

Introduction: A History of “Modernism”

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In one received understanding, “modernism” emerges as a working term only in the teaching cultures of postwar universities in England and (especially) America. According to this understanding, “modernism” earned its currency as a word mainly in those academic settings, where it offered itself chiefly as a term of convenience, providing a departmental curriculum with course titles or doctoral dissertations with historical frames. In those college classrooms and library studies, “modernism” is supposed to have exerted a neutral, mostly descriptive, non-controversial and certainly non-polemical function – at least at its inception. This is not an accurate understanding, and the history it outlines is wrong. The word “modernism” is circulating noticeably and in fact clamorously at the turn of the twentieth century. It emerges already and first of all as a fighting word, being fraught from the start with strident and contestable claims about the meaning of the experience of history in general and contemporary history in particular. This is the historical moment for which “modern” has recently been accepted as a designation and “ism” its newly challenging, and increasingly challenged, intensive. Such is the power of the denominator, in fact, that this *Cambridge History of Modernism* frames its broad historical subject through the word itself. “Modernism” provides the point of reference in this Introduction because it centers a debate about the meaning of being “modern,” especially in the inflection which the additional “ism” attributes to it, and because this controversy frames many of the critical issues and interpretive questions that are most cogent to the body of work that is brought under its heading. The debate is lengthening now into its second (actually third) century. In a fashion at least mildly appropriate to the temporal imaginary of its subject, this Introduction will move through this period counterclockwise as well as clockwise – from the beginning of the twenty-first century to the end of the nineteenth – by entering in medias res.

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“What is ‘Modernism?’” So opens the annual Presidential Address at the English Association meeting in London in 1937. The interrogative mood dissolves quickly as the speaker, the Very Rev. W.R. Inge, turns to the etymology of the word he has pronged between those inverted commas:

The barbarous Latin word *modernus* (from *modo*, ‘just now’) occurs first in the sixth century, in the grammarian Priscian, and Cassiodorus, an official of Theodoric. In the twelfth century it was applied to the Nominalists by the Realists, and Roger Bacon called Alexander of Hales and Albert *duo moderni gloriosi*; even Thomas Aquinas was called a Modernist by the Platonists and Augustinians. During the Renaissance it was applied to the new humanistic ways of thought. In the seventeenth century a ‘middle age’ was intercalated between ‘ancient’ and ‘modern’. Our own age will perhaps some day be called the middle age, unless they prefer to call it ‘the meddle and muddle age’.¹

The after-dinner humor concluding this first paragraph does not obscure a skepticism edging into enmity, which is manifest in that opening blast at the babbling Latinity of the early Dark Ages. Obviously motivated for attack, the philological learning in this overture includes nonetheless a precise understanding of the specific inflection of the Latin radical, which is indeed the root of the issue for Inge. *Modo*, as the *Oxford English Dictionary* informs him, means something narrower than an adjectival understanding of “recent” or “current”; it finds its meaning as a temporal adverb, telling the time of an action occurring not simply “today” or even “now” but “just now.” So, *modo* enters into late antiquity as a most timely register of a temporality pressured by an immense sense of eventful change: a special present, a brink of time, a precipitous instant, all in all, a crisis time. These several associations move to the acutest register in the twentieth century through the addition of the suffix “ism,” which adds a self-conscious awareness to this special experience of the “modern” moment, turning the uncertainty of instantaneous time into not just a feeling but an idea, maybe even a faith or belief in this condition of constantly disruptive change.

The special motive and pressure for Inge’s riposte comes then from the modern context of the twentieth, the assignably “modern,” century, which, in his fearful apprehension, is realizing the meaning of a word introduced into late Roman antiquity as the original indicator of crisis time. The notion of “just now” has been lived out indeed in a century already divided into decades with names and nicknames, ranging from the dynastic to the dynamic, from Edwardian to Roaring. Most important, an instant-by-instant difference in the actual experience of historical time lives out – and in – the

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rhythms of an unprecedented and accelerating pace of change in the history of material cultures. Accordingly, the imaginative experience of temporality moves beyond one of crisis time to one of time itself in crisis: a formerly natural, apparently gradual time of diurnal days and seasonal rounds has been sliced ever more finely and grandly by the developing mechanisms of chronometry, which have worked in ways little and large – from the division of the globe into twenty-four equal time zones to the parsing of micro-times within a supposedly seamless instantaneity – to unsettle temporal measurement itself. It is the feeling of free-fall within these conditions that most unsettles critics like Inge. And so his and their attacks, which are more like counterattacks in the sense that they are manifestly reactive and panicky, tend to deflect from the source of their profounder dread to images of the predictably ridiculous, say, in the characterization of “modernist” sculpture as “figures apparently suffering from elephantiasis or acromegaly” or “modernist” painting as “zigzags” crisscrossing “a woman with green hair.”² No, it is not about the mannerisms, odd or otherwise, that are attached to “modernism” as its characterizing styles, which, in any case, are much too various to conform to any one version. No, it is about time: it is about this new experience of vertiginous instants in which “modernism” is most self-consciously involved, and it was about time, in the minds of those identified with this sensibility over the long turn of the twentieth century, that works of art constitute themselves in awareness of time and the changing conditions of time in their work. So, if the feeling of crisis time and time in crisis was undergone first in Inge’s history in the final collapse of classical culture in the sixth century, it is, now in the fourth decade of the twentieth, implicitly but insistently – and recognizably, in the currency of this word “modernism” – the present condition of things.

The decade-by-decade chronology in the twentieth-century history of modernism begins of course with the “fin de siècle,” where the French nomenclature frames an interval with an equal degree of self-consciousness about its own special time. Accordingly, in the archaeologies of the twentieth-century uses of this word, cultural historians usually find the foundational source of “modernism” in the later nineteenth century, specifically, in the histories of European and especially French Roman Catholicism.³ This “modernist movement” included an effort at updating the formulations of traditional church doctrines and, most important, at understanding the history of these doctrinal positions as historically determined and, so, as relative and changeable. And so it is clear that the “just now”-ism of the modernist sensibility was scored into the founding

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principles of this religious movement, too. What needs to be recognized, however, is that this ecclesiastical “modernism” was not the inaugural form of the word in European usage. Roman Catholic “modernism” was echoing developments in the broader cultural histories of Europe, where the term “modern” was already flourishing in contemporary continental milieus with that charged and often fraught sense of a special present, of crisis time and time in crisis.

Through the last two decades of the nineteenth century, cognates of the term “modern” were appearing with increasing frequency in Italy and Spain, in Germany and Austria, in Denmark and Scandinavia and Russia. Primary bibliographies display a range of periodicals and magazines, novels and anthologies of poetry as well as discursive works, which feature the word “modern” in the title. This flourish occurs with special intensity in Germany, where the pressures of modernization were occurring in the most accelerated form in Europe. German journals include *Die Moderne*, *Moderne Blätter*, and *Freie Bühne für modernes Leben*, while monographs particularize this “modern” condition in a number of specifically topical considerations: *Das sexuelle Problem in der modernen Litteratur* (1890), for example, or *Der Übermensch in der modernen Litteratur* (1897), and already in 1890 in *Zur Kritik der Moderne*. The increasing frequency of this word indicates a sense sufficiently self-conscious as to mean, in every relevant way, “modernism.”

What is equally remarkable in continental Europe and, as Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane have pointed out, especially in Germany, is the sudden lapse of interest in the “modern,” which occurs just as the supposedly “modern” century has turned. In 1909, for indicative instance, Samuel Lublinski titles his monograph *Der Ausgang der Moderne* (*The Exit of the Modern*).⁴ Similarly, in Italy, where the federation of the “modern” (as opposed to classical or Roman) state in 1870 coincided with the energies of a much-promulgated modernization: these developments of political and cultural history crested toward the century’s end as their moment or realization, when, however, a change of terms occurs and, as Luca Somigli succinctly notes, “the label of ‘*decadentismo*’ has come to identify much of what in other traditions is described as ‘modernism.’”⁵ The Spanish variant on this pattern appears in *modernismo*, which, as a synonym of “modernity,” centers an intensity of debate in the years approaching the turn of the century. In that process, however, and especially after 1900, *modernismo* was always disaggregating into a composite topic in cultural and literary history, where the still uncertain associations of the term look backward as well as forward for its markers and come to include Parnassianism,

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Symbolism, Decadentism, even pre-Raphaelitism.⁶ This backward-turning aspect in the term emerges in Latin America as a point of strong reaction “around the turn of the last century,” as Rubén Gallo notes in this *History* in his chapter on “modernism” in Spanish America. Here a “once” but no longer “controversial verse became the rallying cry of a new movement called *post-modernismo* (not to be confused with postmodernism), which called for a poetic renewal and a new aesthetics.”

The sense of crisis time and time in crisis in “modernism” thus clusters around the century’s turn as its likeliest temporal environment. As Frank Kermode has written about the end-and-beginning feeling of the turn of centuries, it is at this (recurring) point in history that a sense of instability is at its most intense.⁷ In this understanding, the feeling of unease is as urgently uncertain as it is necessarily brief. There are other ways of explaining the brief but intense life of the turn-of-the-century “modern,” however, which involve the more particular history of the century then ending on the European continent. Recalling this history may allow us to understand some of the reasons why “modernism” fades as a critical descriptor for subsequent cultural histories on the continent even while it gains strength as a counter of value and center of attention from the beginning through the end of the twentieth century in Britain and America.

Continental Europe had known crisis times in the century then ending with an intensity worth remembering. If we understand revolution in its profoundest dimension as an effort of returning to some radical version of human sociality and, in effect, beginning history anew, we can see that the pan-European revolutions of the period extending from 1789 through 1848 or 1851 witness a continuing and increasingly desperate attempt at this renovation of historical time. This impetus finds a signature, original formulation in the new calendar of revolutionary France, which renames the months of the calendar year as the most explicit sign of the imaginative aspiration for a new time. It is not just those measures of temporality that are being renamed. Time itself is being reinvented as a dimension of novel possibility in the future perfect tense of visionary history. The manifest failure of this ambition is scored into the title of Karl Marx’s 1852 documentary memoir of revolutions lapsing now across Europe as well as in France: *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*. There is a specially condensed, bitter eloquence here. Where the word from the revolutionary calendar of republican France echoes ahead to the next Bonaparte, we hear the token of a new future closing down around a name that is not just recurring and so dynastic but institutionalized: by the end of this phrase, as by the end of the

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period the title frames, the quality of improvisational time in revolutionary temporality has all too obviously run down. This history of disappointed as well as expectant time converges as a complex sensibility, then, toward the turn of the century, when the force of this precedent history charges that otherwise arbitrary marker. This memory bears all too evident witness to the fact that a moment of round-numbered chronology may not be the circumstance of some apocalyptic transformation. And so the verbal token of crisis time – conveying not just the expectation of change or renovation but the feeling of an acute present, a preoccupation with and in a brink instant, of living in a Now explicitly different from a Then or even a Next – is let go with the feeling of crisis fatigue for which this history is prequel and explanation. In France, indeed, where the history of failed revolutions is perhaps most acute, the French cognate for “modernism” has never enjoyed any strong purchase as a term of interest or denominator of value in literary and cultural history, as Jean-Michel Rabaté points out in his chapter on Proust and Gide and Larbaud in this *History*. Such is the power of the word, it seems, that it has been displaced from the cultural histories in which its meaning has been made most starkly real.

But not unrealized: the radical meaning of “modernism” is readily and necessarily applicable to the cultural productions of the countries covered in this *History*. In the work of many different and in fact changing and emerging nations (Russia and Ireland and Austria among them), the strong sense of the root meaning of the word is not at all attenuated: it is extended, diversified, even intensified. This work occurs under the rubric of the term more enduringly in Britain and North America, where the sense of crisis time and time in crisis does not include the events and memory, all in all, the form of historical consciousness, which put pressure on the sense of the word on continental tongues. So, in English, “modernism” operates as a denominator for a more chronic pattern of consciousness and a more diachronic experience of history. This is not to say, however, that the word abides in English in the quiet of consensus understandings in the long and lengthening era of the transatlantic midcentury. In the entity of faith or belief that this suffix makes of the modern condition, “modernism” suggests not just the awareness but the acceptance of crisis time as the abiding time of the modern century. And the fight over this idea flares up first as the end of the previous century begins.

In 1891, in *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, Thomas Hardy produces a phrase that will echo across the turn of the century as a resonant expression of crisis time and its contemporary discontents: “the ache of modernism.” Hardy’s narrator

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uses this phrase to describe the feeling Tess experiences in seeing a vision of days winding away into a future that is at once infinite and diminishing, an eternity that is both meaningless and menacing.⁸ This is a vision of time future as time indeterminate, as time unblessed and unbound from the covenants of eschatology, all in all, as time detached from the patterns of traditional biblical significance. Indeed, the insignificance of traditional time provides a new significance, a new critical condition. And “modernism” is the word for this condition. In Tess’s vision, the experience of time is suspended ever in a moment that recurs without meaningful sequence or consequence, where the root of the “just now” meaning of “modernism” includes the even more challenging sense of “only now” or “no more than now.” Tess stands thus in the exceptionality of her own instant as a radical “modernist.” And while her experience is historically grounded and broadly shared (her feelings are “those of the age”),⁹ her vision stands for the sense of a present that is an isolated and radicalized piece of time, being at once full of itself and emptied of precedents or destinies. This is the modernism that hurts, and, in view of the whole “age” that shares this feeling, there is a lot of pain to go around. The hurt may be located most indicatively where older, accustomed understandings of time are confronted by an assignably “modern” one, which includes not just the diminishment of the post-Enlightenment idea of progressive history but the intensification of the feeling of existence in the sheerest of instants, in a phrase, the emergent menace of existentialism. So, “modernism” already enfolds the complexity of a fully and doubly measured sense, which includes the promise and the disappointment of the futurity Tess views in advancing but diminishing days. The deep time of “modernism” is this counter-rhythmic condition, which runs through the commentary on either side of that turning century.

“The Ache of Modernism”: in 1897, the phrase is already resonant and still provocative enough to provide the title for an essay in *The Wesleyan-Methodist Magazine*. In this venue, one might expect George Northcroft to complain about Hardy’s already well-known apostasy, but he concentrates instead on the meaning of his title phrase for this particular historical moment. “We are too much the children of the hour to be untouched by it,” Northcroft admits, and reiterates: “It is widely felt, and in many cases keenly. It is more than a literary fashion. It is a striking phase of the temper of to-day.” The “to-day” that Northcroft is marking is implicitly but irresistibly the short and shortening day of the end of the century, when a particularly “modern pessimism” and “modern sadness” attends the art of that “modern writer” and all those “modern novelists” that provisions “the public library of any

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modern city.” Repeating “modern” with an insistence equal to its frequency in that reiterative bibliography of German periodicals on or about the same year, Northcroft consolidates his self-consciousness about the condition to which the word refers, expressing the sense of the “ism” suffix in this conspicuous refrain. And this is a “modernism” that hurts just where Hardy feels it most keenly, that is, where the art of this self-consciously “modern” moment produces “no *lasting* satisfaction.”¹⁰ The cultural value being threatened shows clearly in the title of the next article in this issue of the journal: “*Lasting Happiness*.”¹¹ The impermanence that is scored into the root meaning of radical “modernism” is a condition equally of threat and opportunity, where an improvisatory “modern” is always allied with a sense of disintegration, so that the message of this mercurial instant includes also and inevitably a hermeneutic of decay.

Those are the threats against which R.A. Scott-James attempts to defend his “modernism” in the first book-length work of literary criticism to carry the English word in its title: *Modernism and Romance* (1908). He moves the meaning of the first of his title words toward the side of improvisatory opportunity. He puts “modernism” on the plotline of a “romance” novel of history that is driven to ever-better ends by a Progress-minded ideology. In this way, Scott-James’s book offers an inaugural form of a one-sided but defensive construction of “modernism” that will continue to be heard for at least a century longer. This early instance is indeed a radical form. So hard is Scott-James pushing this single-minded idea of Progress-minded modernism, he reads even the novels of a late imperial age, Conrad’s most conspicuously and in fact preposterously, as testaments to the assertion “that our civilisation so far from being very old is really in its infancy.”¹² All of this effortful work represents an attempt to counter the negative inflection of its Latin radical, the “passing moment” sense of its “just now” meaning, which is more than an inference insofar as it has already found a timely habitation and alternative name: “Decadence.”

This sensibility flourished (if “decadence” can be said to flourish) in the English as well as the continental *fin de siècle*. This last decade before the last century of the millennium provides an initial, defining instance of the idea of crisis time or time in crisis that “modernism” denominates. This so-called “decade of Decadence” provides a primary, paradigmatic location of the imaginative time of “modernism” as a verbal concept. And it is a measure of the threat presented by this negative side of dissolving time – told and tolled in the countdown letdown of Northcroft’s self-consciously “modern” time – that Scott-James has to counter it so strenuously. This work extends

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past his chapter “The Decadents,” which includes a single- and bloody-minded denunciation of that group, and into the strenuous efforts of passages like this:

It is a wearisome tale to tell . . . He is happy indeed who does not understand what I have sought to suggest rather than to explain . . . if he has not felt these and all the other parts of our over-developed community shaking and shivering in self-conscious postures, groaning in the agonies either of actual physical pain or the self-imposed torture of affectation, then he belongs to the happy few who have not been compelled to witness the “ache of modernism.”¹³

Readers still familiar with the art and literature of the fin de siècle recognized the type characters of *décadence* in this *mise-en-scène*. Their febrile exhaustion, more specifically their *overripe* (“over-developed”) condition – these figures repeat the trope of civilization at its decaying-before-dying end that recurs among Decadent writers from Théophile Gautier on. Scott-James’s *tableau mordant* revives it all, and all for his own strenuous purpose – to make these figures alien to the optimist’s “modernism,” which he is trying to cure of the “ache” Hardy’s phrase preserves still in the nerve it touches. The pain of decaying time remains a constitutive element of this modernism even – or especially – as Scott-James works so hard to alleviate it.

This archive of turn-of-the-century writings restores some of the fullness of the discursive work being performed with and through “modernism.” In this original force field, the verbal radical generates the primary terms of the relevant debate, which swings between the opposite possibilities of its twofold sense. These root meanings may be attenuated in due course, even in short course, but, even when renamed and rehabbed in the longer durée of its ongoing use, the core ideas will continue to apply.

In shorter course, those potent signifiers of instability and diminishment are shifted into an increasingly indeterminate range of dangers which, in their variety, preserve some of the original negativity but diffuse its particular threat. So dispersed, the meanings of “modernism” do not so much constellate as conjure up many (or any) convention-dismaying qualities, which, lacking specificity, come quickly enough to be tolerated, even fondly tolerated, and so accommodated. Already in 1913 in *The Athenaeum*, for early instance, the author of “Modernism at the Albert Hall” asks “liberal-minded men” to look past the evidently “dangerous tendency” in some of the work on view, which includes cubism and futurism as well as post-impressionism, and recognize that “this revolution, if it is a real revolution, cannot be checked.” The use of “revolution” in this article, which includes the

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intensifying repetition of the word, includes a history of political revolutions in Europe that has been rewritten and reoriented in English, it seems, into a promissory cultural rebirth. Recognized as inevitable, needing thus to be allowed, this specifically cultural revolution is accommodated now, in the closing note of the piece, as “the immediate herald of a new Renaissance.”¹⁴ So, in 1917, in the American journal *New Opinion*, the worst that can be said about the impresario of the original Parisian production of Stravinsky’s *Le sacre du printemps*, which earned far worse for its recognizably or assignably “modernist” quality in 1913, is: “Jean Cocteau, the daring modernist poet.”¹⁵ So in 1925, in a review of Marianne Moore’s poems in the American *Dial*, a magazine already sided with a poetics identifiably and also nominally “modernist,” William Carlos Williams can write to this evolving consciousness of popular acceptance: “modernism is distressing to many who would at least tolerate it if they knew how. These individuals, who cannot bear the necessary appearance of disorder in all immediacy, could be led to appreciation through critical study.”¹⁶

The “critical study” that Williams asks for is the activity necessary to accommodate the quality of “difficulty” that comes increasingly to be attributed to “modernism.” This “difficulty” needs to be understood as an attributed, not a synonymic or intrinsic, condition, and so denaturalized. It may be understood best in terms of the uses and motives it serves in a cultural economy broader than one reader’s, one viewer’s, one listener’s experience.

While landmark works of modernism – from Schoenberg’s to Joyce’s to Kandinsky’s – create perplexity even for their most assiduous critics, the assigning of “difficulty” to this work also serves as a simpler equivalent – a euphemism – for the more challenging “difference” the works of modernism may register from conventional styles of representation. In fact, “difficulty” represents a quality of experience or a category of value that a number of modernists pointedly contest, seeing it as a misplaced understanding about what a work of art is or can do. “Never explain,” T.S. Eliot is said to have said, providing that cryptic motto for this authorial advice for remaining cryptic. The elusiveness – the irreducibility – of an art identified as “modernist” may locate the essential difference it presents to mass-educated notions. In a cultural history that has witnessed a burgeoning growth in the extent of “general” education, which emphasizes basic comprehension as the aim or merit of its activity, a standard-issue art will be regarded as a conveyor of content, as a statement of reducible truths. An art that presents, however, rather than represents: such is the motive and means of work identified as