

LONGMAN CRITICAL READERS

MODERNISM / POSTMODERNISM



Edited & introduced
by Peter Brooker

MODERNISM/POSTMODERNISM

Edited and Introduced by

PETER BROOKER



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General Editors' Preface

The outlines of contemporary critical theory are now often taught as a standard feature of a degree in literary studies. The development of particular theories has seen a thorough transformation of literary criticism. For example, Marxist and Foucauldian theories have revolutionised Shakespeare studies, and 'deconstruction' has led to a complete reassessment of Romantic poetry. Feminist criticism has left scarcely any period of literature unaffected by its searching critiques. Teachers of literary studies can no longer fall back on a standardised, received, methodology.

Lectures and teachers are now urgently looking for guidance in a rapidly changing critical environment. They need help in understanding the latest revisions in literary theory, and especially in grasping the practical effects of the new theories in the form of theoretically sensitised new readings. A number of volumes in the series anthologise important essays on particular theories. However, in order to grasp the full implications and possible uses of particular theories it is essential to see them put to work. This series provides substantial volumes of new readings, presented in an accessible form and with a significant amount of editorial guidance.

Each volume includes a substantial introduction which explores the theoretical issues and conflicts embodied in the essays selected and locates areas of disagreement between positions. The pluralism of theories has to be put on the agenda of literary studies. We can no longer pretend that we all tacitly accept the same practices in literary studies. Neither is a *laissez-faire* attitude any longer tenable. Literature departments need to go beyond the mere toleration of theoretical differences: it is not enough merely to agree to differ; they need actually to 'stage' the differences openly. The volumes in this series all attempt to dramatise the differences, not necessarily with a view to resolving them but in order to foreground the choices presented by different theories or to argue for a particular route through the impasses the differences present.

The theory 'revolution' has had real effects. It has loosened the grip of traditional empiricist and romantic assumptions about language and literature. It is not always clear what is being proposed as the new agenda for literary studies, and indeed the very notion of 'literature' is questioned by the post-structuralist strain in theory. However, the uncertainties and obscurities of contemporary theories appear much less worrying when we see what the best critics have been able to do with them in practice. This series aims to disseminate the best of recent

criticism, and to show that it is possible to re-read the canonical texts of literature in new and challenging ways.

RAMAN SELDEN AND STAN SMITH

The Publishers and fellow Series Editor regret to record that Raman Selden died after a short illness in May 1991 at the age of fifty-three. Ray Selden was a fine scholar and a lovely man. All those he has worked with will remember him with much affection and respect.

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Editor's Preface

Both modernism and postmodernism are phenomena, primarily, of twentieth-century Anglo-American and European culture, though with a changing relation to that culture. For while the novelty of the first fades out of favour and into the grey orthodoxies of the Western tradition, the second abandons the conformities of museum, gallery and library (taking some texts and images along with it) for the fluid potential of hands-on home technologies and the rich adventure of cross-cultural forms and mobile subjectivities. At least that is one view of postmodernism. In fact the word sketches a culture as superficial and monotonous as it is multi-accented, as derivative as it is new; a society, in sum, with all the variety and flatness of its favourite icon, the television screen. Is postmodernism modernism reborn, the second time as soap opera? Is it a mere fashion (and already outmoded)? Does it describe a new permanent mass uniformity, or a new diversity and way forward?

Only in the recesses of one of those museums (talking of Michelangelo) can anyone have failed to hear some of these questions and the answers to them. By the end of the eighties a quickening stream of studies and commentary had become a cascade – which this book tries to catch but of course also joins – by literary and social critics, sociologists and philosophers, geographers, art historians, Rock critics and style-watchers. Inevitably postmodernism became what it described; for the cycle of more books and articles and late-night TV programmes about other books and TV programmes about films and buildings and TV programmes could only demonstrate the dynamic of mass production and consumption at the heart of post-war, postmodern societies. And this destabilising self-reflexiveness, or, from another view, instant weariness, even despair, at a culture that can only out-clone itself, are among the most commonly recognised features of postmodern tone and style. Some find new hope in this end to old certainties, a redeeming fall into everyday life from the heights of intellectual, artistic and political élitism. Others struggle against postmodernism's smooth surfaces aiming to recover a lost critical distance and rational perspective upon past and future.

These positions have been adopted on a very wide front within academic disciplines and in different spheres of the arts and cultural production. In turn they have provoked questionings about major changes and continuities in twentieth-century criticism and culture as a whole; that is to say, about modernity and modernism as well as postmodernism. In my view these earlier and later movements are intimately connected and comprise a network of dominant and marginalised forms and practices. One book, however, is not enough to

represent the many-sided cultural history in which these relationships have been acted out. The cross-currents in literary and cultural criticism alone, to which in the main this Reader confines itself, themselves run wide and deep. I have assumed that most readers will appreciate having well-known essays on postmodernism made available, and have given more space to these. On modernism, where the earlier main debates in Anglo-American and German Marxist criticism are of considerable interest but too extensive for equal inclusion here, my solution has been to give the first more attention in the Introduction and to present the second, with commentary, in the book's contents. The Introduction continues this emphasis in relation to postmodernism; basically because I see postmodernism as closely associated with developments in post-war Western capitalist societies and because the United States remains the paradigm case for these.

It is true too, I believe, that both modernism and postmodernism have been interpreted according to Western intellectual, ideological and aesthetic models. Though it has become easier to acknowledge this with respect to modernism – indeed this might comprise a postmodern perspective upon modernism – postmodernist debate, for all its claims to a new pluralism, has also exercised a hegemonic pull towards selective topics and modes of enquiry. I have wanted to present these 'traditions', as they might be termed, in both movements, in the commentary and contents which follow. But I have wanted also to set them with essays which broaden, redefine and challenge their assumptions, from positions within feminism, or from black or Third World perspectives. This dual purpose, presentational and polemical, has determined the selection of extracts and the overall shape of the volume.

For The Walkers – a band for all isms.

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Introduction: Reconstructions

'Somebody' said Frank Kermode in the mid-sixties, 'should write the history of the word "modern"'.¹ He suggests it has implied 'a serious relationship with the past . . . that requires criticism and indeed radical re-imagining' (p. 27), and as such is a weightier term than 'the new' or 'the contemporary'. Stephen Spender had used this second term in *The Struggle of the Modern* in 1963 to distinguish one group of 'modernist' writers, committed to the new and a break with the past, from another, the 'moderns' of his title. Kermode terms this 'traditionalist modernism', but warns that it is open to ideological distortion and can seem academicist and out of date in a world where shops label popular lines in furniture and curtains 'contemporary'. This 'modern', he points out moreover, is not the same as the 'avant-garde', and he ends the essay, 'But somebody should write a history of that word, too' (p. 32).

Kermode raises many familiar problems here; of periodisation, of academic and popular usage, of ideological and critical position and taste, and so of definition. There is plainly more than one modernism, and not all modernisms are equal. Kermode's essay is indeed titled 'Modernisms', and though he plots and queries some of its versions, he is ready to take some things for granted: 'On the whole, everybody knows what is meant by modern literature, modern art, modern music. The words suggest Joyce, Picasso, Schoenberg, or Stravinsky – the experiments of two or more generations back' (p.28). Unfussy and trouble-free though this seems, it suavely disguises the double sleight-of-hand by which a literary orthodoxy, at least, came into being; by shuffling 'traditionalist modernism' and 'the modern' together to produce what was taken as *the* modernist tradition. This is the modernism of Peter Faulkner's more recent *A Modernist Reader* (1986). With enviable conviction Faulkner pegs the dates for modernism in England at 1910–30 and looks again to Spender for a definition of what it was (modernism appears as interchangeable with 'modern art' in this discussion). Modern art, says Spender, 'reflects awareness of an unprecedented modern situation in its form and idiom'.² This simple and

blandly reflectionist formula somehow authorises the view that the early twentieth century produced a series of unparalleled 'masterpieces' which still command attention. Faulkner names Picasso, Stravinsky, Proust, and of literary modernists in England, Pound, Eliot, Lawrence, Woolf, Joyce and Yeats (aside from other quarrels and complications, the fact that only two of this list were English by birth decides his sub-title 'Modernism in England'). Faulkner's assumptions are remarkably unflustered and for that reason now exceptional, at least in print. What is more, his account is without the tension shaping many of the earlier studies, including Spender's significantly titled volume. Kermode presents his own discriminations, between 'neo' and 'paleo-modernism', by way of a series of reviews of contemporary studies. His three-part discussion breaks in mid-decade (1965–66) across accepted terms and groupings (what 'On the whole, everybody knows') and signs of change in art and criticism. Immediately following the statement quoted above, he writes:

The fact that defining the modern is a task that now imposes itself on many distinguished scholars may be a sign that the modern period is over. We need a language to argue about it, as we argue about Renaissance. The formula devised will, in the same way, vary with time. A documentary history of the modern would have been different twenty years ago, and will be different twenty years hence.

(Kermode, 'Modernisms', p. 28)

Kermode's is still a relaxed, common-room sense of an ending, but he rightly links matters of definition with broader historical change. In America where the post-war period saw an earlier and accelerating shift into the features of 'mass culture', there was a more vexed and more campaigning sense of cultural change, and hence a flurry of critical activity to meet the new paradigm. The terms 'postmodern' and 'postmodernism' surfaced briefly in the forties and fifties and were then employed, still earlier than is usually supposed, in the next decade as organising terms in critical essays registering tremors in cultural values. From the first, postmodernism presented an argument for sensuous response and the languages of the body over intellectual analysis. It declared itself for open, randomised, and popular forms and looked to an alliance with the counter-culture of youth, drugs, Rock-and-Roll and a new erotics in a deliberate affront to the decorums and hierarchies of the literary establishment.

The broad and contrary directions ascribed to postmodernism since this early post-war period in America, towards an aesthetics of consumption and stylistic eclecticism or a politics of cultural subversion energised by the new social movements, might be already discovered in

embryo in this earlier constellation. As with modernism, however, the important question is less what postmodernism 'is' or 'means', in any absolute sense, than how and for whom it has functioned. There is a level of understanding, no doubt, at which 'everybody knows' what 'it' is – postmodernism, we can say, splices high with low culture, it raids and parodies past art, it questions all absolutes, it swamps reality in a culture of recycled images, it has to do with deconstruction, with consumerism, with television and the information society, with the end of communism – but already this sketches a quite different 'knowledge' from the way modernism is 'known' through the citation of major works of art or artists. Rather than pursue a description of this kind, however, we need to see how postmodernism is first of all a name for the series of social and cultural tendencies provoking the definition of modernism. Kermode talks of a documentary history of the 'modern' twenty years before his own essay. Definitions then would have been very thin on the ground, however, precisely because, as Kermode is aware, it was the sense that the modern period was *over* which produced its definition. The more usual understanding that postmodernism came into being as a reaction to an institutionalised modernism follows from this, since it was this particular construction of modernism which was then made explicit. Beyond this point of reciprocal definition, while traditional critics have continued to define and study modernism in traditional ways, postmodernism has functioned to further 'undefine' its supposed unitary identity, itself often collaborating in the construction of that very identity: as fit only for deconstruction.

Kermode is right therefore to call for a 'history of the word "modern"' and of the avant-garde, rather than for their definition. And the same is true of modernism of course, and of postmodernism. Their meanings lie in their uses and function, their rise and fall in a history of dominant, receding, emergent, and always selective evaluations. These meanings, as I suggest, have taken shape in relation to each other, in culturally specific histories, especially in the major example of post-war America, itself increasingly engaged through this period in a complex exchange and dialogue with other cultures.

It is the first purpose of this Reader to present the broad materials of this intellectual and cultural history. Yet a book such as this cannot itself be free from the problems of definition and appraisal it raises. Is this commentary and selection postmodern because it is produced in the present postmodern period? Is it postmodernist in its assumptions, approach and tone? Fredric Jameson has argued that we cannot view postmodernism as an historical situation and present a critique of it from a position on the outside – for how can we be outside history? It follows that we cannot view modernism from outside postmodernism either. In which case this discussion, like every other, is on the inside looking in.

But does this mean it is trapped there, a replicant under a world-embracing geodesic dome of postmodernism which only sounds like or thinks itself a free agent? Is there nothing outside, before or after, the postmodern bubble? And if there is, is it modernity and modernism? My argument is initially that there are postmodernisms as well as modernisms, that between them there is the dialogic traffic of collage and argument, the building and unbuilding of orthodoxies. There is no absolute singular cultural entity or absolute historical break, therefore, and no absolute inside or outside part from the ideological constructions requiring them.

Already to put things this way is to combine a modernist discourse (of 'collage', dominant and emergent tendencies and so on) with an anti-essentialism, a scepticism towards fixed positions and meanings associated with postmodernism. At the same time it implies the rejection of a second postmodern perspective in which difference is endless and unstoppable, the ever-new confirming the ever-same. For my purpose a better (perhaps modernist) image than this recurring vision of the postmodern world as a bountiful hell of unrelieved, unhampered flatness (the desert, the prairie, the highway, the shopping mall) is of different maps, showing differently arranged seas and islands and continents which purport to be true representations of the same world. A map which shows the South of England, the Eastern seaboard of North America, and which marks in Paris, Trieste, perhaps Berlin and Vienna but not Moscow, Petrograd or Milan is not an acceptable map of 'the' world, but might be the map of a certain cultural mentality, and is, as it turns out, the 'map' of an Anglo-American construction of modernism. The same general point applies to postmodernism. However internally different its main versions, their common geography stretches to the American West, Canada and Australia, and until recently would show little else, even of Europe, beyond Paris and Frankfurt.

These maps which 'distort' the world, centring portions of it through the filter of aesthetic value and the force of sheer cultural dominance, also focus on particular periods or years. The book-ends of 1910 and 1930 for example, which Faulkner erects on a very narrow stretch of island, are widened in other versions to anywhere between 1880 and 1950, though the first quarter of the twentieth century is commonly regarded as the period of most intense modernist activity. Some critics (Spender, Graham Hough) would then give priority to the pre-war years, others to the post-war period; some again (Harry Levin, Julian Symons) favour one year, 1922, as the *annus mirabilis* of modernism.³ As for postmodernism, Arnold Toynbee detected its beginnings in the 1870s; Charles Olson and Irvin Howe, though they mean different things by it, saw it as emerging in the 1950s; Fredric Jameson, in one account, 'in the late 1940s and early 1950s', in other, around 'the end of the 1950s or the early 1960s'; Charles

Jencks's as beginning on 15 July 1972 at 3.32 p.m.⁴ For others, postmodernism is a phenomenon of the eighties. The heroes and villains of either movement can similarly shift about and change places.

The point is an obvious one. What you get is what you see from where you stand. What is more, these different perspectives and informing criteria do not add up. They do not together form a complete picture so much as cancel, subsume or contend with each other. A chronology of modernism would identify a range of artistic movements, decisive meetings, individual works and events, and would, for all its inevitable superficialities, underline these disparities. To realise, for example, that T.S. Eliot and H.D. (Hilda Doolittle) and Mayakovsky and Langston Hughes were contemporaries, that Leon Trotsky's *Literature and Revolution* and Eliot's *The Waste Land* were produced within a year of each other, does not so much round out orthodoxies as unfix them. A fuller picture would only confirm the plurality of modernisms, across their several divergent and contrary formations. The proper approach therefore must be one which reveals and questions hegemonic structures by bringing marginalised figures and movements into a fuller dialogue, in a fuller and more argumentative artistic and cultural history.

Making it old: 'Traditionalist Modernism'

Behind the starting date of 1910 and the 'clear cultural identity' Faulkner ascribes to modernism there no doubt lies Virginia Woolf's famous remark of 1924 that 'in or about December, 1910, human character changed'.⁵ Virginia Woolf went on to suggest this had to do with a perception of changed social relations and attitudes, but did not explore this further, perhaps because her concern was precisely with a new interiorising treatment of character and consciousness in the novel: to present 'Mrs Brown' 'herself', not as a factoring out of class and environment in the way of an Arnold Bennett or of naturalism. By her own reckoning, however, her method was not the method of modernism, for in the same essay she finds the 'modernists' Joyce and Eliot indecent and obscure. We might choose to see her metonymic substitution of the part for the whole, of individual consciousness for 'life itself' as equivalent to Joyce's 'epiphany' or Eliot's 'objective correlative' or the Imagist 'doctrine or the image', but Woolf was not consciously contributing to a 'modernist aesthetic'. Nor were these other ideas recognised as new outside a small circle, and far less as dominant until the late twenties and thirties.

None of this points especially either to 1910. If there was any reason for this date for Virginia Woolf it was presumably less a matter of life

itself in the round – which would have something to do, say, with the death of liberal England, with suffrage, Home Rule, trade union militancy, as well as changing domestic relations in the middle-class household – than of the first Post-Impressionist exhibition of that year at the Grafton Gallery. As interpreted by Roger Fry this exhibition, showing work by Picasso, Matisse, Braque and Derain, signalled not so much a new direct address to the modern world as an assertion of artistic autonomy. To complicate matters it revealed ‘a markedly classic spirit’, and classicism was ‘completely free and pure’; it recorded ‘a positive and disinterestedly passionate state of mind’.⁶ There were cross-references for this new classicism in literature, in Hulme, Eliot, Joyce, as well as Virginia Woolf, but again the claims and tendencies they pursued (for non-representationalism, impersonality of form and design, analogies across the arts or between art and science) were not in their own terms ‘modernist’. The classicist temper of this modernism was directly opposed, moreover, to the tradition of ‘modernist’ liberal or radical political thought. Eliot, for example, recommended T.E. Hulme as ‘classical, reactionary and revolutionary . . . the antipodes of the eclectic, tolerant and democratic mind of the last century’.⁷ The spectrum of reactionary ideas occupied by Pound, Lewis, Eliot, Yeats and Lawrence is well known and a long-time embarrassment to modernism’s liberal defenders. What these ‘modernists’ came to prescribe was a ‘modern’ art which would administer to and correct ‘the modern world’, not collaborate with it. This is the suggestion in Eliot’s famous remark on Joyce’s ‘mythical method’, a nodal point in discussions of literary modernism: ‘It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history . . . It is, I seriously believe, a step toward making the modern world possible for art.’⁸ Following Spender, Faulkner writes of how modernist art reflected a rapidly changing social world, but here Eliot, as we can see, saw modern art and the contemporary world as drastically at odds; related (a weak term but less weak than the erroneous ‘reflects’ or ‘expresses’) as order is to anarchy.

What this history also tells us is that the term ‘modernist’ was a construction after the event. Its first sustained but isolated usage in English appeared in Graves and Riding’s *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* in 1927. Here modernism signified an impersonal attention to art as composition (‘in the interests of the poem itself’), a use of language and level of obscurity well in advance of the expectations and sensibilities of plain readers.⁹ ‘Genuine modernism’ – contrasted with the commercially manufactured newness, the ‘merely modernized advertisements’ of such ‘dead movements’ as Imagism and Georgianism (p. 116) – could appear equally at any age, the vehicle of creative invention and insight not