

A COMPANION TO

*M*ODERNIST
*L*ITERATURE AND
*C*ULTURE

EDITED BY DAVID BRADSHAW AND KEVIN J. H. DETTMAR

A Companion to Modernist Literature and Culture

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Introduction

Kevin J. H. Dettmar

Modernism. The Modern Movement. Modernisms. The New Modernisms. For a phenomenon supposed to be safely in the past, modernism has been experiencing a good bit of change, even growth, of late. Generalizing about the reasons for such change is a risky business; but then it's in the nature of an introduction like this one to take such risks.

Modernism: from the Latin *modo*, the critical literature frequently reminds us, “just now,” the present: “life; London; this moment of June,” as Virginia Woolf famously writes in the opening pages of *Mrs. Dalloway*. For the loosely affiliated group of writers and artists who first described themselves by the term *modern*, and who were later labeled *modernists* by others, the evanescence of the now, the present, “this moment,” would prove a recurrent challenge. The philosophy of Henri Bergson, hugely influential among many modernist thinkers and writers (and held up for ridicule in Wyndham Lewis's infamous 1927 treatise *Time and Western Man*), suggested that time was not merely a fluid succession of presents:

Our duration is not merely one instant replacing another; if it were, there would never be anything but the present – no prolonging of the past into the actual, no evolution, no concrete duration. Duration is the continuous progress of the past which gnaws into the future and which swells as it advances. And as the past grows without ceasing, so also there is no limit to its preservation. (*Creative Evolution*, 1907)

French novelist Marcel Proust's 2,000-page modernist masterpiece, *A la recherche du temps perdu* (1913–27; *Remembrance of Things Past*, or more literally *In Search of Lost Time*), is the great literary fantasia on this theme. T. S. Eliot brought Bergson's insight (or something like it) into the realm of literary criticism in his early essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919), where he gives the name “tradition” to this present-ness of the past:

[Tradition] involves, in the first place, the historical sense, which we may call nearly indispensable to any one who would continue to be a poet beyond his twenty-fifth year; and the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order.

Indeed, the more emphasis and weight the modernists sought to place on “contemporaneity” (to resurrect one of their favorite words), the more rapidly it seemed to recede into the past. To American expatriate poet and modernist entrepreneur Ezra Pound belongs the distinction of having coined modernism’s most enduring rallying cry, “Make it new”; Pound wasn’t shy about pointing out, however, that he’d stolen it from a Chinese emperor, who’d had inscribed it on his bathtub. “Make it new,” it would seem, was hardly a new idea. But this insight, according to Eliot, was at the very heart of modernism: “The perpetual task of poetry is to make all things new. Not necessarily to make new things.” If the Romantics had sometimes seemed (especially to a neo-Classicist like Eliot) to have fetishized originality, innovation, then modernism would once again pay attention to the important role to be played by renovation.

Bergson’s emphasis on the *durée*, the persistence of the moment from the past into the present, and bridging the present into the future, is in part a revisiting and revision of Walter Pater’s famous, rhapsodic celebration of the moment, expressed most memorably in the conclusion to his *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873):

Not the fruit of experience, but experience itself, is the end. A counted number of pulses only is given to us of a variegated, dramatic life. How may we see in them all that is to be seen in them by the finest senses? How shall we pass most swiftly from point to point, and be present always at the focus where the greatest number of vital forces unite in their purest energy?

To burn always with this hard, gemlike flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life. . . . Not to discriminate every moment some passionate attitude in those about us, and in the very brilliancy of their gifts some tragic dividing of forces on their ways, is, on this short day of frost and sun, to sleep before evening.

In modernism, that fleeting and delicate moment was termed an “epiphany” by James Joyce in the abortive draft version of his first novel, published posthumously as *Stephen Hero*. While the small differences of perception and emphasis are interesting to note, there is an important group similarity between Joyce’s epiphany (“a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether in the vulgarity of speech or of gesture or in a memorable phase of the mind itself,” his protagonist describes it; “the most delicate and evanescent of moments”) and a tradition of “natural supernaturalism” (Thomas Carlyle’s phrase) going back to William Wordsworth’s “spots of time” (as evoked in

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