

# *European Modernism*

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# *European Modernism*

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# Borders of Modernism

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*Edited by*

Massimiliano Tortora, Annalisa Volpone

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# Introduction

*Immanenza e trascendenza non sono separabili, e farsi uno stato d'animo della perenne mediazione dei due termini, come propone il moderno storicismo, non risolve il problema o lo risolve con un ottimismo di parata. Occorre vivere la propria contraddizione senza scappatoie, ma senza neppure trovarci troppo gusto. Senza farne merce da salotto.*

Eugenio Montale, *Intenzioni (Intervista immaginaria)*

*Besides, interesting things happen along borders – transitions – not in the middle where everything is the same.*

Neal Stephenson, *Snow Crash*

## 1. On borders

Originally connected to heraldry, 'border' comes from the old French *bordeure* meaning 'seam, edge of a shield' and from the Frankish \*bord, from which derives the English 'bord', side. It is only in the late fourteenth century that border gains the sense of 'boundary of a city or country'.<sup>1</sup>

The genealogy of the term border tells us a story of territorial, political, social and cultural separations, and yet, when used as a verb, 'border' can also mean 'to be next to another country' (OED). In this case the term reveals its enantiosemey: while it marks a separation, it also expresses proximity and contact. In his well-known essay *Living on Border Lines* Jacques Derrida discusses this ambivalence at the core of 'bord(er)' by linking it to the French verb *aborder* (to approach). Such a

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1. Cf. Online Etymology Dictionary, < <https://www.etymonline.com/word/border> > accessed January 5, 2019.

‘proximal separation’ within borders proves to be particularly suitable for the kind of approach to European modernism this volume proposes, based as it is on the precarious (and always in the making) balance between those differences and continuities that have so strongly contributed to the construction of the modernist movement.

Further, as Derrida suggests, the reading of ‘bord’ as side brings with itself the idea of ‘taking a side’, of making decisions about where exactly we want to be. If we apply these considerations to modernism, if we figure it as a phenomenon marked by permeable borders, which unite and separate at the same time, then the way we understand and interpret it has to do with the side we take in between its borders. The perspective we choose in terms of ‘sides’ also involves a geographical location – one could here mention Lewis’s contestable distinction between ‘core’ and ‘peripheral’ modernism inspired by Immanuel Wallerstein’s sociological studies – and also a specific cultural context, in which the event of modernism discloses a recognisable path to significance (Levinson). The latter happens when the ‘ideal’ category of ‘European modernism’ incarnates a specific national literature.

Finally, the kind of (physical and cultural) movement involved in the very act of taking a side calls for another important opposition: that between place (*lieu*) and space (*espace*) advanced by De Certeau in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984). Following De Certeau, space is based on direction and movement whereas place is based on stability and location:

A place [...] is the order (of whatever kind) in accord with which elements are distributed in relationships of coexistence. [...] A place is thus an instantaneous configuration of positions. It implies an indication of stability. [...] A space exists when one takes into consideration vectors of directions, velocities, and time variables. Thus space is composed of intersections of mobile elements. It is in a sense actuated by the ensemble of movements deployed within it. Space occurred as

the effect produced by the operations that orient it, situate it, temporalize it, and make it function in a polyvalent unity of conflictual programs or contractual proximities. [...] Space is a practiced place (De Certeau 1984: 117).

We argue that the borders that define modernism produce an intersection between these two opposing models of spatial relations. The interplay between place and space, stability and movement, perfectly encapsulates modernism's intrinsic tendency to reject any attempt to reach a final, stable and reassuring hermeneutics. Indeed, we believe that the most profitable way to explore modernism is through its multiple or polyvalent, to quote again De Certeau, incarnations and practices, whereby it would be perhaps more correct to speak of 'modernisms'.

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The chapters that compose this collection tackle modernism through different, sometimes opposing, and yet complementary approaches. For several contributors, modernism could be seen as an event within specific national and cultural contexts. Simone Casini narrates this through the example of the borders between city and countryside in the Italian modernism of Carlo Cattaneo, Carlo Emilio Gadda and others, and specific national questions are also key to Anna Antonello's discussion of modernist works in the German periodical *Die Weltbühne*. Further discussions of specific national cultural contexts are to be found in Matteo Mancinelli's investigation of the modernist features of Ramón Pérez de Ayala's first novel *Trece dioses* and also in Alexandra Chiriac's discussion of the peculiarities of Romanian modernism through M. H. Maxy and his experience at the Vilna Troupe theatre.

Modernism as a trans-historical, trans-cultural, trans-political and trans-national experience is presented in two further

chapters. Erika Mihálycsa examines the modernist influence of novelist Miklós Szentkuthy on the Hungarian literary scene of the late 1960s and beyond, and Claire Davison tackles the internationalism of wartime radio pageants, which promoted exchange and a sense of community among European citizens. The influence of such works, especially in the literary field, is still visible today.

Hence, while this volume connects and confronts the kind of literature produced within a specific timespan, basically in the first half of the twentieth century, it also tries to go further in its exploration. By considering the possible persistence of the modernist phenomenon in more recent times, it is as if it never really ceased to influence successive forms of writing and narrative representations. Notably what comes after modernism is referred to as 'post-modernism' and/or 'neo-modernism'.

Once again, the hyphen reveals a border, a space of co-existence, in which modernism functions as the basis of a comparison: paradoxically this space in-between presented as otherness can only be defined and explained in relation to the concept it seems to oppose, or that it wishes to reconfigure. Such an interplay is well described by Marco Carmello who investigates the passage from modernism to post-modernism through the concept of the 'baroque', by Federica Rocchi when she discusses the impact of Schnitzler on Tom Stoppard, by Marco Bucaioni in his considerations about António Lobo Antunes's novels and his debt to modernist experimental writing, and by Tiziano Toracca who narrates the re-emergence of modernism in the Italian novel of the second half of the twentieth century.

Attention is also given to some major representatives of European modernism. Onno Kusters investigates James Joyce in the light of Wyndham Lewis's criticism of the materiality of the world described in *Ulysses*, and Annalisa Volpone considers the impact of early cinema on *Finnegans Wake*. Further-

more, Flora de Giovanni devotes her chapter to the figure of Lewis and to the construction of his artistic persona. Virginia Woolf's modernism is explored from a number of points of view; by Petronia Petrar in her reading of *Between the Acts* as an example of liminal writing, by Annalisa Federici who considers the interplay between private and public writing, and by Pierpaolo Martino who investigates the impact of music on *To the Lighthouse*.

Luigi Pirandello and the opposition/convergence between art and reality is analysed in Valerio Camarotto's chapter, while Chiara Nifosi explores the use of musical metaphors in Italo Svevo and Marcel Proust. Maddalena Graziano discusses Svevo and Pirandello through the shared field of philosophical thought, and Carmela Pierini concentrates on Anna Banti and her contribution to Italian modernism beyond feminism and gender studies.

In considering the polyphonic nature of modernism, one cannot neglect the effects produced by exchanges between different national literatures and cultures, which leads us to the category of 'international modernism'. Valeria Taddei discusses this in her comparison of Pirandello and Federico Tozzi on the one hand, and Woolf, Katherine Mansfield, D. H. Lawrence and Joyce on the other.

International 'contaminations' are also present in investigations by Stefano Bragato, who concentrates on Filippo Tommaso Marinetti and his Brazilian tour of 1926, and Elisa Bolchi, who analyses Richard Aldington's fascination with Italy. This fascination is evident in his novel *All Men Are Enemies*, the Italian translation of which, published during the era of fascism, provokes further discussion.

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This collection provides more questions than answers, but that was, after all, its objective in the first place. Indeed, if modernism presents an unstable border – a border that is within itself bidirectional, separating and uniting at the same time – it goes without saying that such an exploration of modernism, set against the very borders that should delimit it, may prove inexhaustible. In the end it is.

This volume has tried to explore the different directions modernism could expand in, and we have tried to envisage what comes next with regard to future objectives and possible fields of study. At the same time, in tracing the expansion(s) of modernism, we also wanted to meet the last and final border, beyond which it is no longer possible to speak of modernism. For these reasons, the twenty-three chapters of this volume raise questions on issues such as periodization (borders between naturalism, modernism, neo-modernism, and post-modernism), national traditions (those that authors both claim and deny), genre (fiction, poetry, theatre but also cinema and music), gender, identity, trends and movements (the avant-garde), private and public writing.

Modernism is not, however, merely a centrifugal drive. There is indeed a common denominator to which all the chapters connect, despite their methodologies, divergent bibliographies and specific national traditions. Thus, as the chapters clearly show, among the various borders under investigation, there is always one, wider and omni-comprehensive, that modernist authors tend towards; it is a border that they try to keep and surpass all at the same time, the border that separates and unites the domains of order and disorder, cohesion and anarchy. Italy's greatest modernist poet Eugenio Montale maintained that such a border was simply 'two sides of the same coin' ('due facce della stessa medaglia'). It is precisely 'this coin', with all its contradictions, that we try to investigate in this collection.



As a matter of fact, in the multi-dimensional world of the twentieth century, every modernist author is supposed to negotiate between two forever-opposing elements. After Freud, Minkowski, Bergson, Einstein (just to mention the usual big names), there is, on the one hand, the representation of a world that has become wider and more structured, but wherein even the categories of space and time prove to be inadequate for representation.

On the other hand, the representation of this multidimensional and multidirectional world (see for instance the description of psychic life) can only be given/offered through writing, a process that is, and remains, linear. Writing, as we know, crystallizes, holds, puts things in order. However, it is precisely through writing's orderly and linear tools that the chaos of the world is made visible. This is the challenge modernism addresses, and consequently, the literary text turns to different codes (music, art and cinema), multifocal perspectives (both in poetry and prose) and radical reconfigurations of its very structure.

There is one last point we would like to consider. Although this volume focuses on authors, movements and questions belonging to the first part of the twentieth century, such questions reverberate throughout the successive years and are addressed again by the subsequent generations of writers. After all, it is not by chance that the definitions given to the literature of the second half of the twentieth century – post-modernism and neo-modernism – can be traced back to modernism.

We believe that this century is indeed modernist; it keeps on being modernist even when 'actual' modernism is exhausted. As a matter of fact, both the persistence of modernism (to refer to Madelyn Detloff's 2011 important work) and post-modernism are possibilities of further development that modernism has itself engendered. This does not mean that the second half of the century does not have remarkable discontinuities with the first.

It does mean, though, that a specific set of problems are still in place. If anything, maybe, the answers have changed. And even those are borders that unite and separate.

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*Borders of Modernism* is the result of a project organized by the Centre for European Modernism Studies (CEMS), made possible thanks to the generosity and commitment of many colleagues and scholars. They have actively taken part in seminars, workshops, and conferences between 2014 and 2015, as well as the first CEMS International Conference held at the University of Perugia, Department of Humanities in 2017. The lively exchange of ideas and perspectives that emerged during those events has greatly contributed to the volume. We are grateful to all of the contributors and hope that *Borders of Modernism* is just the first step on a much longer path.

*Massimiliano Tortora and Annalisa Volpone*

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