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***Modernist  
Inquiries***

*A collection of thematic  
studies related to literary  
modernism*

Editura MEGA  
Cluj-Napoca  
2021

DTP: Editura  
Mega

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Descrierea CIP a Bibliotecii Naționale a României

IONESCU, PETRU ȘTEFAN

*Modernist Inquiries: a collection of thematic studies related to literary  
modernism* / Petru Ștefan Ionescu. – Cluj-Napoca: Mega, 2021

Conține bibliografie

ISBN 978-606-020-365-0

82.09



EDITURA MEGA | [www.edituramega.ro](http://www.edituramega.ro)

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## Introduction



This is a volume of collected articles published over the past 5 years in scientific journals, discussing topics related to modernism and literature. They approach themes appertaining to some of the main concerns of literary and artistic modernism at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, starting from the need to innovate art and literature, an enterprise necessary for a better reflection of the complexity of modern life, and continuing with the more radical elements of progress that accompany any revolutionary movement (in this case revolutionary avant-garde groups like Dada, Cubism, Futurism etc.). Trends born in modernism continue as well in what some call the second phase of modernism, or postmodernism and are of significant influence on the world of literature today, more or less successfully.<sup>1</sup> Some of the modernists' attempts were quite radical in their intention to break away with the past and create a new form of expression. Virginia Woolf even went as far as intending to create a new type of writing to completely replace the novel<sup>2</sup>, that had become to her obsolete, now more than

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, the scarcity of language introduced and coined by Hemingway was revolutionary, but some of his imitators, especially in the 1980's went radical imitating his technique, and the results were not favourable.

<sup>2</sup> One entrance in her personal diary, dating 1925, and referring to the process of writing *To the Lighthouse*, states: 'I

a low form of entertaining art that was no longer capable of reflecting the dramatic and accelerated change in society, the revolution of the human spirit and the big city alienation in a continually and rapidly changing environment. The great writers always find the formulae to express their genius in a way that is programmatic (like all revolutions) but also aesthetic and meaningful. The modernists could touch the sensitive chords of the human soul by playing their sensibilities, even if sometimes, to achieve the desired effect, the audience had to be immersed into the darkest corners of that soul.

The studies presented here do not start by cutting directly into the core of the modernist movement in literature. There is a considerable focus on the events that prepared the apparition of modernism. Some of the authors mentioned in the studies are what we might call “pre-modernists”, “proto-modernists”, or modernists “avant la lettre”, like Poe, who, despite his profound dark Romanticism and Gothicism, pioneers and innovates in several genres of literature like modern science fiction and the modern detective novel, and proved a deep influence on European, especially French literates from the mid and end 19<sup>th</sup> century, like Charles Baudelaire, Villiers de L’Isle-Adam, or Stéphane Mallarmé. These French innovators, and later also the English aesthetes and decadents like Oscar Wilde, Aubrey Beardsley, Arthur Symons, set the foundations for literary modernism. Other arts, like painting, where modernist influences can be traced back to the mid-nineteenth century were of a decisive influence in the development of literary modernism. “On or about December 1910 human nature changed,” wrote Virginia Woolf in her 1924 essay

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have an idea that I will invent a new name for my books to supplant “novel”.

*Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown*, identifying thus the dawn of English Modernism, triggered by a London exhibition of French Impressionist painters that shocked most of the audience.

Decadence and symbolism can be considered as the triggers or an early stage of modernism, a pre-modernism that lasted well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with many of the prominent writers and artists being influenced by these movements. The deep and heavy feeling of an imminent, implacable, and unescapable end of Western civilisation, the fall of its institutions, including those of letters and education were concerns for many intellectuals, from English author Ford Maddox Ford to German philosopher Oswald Spengler. The feeling of the end of a cycle, end of history for the European civilization, resulted in a sense of uselessness, and lack of direction, stressed even more by the collapse of the previous social order during the democratic age, that culminated with the outcomes of WWI. All the struggles of the new man and all the fears, the nonsense and even absurdity of social life and politics were reflected by art and literature, the faithful copy of society, the sponge that absorbs all repressions as well as all outpourings of society and the true mirror that reflects all the darkest sides of human societies and personalities.

To express the new realities of the day, old forms and norms were not suitable any longer. Thus, the radical break with tradition, with all the previous literary forms that defined literary modernism and had their counterparts in all the other arts. In literature, we might start the pre-modernist expression with the French decadent poets and novelists of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with Baudelaire and Mallarme and Huysmans. Baudelaire's vision of the modern democratic state and the place of the artist of

genius in a rotten society. Mallarmé's extremely elaborated poetry in contrast with the very popular literary mass-productions and series of his time, Huysmans radical break with realism and naturalism and complete immersion into the artifice and of the human psyche, all these prefigured the literary style that would reject all forms of previous expressions and try to create new means and forms of communicating in writings the preoccupations and struggle and worries and fears of an entirely new generation.

Painting had a huge influence on the development of modernism and introduced the first modernist features introduced as early as the 1860s with the works of French painter Eduard Manet. It later developed several avant-garde expressions, from impressionism to surrealism, incorporated by all other forms of artistic expression. Architecture and the decorative arts followed with movements as Secession or Jugendstil in Germany and the Vienna Secession, the Art Nouveau in France.

In music, modernism followed the modernist expressions in other arts like impressionism and expressionism and the first breaks with classical tradition and evolution of classical music can be traced back to composers like Gustav Mahler and Richard Strauss. Strauss' 1888 opera *Don Juan* clearly marks this break and displays modernist innovation from the first lines. Later, Stravinsky and Strindberg brought controversial innovations to classical music, breaking the unity and tonality of the musical phrase, constructing intriguing and anxious, even disturbing musical effects that contradict the entire historical evolution of classical music. Strindberg's *Pierrot Lunaire* (1912) and Stravinsky's *Rites of Spring* (1913) and *Firebird* (1910) are illustrative in this respect. The sometimes wild tonalities and rhythms of their music find

a counterpart in the popular forms of music that were becoming extremely influential in the modernist age, especially jazz with its wild rhythms and influences of folklore and primitive rituals like in Stravinski's *Rites of Spring*.

The seventh art made its debut on the artistic stage in a world that was already being shaped by modernism. Nevertheless, its expression was a mirroring of the popular taste for melodrama and historical fiction, and only later it came to the artistic maturity that would allow for the less popular avant-garde experiments in cinematography as well. One of the most representative modernist expressions in film remains Alain Resnais' *L'Année dernière à Marienbad* (1961), a complex modernist work of art where dream and reality intertwine in a complex compositional scheme of pictures and images that resemble modernist paintings and a hallucinating narrative accompanied by the chilling sounds of the solo organ. Its discontinuity of space and time follows the best modernist tradition in literature, a major concern of the Left Bank film directors of the French New Wave cinema.

Modernism is not only artistic. It is also social and philosophical. The multitude of avant-garde movements that make up modernism also means that it is not heterogeneous, but quite loosen, united though by the firm rejection of past canons and an indefatigable search for innovation and experimentation.

Its dissociation from the popular expressions in art and literature and its elaborate search for perfection and complexity made modernism seem rather elitist, a representation of high culture, in opposition to the popular one. It was also the dark pessimism, inherited and inspired by the decadent movement and the search for a rather abstract and often disturbing view on man and



the world, the obsession with the abnormal, as deviating from the norm, that made it rather unpopular among the mainstream audience. The second article presented in this volume refers exactly to the difference between modernist literary masterpieces and the bestsellers of the day, the two of them never overlapping.

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In the first article presented in this volume, *High-End Decadents and Poètes Maudits, a Representation of Central and Peripheral Identities in Modernist Literature (I)*<sup>3</sup>, I present the concept of centre and periphery as stated by modern political and social sciences and apply it to the theory of culture. Starting with the fundamentals of European culture in Greek and Roman antiquity, I further describe the way how culture started to evolve separately especially since the Middle Ages, according to the social class system that was developing in Europe. Social differentiation led to cultural differentiation. The arts performed at the noble and kingly courts started to differ more and more from those performed for ordinary people. In modernist and democratic times, some writers and artists turned against the mainstream, that was now dictated by the majority, and, following the teachings of German idealist philosophers like Schopenhauer, initiated an artistic revolution where art in itself and the search for absolute beauty were the single goals of artistic expression. All these set the conditions for the innovative and experimental avant-garde movements that formed modernism.

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<sup>3</sup> Published in *Annales Universitatis Apulensis, Series Philologica*, 2017.

The dissociation between popular taste and decadent (pre-modernist) and modernist literature is illustrated in the second study presented in this volume, *High-End Decadents and Poètes Maudits, a Representation of Central and Peripheral Identities in Modernist Literature (II)*<sup>4</sup>. The second article is a continuation, focusing now on some philosophical aspects that contributed to modernist literature. Starting again from political and social evolutions in Europe and America, philosophers like John Stuart Mill, a champion of liberty and individuality, warned already against the “Tyranny of the majority” and the intrusion of the all-powerful public opinion into all aspects of life. This intrusion and tyranny influenced decisively cultural and artistic production. The result was a commercially orientated cultural output that was trying to please the customer-buyer and not to pursue higher artistic goals. Modernist writers stood against this tide, opposing highly original and elaborated works of art to the commercial bestseller of the day. A list of bestsellers from 1894 to 1901 in England and America is presented to support the idea by showing that the commercial successes of the day are completely forgotten today, while the less popular modernist authors are still very influential today.

*Science and Fiction in Modernist Literature (I)*<sup>5</sup> shifts the focus from the confrontation between core and periphery to the relation between the effects of the scientific and technological breakthroughs and progress of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and the evolution of literature and education. There are examples of proto

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<sup>4</sup> Published in *Annales Universitatis Apulensis, Series Philologica*, 2019.

<sup>5</sup> Published in *Annales Universitatis Apulensis, Series Philologica*, 2017.

science-fiction since the earliest times, but the extraordinary interest of the public in scientific discoveries and technological progress in Victorian England, powered by the numerous publications that appeared because of a huge boost in education and literacy, led to a gradual merger of the public and authors' interest for literature and science. H. G. Wells in England and Jules Verne in France are regarded as the fathers of modern science-fiction literature, while Edgar Allen Poe in the United States was a pioneer in this genre as well.

*Science and Fiction in Modernist Literature. The Huxleys*,<sup>6</sup> continues the exploration of the merger between science and the arts into a distinct cultural expression, but also creating a rift between classical and modern education. The most ardent partisans of scientific and technological progress called for a change in the classical education provided by schools and universities, wanting to introduce to the curricula more practical subjects, to the detriment of the humanities. One of the most famous and influential debates on the topic was between Thomas Henry Huxley, nicknamed "Darwin's bulldog" for the enthusiasm and determination with which he defended Darwin's theories, and "our chief apostle of culture" as Th. H. Huxley called Matthew Arnold. A second rupture that influenced the literary evolution of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was that between science and religion, a topic on which T. H. Huxley also had strong opinions. The article also underlines the "intellectual aristocracy" that was formed in England during the 19<sup>th</sup> century and then explores the most famous work of one of the products of the union between the great intellectual families of Britain: Aldous Huxley.

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<sup>6</sup> Published in *Annales Universitatis Apulensis, Series Philologica*, 2021.

*From Core to Periphery and Back. Modernist identities revisited*<sup>7</sup> explores once more the relationship between core and periphery, this time from the perspective of social studies related to the behaviour and power of the crowds. Following ideas expressed by authors like Elias Canetti, Everett Dean Martin, Edgar Allen Poe, Charles Baudelaire, José Ortega y Gasset and others, the article tries to explore the influence of crowd behaviour on culture and artistic and literary expression. The influence of the crowd behaviour was and still is extremely powerful, and literary modernism was not only a reaction against all previous forms and norms in literature but also against the suffocating dictate of the crowds in matters of artistic and cultural production. With its emphasis on individual experiences and the exploration of the mind and soul, its stream of thoughts, modernism could not be related to the anonymity and uniformity of the crowd, and found itself isolated from the mainstream, an amalgamate of more or less radical avant-garde movements developed and supported by a few niches. The results and continuations of the modernist experiments though, have been modelling and strongly influencing all artistic expression ever since, impacting the crowds more than the crowds were able to impact them.

*Natural Disasters and the Rise of the Modern Prometheus*<sup>8</sup>, the last article in this volume, started as an idea about *The Last Man*, by Mary Shelley, but was extended to a larger discussion of the reintroduction of the ancient myth of Prometheus to the modern age, in a time when extraordinary social and political transformations like the French Revolution were shaping a new future for mankind. In

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<sup>7</sup> Published in *Annales Universitatis Apulensis, Series Philologica*, 2020.

<sup>8</sup> Published in *Acta Universitatis Sapientiae, Philologica*, nr. 1/2021.

an exceptional setting provided by cataclysmic natural disasters, some poets and writers inflamed by revolutionary ideals appealed to the great myth of man's struggle with the Gods and adapted it to modern realities of political and social emancipation. Lord Byron and his friend Percy Shelley, following the Aeschylean version of the myth, a pattern already established by Goethe, reinterpreted the myth of Prometheus as the hero and saviour of mankind. Mary Shelley created the first modern novel of science fiction, *Frankenstein: or, The Modern Prometheus*, but turned her Prometheus into an anti-hero of humanity, following Hesiod's version of the ancient myth. Her vision of the promethean myth as an anti-hero of humanity that tries to comprehend his place in a world he is not able to understand anymore opens the way for the modernist interpretations of the antihero that roams restlessly and aimlessly in a world that does not make any sense any longer.

A possible yet open conclusion to the present collection is the last study, *Modernist Open Endings*.<sup>9</sup> This article investigates the perspective of unfinishedness and incompleteness in modernist art and literature, tracking its origins back to renaissance cultural expressions. The modernist open ending is present in literature, music, sculpture, film, expressing the convulsions of a society that could hardly cope with the loss of traditional values and guidance and was thrown rapidly and unexpectedly into the modern rush. In the new and often absurd world and modern urban environment, more and more people had increased access to universal wisdom and knowledge and, left without the previous certainties of life given by faith and a stable social and political environment,

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<sup>9</sup> Published in *Meridian Critic*, nr. 1/2021

started to ask questions about their role in society, about the meaning of life itself. Religion and philosophers had offered interpretations and answers to human dilemmas since the beginnings of civilised society, but the swiftness and complexity of modern transformations were leaving for the first time questions unanswered on a large scale. It seemed that the action of every new question was causing a reaction not of answers, but of multiple other questions. In this context, the role of art and literature as a reflection of and on society and human life was to express the very concerns of the people. Works of art, literature were left seemingly unfinished. The traditional ending was replaced by an open ending, unlocked for interpretation and generating more questions than answers.