

The creation of something called modernism – as opposed to what Malcolm Bradbury and James MacFarlane itemised as the study of the ‘Modern Movement; the Modern Tradition; the Modern Age; the Modern Century; the Modern Temper’, or simply ‘The Modern’ – took place in and around the pages of *Critical Quarterly*.¹ The word modernist, of course, had been used sporadically in a literary, rather than its more common religious sense, since the 1920s; in Laura Riding and Robert Graves’s 1927 *Survey of Modernist Poetry*, for instance.² But the hinge of those three letters ‘I’, ‘S’, ‘M’ – from modern to modernism – went hand in hand with the institutionalisation in the mid 1970s of modernism as a field of analysis subject to definition, redefinition, polemic and contestation. David Lodge’s 1975 CQ essay, ‘Metaphor and Metonymy in Modern Fiction’, both summarised and dissected the shift. To ‘denote’, he wrote, ‘the kind of fiction that deviated from the traditional realism we have added a syllable to the chronological term ‘modern’ and called it ‘modernist’ or sometimes ‘symbolist’, thus linking it to the cosmopolitan movement of innovation and experiment in all the arts.’³ Lodge’s modernism was a geographical as well as chronological category. In its European cosmopolitanism, it cut across the boundaries of national literatures. It was an aesthetic rupture; the departure or deviation from realism, as he put it here; the distinction between contemporary and modern literature as he would, following Stephen Spender’s *The Struggle of the Modern*, put it elsewhere. And it was a modernism of cultural rupture and revolution conceived within a progressive view of history. It mirrored the modernism of Bradbury’s and MacFarlane’s 1976 guide to European Literature – announced as a ‘cataclysmic’ and revolutionary cultural upheaval.⁴ For Bradbury and MacFarlane, modernism toppled ‘even the most solid and substantial’ beliefs and assumptions, and stimulated frenzied ‘rebuilding’. Their book sought to register what they saw as a partial version of an ‘overwhelmingly complex phenomenon, an individual selection from the infinity of detail, which may in time compost down with other views into that sifted and resolved thing, a critical concept’.⁵

Modernism, as a critical concept, or ‘compost’, as they delightfully put it, would now become a chronological, geographical and aesthetic field, and a field whose boundaries could therefore, and would be energetically debated. There was its disputed chronology – beginning anywhere between 1850, 1890 or 1909 and ending anywhere between 1939, 1945 and 1960; fought-over primary authors and texts – did Elizabeth Bowen really belong? And what about Edna St Vincent Millay or Nella Larson? Its disputed arguments about the relationship between aesthetics and politics, suggested by the shifting label of literature’s cultural other: from mass culture, to popular culture to the marketplace. Who could really accept the claims by those so-called high modernists to their lofty place hovering above the marketplace? Weren’t they just as mired in commercial interests as H.G. Wells? But also, and increasingly, a field structured by a history of modernist literary criticism itself so that feminist critics of the late 1970s and 1980s battled the claims of F.R. Leavis, Hugh Kenner and Harold Bloom, as much as the words of Lawrence, Pound and Eliot, and new critics were in the sights of Marxist, post-colonial and post-structuralist critics, alongside the authoritarian and racist language of the Men of 1914. I doubt that Bradbury and MacFarlane, and Lodge could possibly have imagined the sheer volume of modernisms the new word – modernism – would spawn; sentimental, cinematic, cosmopolitan, global, planetary, strong, weak, high, low, and bad.

Given what might be called this recklessly promiscuous critical spawning it is no surprise that modernism has been reinvented in and around CQ – at least three or four times. Peter Nicholls added an extra ‘s’ to modernism in 1995. This letter pluralised and complicated our term, signalling a desire to move beyond the caricatured modernism of postmodern theory, a modernism of grand narratives of social and psychic order, and explore the ‘interactions between politics and literary style’.⁶ Nicholls’s intervention, itself informed by psychoanalytic theory, accorded with the theoretical engagements of the new generation of thinkers in and around Colin MacCabe’s assumption of *Critical Quarterly* editorship in 1987. Along with MacCabe’s own 1978 reading of Joyce’s revolutionary use of words as central to any notion of modernism’s value and political force, as *Critical Quarterly* editor he ushered in essays by Jacqueline Rose, Suzanne Raitt, and Jonathan Dollimore on feminism, psychoanalysis and sexual transgression, as well as essays by David Trotter and Lawrence Rainey exposing modernism’s links to a culture of imperialism and empire. The creation of the new US-based modernist journal *Modernism/modernity* in 1994, provided an academic forum for the discussion of the proliferating modernisms registered by Nicholls’s ‘s’, and was inaugurated with a declaration, a definition and a set of values; here was modernism polemically described as a cultural and interdisciplinary historical field in the Bourdieuan sense. Nella Larsen, Marcel Mauss, and typists were well and truly in.

From now on, *Critical Quarterly*’s discussion of modernism would be operating in a more crowded and in some senses specialised journalistic space and the modernist critical spawning would truly begin in earnest. Journals are microclimates defined partly by editorial steer, partly by broader literary and cultural shifts and partly in relation to other similar publications. MacCabe’s retrospective 2015 *Critical Quarterly* response to *Modernism/modernity*’s 1994 declaration boldly identified what he saw as the critical differences between the two journals. Modernism, insisted MacCabe, was a living legacy rather than a ‘completed’ era, alive in both literature and new media, most notably film. For MacCabe, in contrast to the historicist focus of *Modernism/modernity*, *Critical*

Quarterly had attended to the new 'media ecology' of cinema, radio and recorded sound that defined a modernism that stretched across the twentieth century.⁷ Boldly stated differences aside, there was also a significant cross-fertilisation of ideas. In *Critical Quarterly* special issues 'Modernism' and 'Low Modernism' in 2002 and 2004, edited by David Trotter and me, and with essays by Maud Ellmann, Peter Nicholls, Leo Mellor and others, we conceived modernist writing as a 'provocation', a means with which to bring to life culture's so-called 'others', as well as the rebarbative affects of its indecent and abject features.

Proliferating modernisms have also, however, been accompanied by valiant attempts to lasso the modernist beast. In 2008, Douglas Mao and Rebecca Walkowitz heroically took up the challenge and announced the creation of something new – entitled the 'New Modernist Studies'. For them, this meant an interest in new media, and extending modernism's geographic boundaries beyond Lodge's, Bradbury and MacFarlane's Europe and embracing the globe. But their essay also exposed the shifting nature of the object of analysis. This essay's replacement of Post with New was a sign that postmodernism had now well and truly been kicked into the long grass. Not content with going newly global new modernism has since then expanded chronologically as well - reinterpreted as a living legacy, alive in the poetry of J.H. Prynne, or the novels of Kazuo Ishiguro or Eimear McBride, and, in Susan Stanford Friedman's hands, as a planetary phenomenon encompassing fifteenth-century writing and its modernist afterlives across deep time.

But it does make me wonder, if modernism has become now as well as then, Wells as well as Woolf, Malinowski as well as Mao, Planetary as well as microtextual, then has it, in fact, become nothing at all? This question is one that might involve probing or revisiting the history of our word and the 'i', the 's' and the 'm'. As Paul Saint-Amour puts it in his book *Tense Future*, modernist scholars have been 'weakening their central term for years now'.⁸ More recently he expanded on this claim, arguing that modernism is not only 'an object of weak theory', but a 'weak thought par excellence'. He dates its beginnings as a field of study to the early 1990s, and sees it as weak from the start, but also argues that while weakness would seem to be 'modernism's obverse – injured, low-energy, and acquiescent – all the cloying orthodoxy that modernism would shock its way out of', it successfully captures the new modernist focus on a critical humility and openness to provisional readings, as well as the study of the 'everyday, the domestic, the affective, the middlebrow, the infrastructural, the doctrinal'.⁹ Wai Chee Dimock points out in her essay on weak theory that weakening requires a strong central term or universalising theoretical claim on which it works its scattering, chaotic, vacillating, magic.¹⁰ This helpfully suggests, for instance, the defining relationship between modernism, as a strong critical concept and modernism as a series of provisional networks or connections. David Trotter, in his 2013 *Critical Quarterly* reloading of modernism uses the metaphor of a 'scattering of tea leaves' to suggest intriguingly that modernism may well need to become 'yet more fluid before it once again solidifies'.¹¹

The image of a solidifying and scattering modernism is apt when thinking about what we mean when we use the word modernism now, and why this meaning might still be entangled in its intellectual genealogy. The bold declaratory statements as well as uncertainties over modernism, and whether it was the appropriate word in the mid 1970s, attest to an attempt to solidify or strengthen – in the sense given it by Dimock – the category of modernism. This strengthening involved a knitting together of disparate writers and artists into a movement, many of whose projects were either deeply hostile to one another or whose styles were radically individualistic. Lodge, in his 1975 essay, attempted to show – not very convincingly to my mind - that there was a 'family resemblance' or a 'common way of writing' that modernist writers shared. Bradbury and MacFarlane, in contrast, acknowledged a modernism of what they called 'stylistic plurality', and the provisional nature of it as a critical 'compost'.

Significantly, too, at the very same time as Lodge tried to tighten the linguistic resemblances of his modernist family, we also witness anxieties about modernism's institutionalisation. In an essay of 1964, Lodge made the interesting point that the era of Eliot and Pound was the last revolutionary alliance between imagination and criticism, and that since the 1920s, 'literary criticism has become, for better or worse, an academic institution (or, if you think for worse, an industry) indissolubly wedded to teaching and research'.¹² Gabriel Josipovici, too was alarmed by the institutionalisation of writing by Joyce, Pound, Eliot and Woolf, suggesting in 1968 that the 'issues raised by them' don't really matter any more; 'as far as most readers, critics, and writers are concerned, they are well and truly dead'.¹³ While Josipovici would carry on announcing the death of modernism – despite much evidence to the contrary – for the next forty years, his division of dead and living modernism rested, I think, on his interest in what happens when so-called revolutionary or transgressive literature, is institutionally absorbed – and when a movement becomes a self-defining critical field. Death, here, might be better phrased as what Herbert Marcuse, in 1965, labelled 'repressive tolerance': talking of 'the market', rather than the university, he described it as, 'a friendly abyss in which the radical impact of art, the protest of art against the established reality is swallowed up'.¹⁴ As Sianne Ngai argues more recently, from the vantage point of market society, the 'thing which can be benevolently tolerated – is art'.¹⁵

It is interesting that the invention of modernism was accompanied both by declarations of its radical impact and by anxieties about its institutionalisation or benevolent tolerance. That the knitting together of its critical, revolutionary, blasphemous, rebarbative, obscene, negative, in Marcuse and Adorno's sense, or 'ugly', in Ngai's terms, linguistic substances and forms had flattened it. And, that at its moment it was named as a collective movement,

individual texts were seen to have lost their critical mojo. It is in thinking through the history of the word and its theoretical underpinnings that we can unravel why we continue to desire, even need, an ever expanding modernism. As the terminology has shifted from the modern, to modernism, to modernisms, to new modernist, its theoretical underpinnings have changed, from a process of critical sifting and binding, to the textual proliferations facilitated by the creation of a strong critical concept, to its weakening. Ideas of literary cataclysmic artistic upheaval and low energy domesticity, radical literary impact and humility, institutional transgression and globalised expression, historical completion and living legacies, revolutionary intolerance and inclusivity would seem to be opposites. Perhaps modernism remains a desirable term because it contains this intellectual genealogy, and these contradictory ideas, within it.

Notes

- 1 Malcolm Bradbury and James MacFarlane, *Modernism: A Guide to European Literature* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1976), 21.
- 2 Laura Riding and Robert Graves, *A Survey of Modernism Poetry* (1927; New York: Haskell House Publishers, [1927] 1969).
- 3 David Lodge, 'Metaphor and Metonymy in Modern Fiction', *Critical Quarterly*, 17:1 (1975).
- 4 Bradbury and MacFarlane, 19.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 19, 21.
- 6 Peter Nicholls, *Modernisms: A Literary Guide* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1995), vii.
- 7 Colin MacCabe, 'A Modernist Manifesto', *Critical Quarterly*, 3.
- 8 Paul Saint-Amour, *Tense Future: Modernism, Total War and Encyclopaedic Form* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).
- 9 Paul Saint-Amour, 'Weak Theory, Weak Modernism', *Modernism/modernity*, 24:3 (2018), 454.
- 10 Wai Chee Dimock, 'Weak Theory', *Critical Inquiry*, 39:4 (Summer 2013).
- 11 David Trotter, Introduction, 'Modernism Reloaded', *Critical Quarterly*, 55:2 (July 2013), 1.
- 12 David Lodge, 'The Critical Moment 1964', *Critical Quarterly*, 6:3 (1964).
- 13 Gabriel Josipovici, 'Structure of Truth': The Premises of the French New Criticism', *Critical Quarterly*, 10:1-2 (1968).
- 14 Herbert Marcuse, 'Repressive Tolerance', in Robert Paul Wolff, Barrington Moore and Herbert Marcuse (eds), *A Critique of Pure Tolerance* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965), 88.
- 15 Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 432.