

## **Modernism**

### **Rebecca Beasley**

Ezra Pound's maxim, 'Make it new' ('Canto LIII') is often quoted as a succinct summary of modernism. What's most inspirational about modernism, in my view, is its determination to question the basic assumptions of our lives, and art's relation to them. Everything is up for grabs—from how we think, to what kind of world we should live in, from the impact of new technologies, to what kind of role the artist should play in contemporary life. Reading such literature is invigorating and challenging and, sometimes, difficult. But how could such profound questioning be easy?

This is not to say that modernist literature is inaccessible, as its reputation can suggest. There is no ideal reader of *The Waste Land* or *Ulysses*, who understands all T.S. Eliot's or James Joyce's allusions—and there never was such an ideal reader. If you think about it, we read all literature, understand all language, only partially: we miss references, we fail to understand ironies in every conversation. Modernist literature often foregrounds the limitations of language as a form of communication: many of its protagonists puzzle over how best to express themselves: think of Eliot's Prufrock in 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', Joyce's Stephen in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Dorothy Richardson's Miriam in *Pilgrimage* or Virginia Woolf's Bernard in *The Waves*. In examining this problem, modernist writers are not only reflecting on their own struggle to produce a compelling work of art, but examining how effectively language mediates our social and political experiences.

But what is 'modernism'? It's a term that can only, really, mean up-to-dateness, yet when we use it to talk about literature in English, we usually mean a movement, or a period, that is in the past. If you take a course on modernist literature at school or university, you'll probably be studying writers who began their careers between 1908 and 1930—such as those I've mentioned so far. Not everyone would agree that modernism is an early twentieth-century movement, though: there are certainly contemporary writers who would define themselves as modernist or 'neo-modernist'.

If modernism can't be securely tied to a period, can it be defined as a style? Works by the writers associated most strongly with modernism—T.S. Eliot, James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, for example—do seem to share some common features: a preoccupation with the city, rather than the country, a focus on the interior life of characters and speakers, and, as I've already suggested, an interest in experimenting with new ways of using language and literary forms. But these features are hardly consistent across all the works typically termed 'modernist'—little of W.B. Yeats's poetry is about the city, for example, few of D.H. Lawrence's novels foreground experiments with narrative form. Moreover, 'modernism' was not a term these writers used to describe their own writing: it only began to come into currency in the late 1920s, when it was influentially used in *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* (1927) by the poets Laura Riding and Robert Graves.

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In other words, 'modernism' is a term that says more about the twentieth and twenty-first century's desire to categorise and prioritise certain kinds of writing, than about the literature itself. It's a kind of advertising ploy, reinforcing values that influential poets and critics have wanted to associate with their own work and work they admired—T.S. Eliot, for example, made a powerful claim for 'impersonality' as a feature of good contemporary poetry in his famous essay, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' (1919), which led to some very strained readings of modernist works, like Ezra Pound's *Cantos*, which contain plenty of autobiography and 'personality'.

Interestingly, and by no means accidentally, the term 'modernism' has more currency now than ever before, with ever increasing numbers of books using 'modernism' in their title, at the very same time that critics are more sceptical about its use. Some of the most interesting research in the field of early twentieth-century literature is breaking down the boundaries between writers traditionally thought of as modernist and those that have been kept out of the modernist canon. One way this has been done is through study of early twentieth-century literary journals, which shows which writers were being published together and how they were read. Have a look at Faith Binckes' essay on this site (to follow), which has more to say on this subject, and you can read facsimiles of early twentieth-century journals yourself on-line at the websites of the 'Modernist Magazines Project', based at De Montfort University, and the 'Modernist Journals Project', based at Brown University and the University of Tulsa. Looking through these journals is a fascinating way of thinking about how 'modern' the writers we now call modernist looked, and a way of finding some 'Great Writers' history has unjustly forgotten.