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1 Approaching modernism

- What is modernism and how important is it in its period?
- What is the historical and cultural background to modernism?
- What is the legacy of modernism?
- How can we relate writing of this period to its context?

What is modernism?

Between 1910 and 1939 modernism was the most important artistic movement in Britain and Europe. *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* defines it as 'a breaking away from established rules, traditions and conventions, fresh ways of looking at man's position and function in the universe and many (in some cases remarkable) experiments in form and style'. This is a helpful starting point.

The term modernism itself is a relatively recent one: it came into use in the late 1920s and early 1930s to describe experiments in art, sculpture, architecture and music. Referring specifically to literature, it does not appear until 1955, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, and even then only in inverted commas. Two points emerge: firstly, the early modernists did not think of themselves as a group, and they did not sign up to any shared theoretical position. Modernist writers were individual, often quarrelsome and argumentative people. Many of them would have been surprised to be called modernist at all and would have hated to share a label that was only awarded posthumously. Secondly, since the term modernism was initially used to define styles of art and architecture, an awareness of the artistic breadth of the modernist movement is vital to understanding the writing of the time. Modernists felt that their writing was intimately connected with painting (the importance of the image) and with music (the importance of sound and rhythm). Modernist writers also often borrowed critical terms from music, architecture and painting to describe the effects they were seeking. Words and phrases such as 'rhythm' from music, and 'significant form' and 'pattern' from art, became commonplace in the discussion of the arts. D.H. Lawrence was also a painter; Ezra Pound was a musician and composer; Vanessa Bell, Virginia Woolf's sister, was an artist and Virginia herself found inspiration in painting.

An important book and television series on 20th-century art by the art critic Robert Hughes was called *The Shock of the New* (1981). In it he traced the history of the artistic revolutions of the century. The key word here is 'new'. Ezra Pound's famous injunction 'Make it new' spoke to his contemporaries – or at least to some

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of them. 'New' was a favourite adjective of the time. Literary magazines brandished their novelty: *The New Age* was founded in 1907 and *The New Republic* in 1914. After the Great War 'new' became a clichéd adjective in literary titles. The novelty of modernist literature and art often surprised and outraged the public. Lawrence's paintings were seized by the police and *Lady Chatterley's Lover* was banned as obscene. *The Waste Land* too, when published in 1922, shocked many critics, such as F.L. Lucas who began a hostile review in the *New Statesman*: 'Among the maggots that breed in the corruption of poetry one of the commonest is the bookworm.' It is easy to forget the sheer bewilderment, anger or derision that met much of the work of the period when it first emerged, because it has, like so many experiments, become absorbed into the mainstream.

To understand modernist art of all kinds then, we must recapture some of that sense of shock as taboos were broken and stylistic conventions overturned in the search for an adequate way of describing the experience of living in the 20th century. Traditional representations of reality were being questioned by modernists: narrative and characterisation in novels; the use of rhyme and rhythm in verse; harmony in music; realism and perspective in painting – all were being transformed. It was a period when the spirit of the new and the idea of experiment seemed to be common reference points for arts and artists of all kinds.

Modernism and its audience

One defining feature that marked out the early period of modernism was the way in which its works were filtered through to its audience. Modernist literature first came into the world by means of the learned periodical, the obscure review or the private press. If the writer or editor had some luck, a patron was in the wings; the whole thing was done on a shoestring. So-called 'Little Reviews' published *avant-garde* material and young poets' work, and kept the flame of experiment alive. In his 'Last Words' in the final edition of the influential critical magazine which he had edited, T.S. Eliot (1888–1965) wrote:

> For this immediate future, perhaps for a long way ahead, the continuity of culture may have to be maintained by a very small number of people indeed – and these not necessarily the best equipped with worldly advantages. It will not be the large organs of opinion, or the old periodicals; it must be the small and obscure papers and reviews, those which hardly are read by anyone but their own contributors, that will keep critical thought alive and encourage authors of original talent.
>
> (*The Criterion*, January 1939)

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Eliot was not only predicting the future, but also describing the ways of publication that had been in place since the first decade of the century. *The Waste Land* was published in the first edition of *The Criterion* with a circulation of about 800 copies. *The Egoist*, which first produced James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, had a subscription list which never exceeded 150. New words came into circulation to describe the different readerships: the 'intelligentsia' (a word that is first recorded as used by Aldous Huxley in its modern sense in 1921) was born. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* the first use of the word 'high-brow' is in 1908; 'low-brow' came into use in 1914, and 'middle-brow' (first used by *Punch* in 1925) naturally followed. The world of modernist literature was an extremely small and select one. Cyril Connolly christened the cultural élite of the 1920s and 1930s 'The Mandarinate' (see page 34, below).

Edwardian Britain

On the surface Edwardian Britain was a period of affluence and stability. In sharp contrast to the severity of his mother, Queen Victoria, the pleasure-loving King Edward VII seemed to epitomise an aristocratic life of leisure, heroic eating and available mistresses. In 1910 Britain still enjoyed the prosperity and prestige of its empire. Aided by their retinues of servants, the upper classes basked in the sunshine of garden parties, long days watching cricket at Lord's or rowing at Henley. That is, at least, how it was seen and remembered by many who, after the horrors of the First World War, looked back upon this time as an island of peace and prosperity. Siegfried Sassoon's *Diary of a Foxhunting Man* (1928) captured this apparently timeless, leisurely way of life, as did L.P. Hartley much later in *The Go-Between* (1953). The poet and novelist Osbert Sitwell poignantly recalled the atmosphere of a time when 'music flowed with the lightness and flash of water under the striped awnings and from the balconies; while beyond the open, illuminated windows … the young men about to be slaughtered, still feasted, unconscious of all but the moment'.

This is, of course, a partial picture: it is limited to a view of the top strata of Edwardian society. It also ignores the deep-rooted social and political problems which existed before the First World War. In *The Time Machine* (1895) H.G. Wells had imagined a future that was just as much a nightmare version of the class enmity of late Victorian and Edwardian society as it was science fiction. Above ground lived the flower children, the Eloi, beautiful, weak, totally idle and decadent. Below ground were the fiercely energetic Morlocks who toiled at their machines in near darkness. The Morlocks had just developed a taste for cannibalism and were beginning to prey on the defenceless Eloi …

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Between 1910 and 1939 class divisions became central to politics and the life of the country. The decline in real wages led to a spate of strikes in 1911 and 1912 involving seamen, dockers and railwaymen. In Wales the army had to be called in to quell the strikers: shots were fired and two men killed. It was no accident that John Galsworthy set his play about a strike, *Strife* (1909), in a Welsh mining village. In 1912 alone over 40 million working days were lost because of industrial disputes and there were calls for a Triple Alliance of unions to take strike action – effectively a General Strike. Amongst radical unionists there was talk of revolution.

No longer did it seem that the progress of the laissez-faire economics of the Victorian age (the free market with no state control), could produce a fair or just society. Increasingly intellectuals began to question how capitalism worked and whether more direct government control of economic policy might be the way forward. The Fabian Society, formed in 1884 and an ancestor of the Labour Party, attracted writers such as Bernard Shaw, H.G. Wells, Leonard Woolf and many other progressive thinkers. Socialism became a political force – although the very mention of the word was enough to outrage bastions of Edwardian capitalism such as Mr Birling in J.B. Priestley's play *An Inspector Calls* (1946). The Labour Party had been formed in 1906 to represent the interests of the working class and grew in importance throughout this period.

Women's roles

'In or about December 1910 human nature changed,' recalled Virginia Woolf, at least half seriously, in her essay 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown' (1924). 'All human relations have shifted – those between masters and servants, husbands and wives, parents and children. And when human relations change there is at the same time a change in religion, conduct, politics and literature.' For some time the suffragettes had also been seeking change and were willing to use violent methods to achieve it. In 1903 Mrs Emmeline Pankhurst had founded the Women's Social and Political Union – a title that linked it with working-class agitation. For the next ten years the cry 'Votes for Women' was heard more and more strongly. As the campaign evolved it increasingly became more violent: arson, smashing windows and the use of bombs shocked many and began to upset more moderate supporters of the women's cause.

In the first three decades of the 20th century many women's roles were transformed and their traditionally subordinate position was under attack. The Victorian view of the ideal 'angel in the house' offered little fulfilment to a woman looking for independence. The 'new woman' did not want to be an angel and did not want to stay in the house. Changes in style of dress were the visual signs of a revolution in women's lives. 'There is much to support the view that that it is clothes that wear us and not we them,' wrote Virginia Woolf. The Edwardian lady

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in her whalebone corset and elaborate bustle and the working-class woman with her 'hobble' skirt were as imprisoned within their clothing as they were within their accepted roles in society: mother, nurse, teacher and servant. The ankle-length skirt had risen to the calf before the First World War and very soon reached knee length. By the 1920s 'flappers' were to shock their elders with their short-skirted abandon.

▶ Read the extract from 'Vienne' (Part 3, page 87). How does the narrator view the dancer's clothes and how does this help the reader to understand her personality and role in society?

Faster, faster …

The most prominent feature of the years before the First World War was change. Transport and the cult of speed were obvious symbols of this: the motor car had developed rapidly and by 1910 many middle-class Englishmen could afford to become car owners. That furious goggle-wearing motorist, Mr Toad in *The Wind in the Willows* (1908), was a representative image of his time. For those who did not have the money, or did not like the dust and the speed, the bicycle became very popular; in their old age Thomas Hardy and Henry James became unlikely cyclists. Steamships began to offer cruises of great luxury. The *Titanic* even promised unsinkability. The progress of flight was watched with fascination. Nothing could demonstrate more clearly humankind's mastery of nature than the achievement of the apparently impossible – flying. The Wright brothers had taken to the air in 1903; Louis Blériot had flown across the Channel six years later, the same year as Wells' *Tono-Bungay* (see below). At last it seemed technology allowed humankind to fulfil the dream of Icarus.

Some writers, like the young H.G. Wells, were optimistic about the new age of progress that scientific knowledge might bring. Others such as Woolf and D.H. Lawrence were more sceptical. In his short story 'The Machine Stops', E.M. Forster (1879–1970) imagined a future society ruled by the all-powerful 'Machine'. The hero is the rebel Kuno who tells his mother:

> We created the Machine, to do our will, but we cannot make it do our will now. It has robbed us of the sense of space, it has blurred every human relation and narrowed down love to a carnal act, it has paralysed our bodies and our wills, and now it compels us to worship it. The Machine develops – but not on our line. The Machine proceeds – but not to our goal.

1910: the condition of literature

In 1910 two major English novelists, Arnold Bennett and H.G. Wells, were at the height of their careers. Bennett had made his name and his fortune from the

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Clayhanger novels, based on the towns in the Potteries where he had grown up. Wells had enjoyed great success with scientific fantasy such as *The Time Machine* and *The War of the Worlds* (1898). Two expatriate writers, living in England, wrote in ways that the modernists would develop further in the 1920s. The Polish novelist Joseph Conrad (1857–1924) had shown in *The Heart of Darkness* (1902) how the power of a narrative may be focused on a central narrator, Marlowe. Often the reader, like the narrator, cannot know exactly what is going on: the beginning of the story is shrouded by the growing darkness of the scene until Marlowe becomes just a disembodied voice. As the novel's title suggests, with its use of 'darkness' – one of the key words that resonates throughout the book – symbolism is a mode that Conrad exploits. The American writer Henry James (1843–1916) was also a supreme stylist. He developed a distinctive style of writing, using very long, complicated sentences which many readers found cumbersome and almost unreadable: according to Wells, his style was like a hippopotamus trying to pick up a pea. It was nevertheless a finely tuned instrument set up to register exactly the emotions of characters.

The Edwardian novel: *Tono-Bungay*

Of all art forms, the novel picks up most quickly, and reflects most accurately, a changing society. Victorian novels, such as Mrs Gaskell's *North and South* (1855) which dealt with social and industrial divisions, became known as 'Condition of England novels'. H.G. Wells' *Tono-Bungay* (1909) is a good example of this kind of writing: it gives a panoramic view of its times. It is the story of a relationship between Uncle Edward and his nephew George. Both come, like Wells himself, from humble origins and their rising fortunes allow him to paint a picture of Edwardian society. The story begins on the Kentish Downs in a large country house called Bladesover, where George's mother is the housekeeper. The housekeeper's role was parallel to the butler's: they both had control of the workings of the house and its servants. This position allowed George's mother to understand the precise gradations of rank both above and below stairs at Bladesover. It is a feudal society where everything has its place and everyone knows his or her station – apart from the rebellious George. Already at the opening of the novel, Bladesover is presented as a memory, a thing of the past. As the novel opens it has been taken over by the Jewish Reuben Lichtenstein, the nearby estate, Hawksnest, by a newspaper proprietor, and a third, Redgrave, by a brewing family; all three new proprietors represent the power of new money.

The question is what kind of society will follow on from the feudal order of the great house? As a student of evolutionary biology, Wells knew that change was the principle of life itself. But change did not guarantee progress; evolution can go backwards as well as forwards. (The final vision of *The Time Machine* is a

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nightmare view of a world that has reverted to the primeval.) The capitalist future is represented by the energy of Uncle Edward, who starts as a chemist in a sleepy village and becomes a millionaire before his business bursts and crashes to nothing. He makes his fortune through marketing and selling 'Tono-Bungay', a tonic which is advertised as health-giving but which in fact has almost no effect – except to harm those with weak kidneys. (Wells' idea was based on the enormous success of Coca Cola, which arrived in Britain in 1900 and contained a trace of cocaine.) Wells exposed the new and sometimes corrupt practices of advertising. Through the career of Uncle Edward, he created a picture of the new kind of capitalist who made enormous wealth by creating a need and then filling it. Uncle Edward is an ambivalent figure, admirable in terms of energy, kind and fatherly to his nephew, and yet also a crook selling a gilded nothing. The world of business and capitalism was to become a central concern of the literature of the period, from Shaw's arms manufacturer Mr Undershaft in *Major Barbara*, to Galsworthy's Forsyte family and the Wilcoxes in Forster's *Howards End* (1910).

George, like the young Wells, becomes a student of chemistry. He has the highest ideals of science and cannot put up for long with selling a quack's remedies. So he pours all his money and effort into the new adventure of flight, which comes to stand for all that is exciting, progressive and hopeful in the novel. But the final flight that George makes after the collapse of the business empire of 'Tono-Bungay' is a flight in a different sense, when he and his ruined uncle flee from the country. The novel ends pessimistically, as George the engineer steers the destroyer he has designed down the Thames. England does not want it and has rejected his plans – so the ship has been sold to the Americans.

The early optimism of Wells' novels is replaced by gloom about the future: both George and his uncle fail as businessmen and inventors, and as changers of society. D.H. Lawrence called *Tono-Bungay* 'a great book' and was convinced that it was Wells' best novel, but found it 'so sad' and its author 'a terrible pessimist'. When he came to write *The Rainbow* (1915), very much influenced by *Tono-Bungay*, Lawrence described industry through the figure of Ursula's Uncle Tom, who becomes a rich colliery owner. But in that novel, even though he paints the life of the miners and capitalism generally as ugly and degrading, Lawrence sets up a hopeful alternative in his heroine Ursula's new life. She trusts herself to be part of 'a new creation'. The rainbow that she sees in the final moments of the novel is its symbol: 'She saw in the rainbow the earth's new architecture, the old, brittle corruption of houses and factories swept away, the world built up in a living fabric of Truth, fitting to the over-arching heaven.' By contrast the final words of *Tono-Bungay* are: 'We are all things that make and pass, striving upon a hidden mission, out to the open sea.'

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▶ Read the extract from *The Rainbow* (Part 3, page 83). How does Lawrence use imagery to suggest hope and rebirth? Compare it with the end of *Tono-Bungay*.

The Georgian anthologies

The poet Robert Bridges (1844–1930), very popular in his day, is now almost forgotten. His poetry was widely respected and his reputation earned him the position of Poet Laureate in 1913. His verse was written in a traditional style that the modernists turned against. A good example of the poetry that made him so well known – and of the taste of the time – is 'Nightingales'.

▶ Read the poem in Part 3 (page 74). Pick out three or four words that seem to you characteristic of Bridges' style here. Now read T.S. Eliot's 'Sweeney among the Nightingales'. Compare and contrast the two poems.

Bridges' language is archaic – the use of 'Ye' and 'meads', for example. The adjectives are too familiar and stale ('*sweet-springing* meads', '*bursting* boughs'). The poem deliberately uses poetic diction **–** a heightened 'poetic' language **–** for its effects. The form of the poem too, with its invocation to the nightingale and its metrical regularity, seems dated, looking back towards the romantic ode, for instance Keats' 'To a Nightingale'. 'Nightingales' embodies the subject matter, tone and style against which the groups of poets who came to be known as Georgians and Imagists, in the second decade of the 20th century, were to rebel. In their view the subject was clichéd and the language faded. They would construct their ideas and poems in direct opposition to Bridges and other poets writing in his style.

> This volume is issued in the belief that English poetry is now putting on new strength and beauty…This collection, drawn from the publications of the last two years, may if it is fortunate help the lovers of poetry to realise that we are at the beginning of another 'Georgian Period' which may rank in due time with the several great ages of the past.

So begins Edward Marsh's Preface to the first volume of *Georgian Poetry, 1911–1912*, announcing confidently a new poetic age to coincide with the reign of the new king George V and naming it for the first time. At a stroke he had created the 'Georgian Poets' and 'Georgian Poetry'. *Georgian Poetry* was initially fresh and strong, and aimed to get rid of Victorian fustiness. The first volume proved so popular that, to everyone's surprise, Marsh was able to organise four successors which ran from 1911 to 1922. The first two volumes alone sold more than 34,000 copies.

Poets were invited to submit their work for inclusion to Marsh's anthologies. He then selected and put together the material and sent the grateful writers their cheques. At first the 'Georgians' were not a movement or even a group. This makes them different from self-conscious theoreticians such as the **Imagists**, **Vorticists**,

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Futurists or 'Automobilists', who had specific ideas of what poetry should be and what direction it should take. Marsh's anthologies reflect a variety of styles and his own broad taste. Poets as various as Lawrence, Wilfred Owen, Robert Graves and Isaac Rosenberg were included. A notable and strange omission was the Anglo-Welsh poet Edward Thomas.

As the Georgian anthologies proceeded, however, they came, despite their claims, to represent a more traditional approach to poetry. Generally written in regular rhyming verse and full of adjectives, the poems often looked back to an unspoilt pastoral England. The air of the English countryside, especially that of Gloucestershire, Kent, Sussex and Cambridgeshire, breathes through much of the verse. The poems are full of birdsong, animals, country pursuits, rivers and of the people of the countryside, tramps and gypsies. In spirit they are sometimes not so far from the riverbank of Badger and Mole in Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows*. The tone can be sentimental too: Rupert Brooke's 'The Old Vicarage, Grantchester' (whose original title was 'The Sentimental Lover') is a good example of a yearning for a rural Eden where the clock literally stands still:

> Stands the church clock at ten to three?
> And is there honey still for tea?

The poem was a focus of attack for those, such as George Orwell (1903–1950), who hated the complacency of Georgian England. In the essay 'Inside the Whale' (1940), he wrote: 'Rupert Brooke's "Grantchester", the star poem of 1913, is nothing but an enormous gush of country sentiment, a sort of accumulated vomit from a stomach stuffed with place-names. Considered as a poem "Grantchester" is something worse than worthless, but as an illustration of what the thinking middle-class young of that period *felt* it is a valuable document.'

Ezra Pound and Imagism

Edward ('Eddie') Marsh (1872–1953) and Ezra Pound (1885–1972), the two men most responsible for helping to foster a renaissance of English poetry before the First World War, could not have been more different. Marsh belonged to the English Establishment. Cambridge-educated, he remained close to power as Winston Churchill's Private Secretary. He was an unusual editor: for him poetry was a hobby and a passion, but separate from his political work. (Paradoxically, although he was the one person most directly involved in politics in this period, he helped to create the Georgian poets, the least political of all artistic groupings.) Pound was an extreme contrast: as described by Ford Madox Ford, he was a young American poet recently arrived in Europe, who wore a sombrero, bright green trousers made from the cloth of a billiard table and a single turquoise hanging from his ear in a calculated, and generally successful, attempt to upset the conventional citizen.

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Eddie Marsh, no poet himself, organised the anthologies that were to define an age; Pound gathered around him a more radical coterie of sympathetic friends whom he christened 'Imagistes' and for whom he acted as guide, critic and editor.

'The *point de repère* [landmark, point of reference] usually and conveniently taken as the starting point of modern poetry is the group denominated Imagists in London about 1910,' wrote T.S. Eliot in his 'Address on American Literature and the American Language' (1953). Perhaps the most well-known imagist poem was written by Pound himself:

In a Station of the Metro
The apparition of these faces in the crowd:
Petals on a wet, black bough.

▶ Before turning to the following discussion, examine Ezra Pound's use of the image here, and the detail of the language. Why do you think this poem made such an impact when it was first published?

'In a Station of the Metro' is a snapshot, a frozen moment, challengingly brief and vivid. The word 'these' gives the faces immediacy as if Pound were pointing to them in front of him. The poem aims to give the instantaneous thrill of the moment's vision, as Pound suggested in his advice on writing imagist poetry (see Part 3, page 83). It is 'modern' – set in the Paris Metro – and also traditionally Japanese, as both the form (an adapted ***haiku***) and the allusion to blossoms might suggest. There is no grammatical connection between the first and second lines – the reader has to supply the link. The reader also has to supply the emotion of the poem: what exactly is the tone or feeling here? The poem poses the question of what is real and what is not: the 'apparition' gives the people a dream-like reality. The flowers are perhaps more vivid than the people.

The Imagists and the Georgians had more in common than Pound wanted to admit. Both initially claimed to get rid of 'poeticisms' and to challenge worn-out poetic conventions. But they were also different: Pound had a clear programme and was a self-publicist who ensured that Imagism became known. He and his much smaller group of followers were much more cosmopolitan and looked to poetic traditions beyond England for their inspiration. The Imagists were also more radical in their aim to eliminate redundant language, in their use of strong rhythms and in their focus on the precise image. Names such as Richard Aldington, F.S. Flint and Amy Lowell may be little known today, but their ideas have had an enormous influence not only on and through Eliot (see page 30, below), but on poetry ever since. These continued to resonate after the Imagists as a group had dissolved in the early 1920s. Even W.H. Auden, who did not admire him, said that 'there are very few living poets who could say their work would have been exactly the same had not Pound lived'.

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