into a whole object.

Juxtaposition in poetry/ collage in painting/ montage in movies



Chinese Restaurant (1915) by Max Weber



Bottle of vieux marc glass guitar
and newspaper (1913) by Pablo
Picasso

Allusion

“Co co rico” demonstrates the polyvalent nature of allusion. As a literary device, it operates as a kind of shorthand that paradoxically enlarges rather than reduces. Thus the cockcrow permits simultaneous reference to ghosts, sons and fathers, revenge, cowardice, and betrayals, among other effects. At the same time, it functions as a palimpsest. A palimpsest is a writing surface on which one text has been written over another. On a piece of parchment, for example, an original text might be erased or effaced so that a second text can be written over it, and this “recycling” can continue into multiple layers of writing. The superimposition of one layer upon another, like geological strata, records history. Similarly, a single word, a pair of lines, or juxtaposed images can evoke materials ranging broadly in time and space. The palimpsest is analogous to Schwartz’s “surface and depth” paradigm. One of the things Eliot most admired about *Ulysses* was Joyce’s “manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity” (“Ulysses, Order, and Myth”). He employed the method in *The Waste Land* as well.

The 1920s remain an extraordinary decade in American history for energy and innovation in the arts. Artists in every medium wrestled with many of the same issues and strategies that occupied writers: speed, multiplicity, complexity, the jumble of simultaneous stimuli in urban settings, the opening up of permissible subject matter, new thinking about the potentialities of one's medium, and, in some instances, competition with new media and other forms of mechanized entertainment.

Samples from Modernist literature

1- Imagism in Ezra Pound's "In a Station of the Metro"

The apparition of these faces in the crowd:

Petals on a wet, black bough.

SEVEN POEMS

I

mortals)

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dizzily
swingthings
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trapeze gush somersaults
open ing
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turn
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fall which now drop who all dreamlike
im)

January 1939

E.E Cummings Poetry