

# Literary Modernism and Its Avatars

Sonia Elvireanu

*Technical University of Cluj-Napoca, Romania*

---

## Abstract:

Current studies by Anglo-American and European exegetes reveal a revisionary approach to modernity. Periodization and aesthetics vary from one culture to another. American literary criticism advances the idea of a two-phase modernism: the first modernism, in the first half of the 20th century, and the second, after World War II. Typologically speaking, there are important differences among its European and Anglo-American centres. European literary modernism includes many currents in literature, arts, music, and architecture: symbolism, parnassianism, surrealism, expressionism, abstractionism, cubism, futurism, fobism, Dada, futurism, vorticism, etc. Anglo-American modernism gravitates around poet Ezra Pound and his imagist manifesto. European modernism reaches its peak with the avant-garde movements of the early twentieth century, perceived as "an extreme manifestation of modernity." European modernists innovate through a break with tradition, while the Anglo-Americans capitalize on assimilation and renovation of tradition. Our paper is a survey of reception and canonization.

**Keywords:** modernism, periodization, poetics, representations

## Concepts, Periodization

Current Anglo-American and European studies show revisionary tendencies in their approach to modernity, with its stages of innovation, extremism, decadence and revival, new definitions and typologies being thrown up in an attempt to avoid ambiguity. Modernity is often confused with the avant-garde, as Antoine Compagnon remarks (Compagnon 1990: 48), the main difference between them being the former's interest in the essence of the present and the latter's investment in the future.

Hans-Robert Jauss, the reader-response theorist, traces back the historical path of the notion of modernity, illustrating its relativity in time and space, and launching the idea of more modernities as historical and aesthetic period terms (Jauss 1978:173-220).

The ambiguity of the concept of modernity comes from the different content it designates: a. The revolutionary, avant-garde character of modernity; b. Innovative literary and artistic movements of the early twentieth century. The concept of modernity is disputed by the exegetes of the phenomenon, Vassiliki Kolocotroni, Jane Goldman and Olga Taxidou, authors of *Modernism: Anthology of Sources and Documents*: "Modernism is not a movement. It is a term that masks conflict and upheaval and any number of contradictory positions." (Kolocotroni et al. 1998: XXVII).

The same ambiguity of meaning is looming round the avant-garde concept, which may be taken to refer to: a. The European avant-gardes of the early twentieth century, with a multitude of

literary and artistic movements; b. the two avant-gardes of modernism at the end of the 20th century. In the broadest sense, the term avant-garde means innovation and rupture of tradition, as defined by Eugen Ionescu: "I prefer to define the vanguard in terms of opposition and rupture. While most writers, artists, and thinkers consider themselves to be part of their time, the rebel author has the consciousness that he is against his time." (Ionescu 1966: 77)

The Anglo-American Critique adopted the term "avant-garde" in literature quite late to designate European avant-gardes at the beginning of the twentieth century, opting for "modernism", while the period-term "postmodernism" got into Europe from American theoretical sources.

Both periodization and perception of modernity / modernity differ from one culture to another: some western critics reject the idea that modernism is a movement, others consider it to be "an international literary and artistic trend" (Fauré : web). Periodization too is a matter of dispute. Some set the lower limit of modernism in 1890 and the upper one in 1930, others begin in the first decade of the 20th century (1910-1913) until 1940. Some historical surveys extend the end limit to 1950. Marjorie Perloff confines modernism within the 1900-1930 timespan, while Stephen Fredman enlarges the frame to 1890-1940. Some even extend modernism to include the contemporary age, considering that its natural evolution has been fractured by the two world wars. Such is Matei Călinescu's view of five-faced modernity (Calinescu 1977), postmodernism being considered the final stage of modernism, not a new trend.

Since 1960 American literary criticism has worked on the idea of modernisms: the first modernism, dated back to the first half of the 20th century, and the second, post-war, neomodernism or postmodernism. It was only in the 1980s that European critics adopted the term postmodernism.

Modernism is not homogeneous, collecting out of many phases, currents, and poetics which crossed paths since the surge of the first wave down to the consecration of postmodernists. The attempt to homogenize modernism can only be reductive in view of its complexity: "Indeed, it combines a multitude of literary and artistic, avant-garde movements, including post-Impressionism, Cubism, Dadaism, Surrealism, Futurism, Vorticism, Expressionism." (Fauré : web).

Historically, there are gaps between European and Anglo-American modernism. In European literature, the modern spirit was first asserted by romantics, succeeded by the post-romantic symbolists (Charles Baudelaire, Arthur Rimbaud, Stéphane Mallarmé) and the Parnassians (Leconte de Lisle, Théophile Gautier), the poets and theorists of the second half of the nineteenth century, running into the twentieth century with the expressionists and post-impressionists (cubism, abstractionism, Fauvism). European modernism reached its climactic point through the avant-garde movements of the early twentieth century (futurism, dadaism, vorticism, surrealism), whose manifestations announce a total break from the past (Marinetti, Breton) perceived as "an extreme manifestation of modernity" (Gontard 2003: 17).

Whereas in France there was a literary modernism in the late nineteenth century, from which the avant-gardes of the early twentieth century broke away into new experiments, in keeping with the innovating spirit of society, the origins of this movement in the UK are placed somewhere between 1910-1914. The 1910 scandal of the exhibition opened in London by art critics and painters Roger Fry and Clive Bell, which displayed post-Impressionist paintings by Cézanne, Gauguin and Van Gogh, is considered the first British contact with modern art.

In 1914 the manifesto of British Vorticism (the name given by Ezra Pound to the artistic movement launched by Wyndham Lewis) appeared in the *Blast* magazine. Its signatories impose a new aesthetic of "vortex" as a reaction against Marinetti's Italian futurism, and proudly declare that the emergence of the modern world is due to the Anglo-Saxon genius: The signatories of the Vorticist manifesto, appearing in the first issue of the *Blast* magazine on June 20, 1914, including Ezra Pound, Wyndham Lewis et Gaudier Brzeska, claim "more modernity" in comparison to Italian futurism: "*The Modern World is due almost entirely to Anglo-Saxon genius, - its appearance and its spirit*"

Despite the attempt to delimitate itself from futurism-as a total rupture from tradition and as celebration of urban and industrial modernism-Vorticism does not walk far away from its southern counterpart: "Thus we find the same ideology of the "modern " the meaning of the industrial and mechanical universe - in the manifestations of the Vortex and Futuristic foundations." (Tomiche 2005: web)

Modernity relates in different ways to tradition in Europe versus America. European modernists innovate through divorce from tradition (futurism, surrealism, Dada), while Americans focus on assimilation and reconfiguration of tradition, and that is the case both with the first and the second modernity. Thus "post in postmodernism is rejected by American poets Guy Davenport and Robert Duncan (the second modernist wave after 1960), because it suggests separation from what had gone before instead of continuity.

### Western Postmodernism

The new (Anglo) American Modernism is built around the 1950s, the date of the appearance of Charles Olson's *Projective Verse*; a new poetic sensibility was then born, post-modern poetics, an extension of the first modernity, not a rupture in the avant-garde, but a revision and reconfiguration of the past, a renewed awareness of historicity and a heterogeneous mix of structures, languages, motives. The American poet uses the "post-modern term", borrowed from the language of contemporary architects who claimed their right to a syncretic, eclectic art. (Meschonnic 1994: 220)

In his essay, "The Self in Postmodern Poetry" (1979), Robert Duncan distances himself from both modernism and postmodernism because of the nature of the self, acting as an eloquent duplicitous ego that is no longer the poet's authentic self but the poem with its roots in the unconscious. Thus the subject of the poem is not the poet's ego, but the ego of the word that creates the poem. The poet disappears from the illocutionary act, his place being taken by words, and the poet's ego is substituted by another eunuch from Duncan's "trinity": "Me-Myself-and-I". In Duncan's poetics, not only the nature of the poetic ego is changing, but form itself emerges in the act of writing, having no precedent among the already existing forms.

Used in a socio-historical sense by Arnold Toynbee in 1947 to designate the post-war society, taken over by American literary criticism and imposed in 1960 in reference to the new postwar modernity, the concept of postmodernism was finally canonized in the studies of Jean-François Lyotard (*La Condition postmoderne*, 1979), Ihab Hassan *The Dismemberment of Orpheus: Toward a Postmodern Literature*, 1982) and Linda Hutcheon (*The Poetics of Postmodernism*, 1988). Post-modernism is associated with post-modernity, post-history, and the post-industrial society. Its different spelling, either hyphenated or in one word, reveals its perception: post-modernism (Harry Blake, Henri Meschonnic) implies a break with the previous socio-cultural context, while

postmodernism (Ihab Hassan, Jean-François Lyotard) suggests a critical reconfiguration of postwar modernism.

French criticism, however, uses this concept by which Americans designate different contents as an umbrella term for the experimental writings of French modernity, including the *Nouveau Roman*, as noticed by John Barth (Barth 1981).

Joining the ongoing debate on postmodernism, Jürgen Habermas Jugen states that modernity is an "unfinished project", while Jean François Lyotard looks at postmodernity as "the rewriting of some features claimed by modernity." The two critical positions reinforce Matei Călinescu's view of postmodernity as the final stage of modernity.

European postmodernism is based on the principle of alterity, evolved by Jean Baudrillard, Jacques Derrida, François Lyotard, Julia Kristeva, Paul Ricoeur, and Tzvetan Todorov. It is not a new trend, but a critical reconfiguration of modernism, as Marc Gontard perceives it: "a critical return to modernity." (Gontard: 66)

In their progress from literary practice to theory, plodding through the variety of narrative forms that emerged in America after 1970 and in Europe since 1980, the critics of postmodernism have identified some recurring principles in postwar literature: "discontinuity, heterogeneity, renationalization, parody, the return of the subject, self-representation ". (Gontard: 72) Harry Blake's short list of American postmodernists includes: John Barth, Donald Barthelme, Richard Brautigan, Robert Coover, William Gass, Thomas Pynchon, Kurt Vonnegut, John Hawkes, and Stanley Elkin. The European postmodernist show features Le Clézio, Patrick Modiano, Jean-Philippe Toussaint, Jean Echenoz, Antoine Volodine (Gontard : 72), Michel Houellebecq a.o.

Marc Gontard identifies three formal trends in the postmodern novel: the discontinuity that replaces the "unitary and totalizing thinking of modernity" with "heterogeneity, alterity, chaos", conveyed through "collage, fragmentation, hybridization"; the discrediting of the principle of originality, which means "the relativisation of the power of innovation", the ironic distance from the avant-garde of the beginning of the twentieth century and its anti-cultural poetics by engaging in a dialogue with tradition through hypertextuality, metatextuality, parody, pastiche, the rewriting of myths; the replotting of plots, characterized by a trompe-l'oeil linearity, the recourse to the carnivalesque of history as a model of narrative and the temptation of self-perpetuation that perverts the narcissistic replication of the subject through a fictionalization of the self's otherness. (Gontard: 73-74)

Glossing on the same issue, of the possibility of a postmodern poetics, André Lamontagne states:

There is a relative unanimity around a postmodern poetics, which revolves around the following elements: selfreflexivity, intertextuality, generic mix, carnivalization, polyphony, presence of heterogeneity, impurity of codes, metaphysical irony, derealization, destruction of the mimetic illusion, indeterminacy, deconstruction, interrogation of history and of the great emancipating utopias, the return of referentiality and of the subject of enunciation (in a fragmented form and with excessive subjectivity), refusal of the split between the subject and the object, the reader's participation in the meaning of the work, the return of ethics, a more "readable" narrative discourse, the refurbishing of ancient genres and of past narratives, the hybridization of scholarly and mass culture. (Lamontagne 1998)

Comparing the poetics of Anglo-American modernism in the early twentieth century to the postmodernist period at the end of the same century, we notice a return and a radicalization of the principles already exposed and consecrated by the works of the early modernists, which confirms the position of some theorists who refuse to see postmodernism a new literary trend, considering it a critical return to modernism.

## Conclusion

Modernity covers a long historical period, crossed by crises in social, economic, political, philosophical, linguistic terms. In the search for a new poetics, modernism meant a radical and continuous process of innovation, of formal experimentation, pushed to its extremes, the avant-gardes of the early 20th century, which were gradually exhausted; after 1980 it turned against itself through a critique of the modernist tradition. The postmodernist turn can be summed up as an overcoming of the modernist aesthetic of innovation and elitism, the abandoning of the principle of originality, that is, of innovation, waning away into a period of decadence and lapse into *kisch*, followed by an attempt at formal renewal dubbed postmodernist art, perceived by some exegetes or writers as a possible antimodernism (Antoine Compagnon, Milan Kundera).

Originating in architecture, where it designates an eclectic mix of motifs and styles from various epochs, which implies a revision of the past, postmodernism spread out to literature and other arts. It brought along with it the principle of heterogeneity, meaning fragmentarism, discontinuity, generic and stylistic mix, hypertextuality, hybridization of cultures. In the evolution of modernity, with distinct phases of historical temporality and modernist aesthetics, postmodern contemporary art is apparently a parodic rewriting of modernity.

## Works cited :

- Barth, John, 1981. "La Littérature du renouvellement. La fiction postmoderniste, *Poétique*, N°48, novembre.
- Calinescu, Matei. 1987. *Five Faces of Modernity*. Durham : Duke University Press.
- Compagnon, Antoine. 1990. *Les Cinq paradoxes de la modernité*. Paris : Seuil.
- Duncan, Robert. 2014 [1979]. "The Self in Postmodern Poetry", *Collected Essays and Other Prose*. Ed. James Maynard. Berkeley-Los Angeles-London: University of California Press (pp. 394-409).
- Fauré, Anne. 2007. "Le modernisme". *La clé des langues*, septembre 2007. Web : <http://cle.ens-lyon.fr/anglais/le-modernisme-40420.kjsp>
- Garnier, Xavier, Anne Tomiche (Eds.) 2009. *Modernités occidentales et extra-occidentales. Itinéraires*, 3. Paris: L'Harmattan
- Gontard, Marc. 2003. *Le roman français postmoderne*. HAL Id: halshs-00003870  
[https://halshs.archivesouvertes.fr/file/index/docid/29666/filename/Le\\_Roman\\_postmoderne.pdf](https://halshs.archivesouvertes.fr/file/index/docid/29666/filename/Le_Roman_postmoderne.pdf)
- Habermas, Jürgen: 1981. "La Modernité : un projet inachevé," *Critique*, 418.
- Ionesco, Eugène. 1966. *Notes et contre-notes*, Paris Gallimard, 1966
- Jauss, Hans-Robert. 1978. "La 'modernité' dans la tradition littéraire et la conscience d'aujourd'hui", *Pour une esthétique de la réception*. Trans. Claude Maillard, preface Jean Starobinski. Paris : Gallimard, coll. "Tel . "

- Kolokotroni, Vassiliki, Goldman, Jane, Taxidou, Olga. 1998. *Modernism: an Anthology of Sources and Documents*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Lamontagne, André. 1988. *Métatextualité postmoderne : de la fiction à la critique* », *Etudes littéraires*, vol. 30, N°3, été.
- Lyotard, Jean-François. 1988. "Réécrire la Modernité". *Les Cahiers de philosophie*, 5.
- Marx, William. 2009. "Traditions et modernités: Eliot face à la temporalité française, Itinéraires", 3. <https://itineraires.revues.org/475> (pp. 77-88).
- Meschonnic, Henri. 1994. *Modernité Modernité*. Paris : Gallimard. Folio essays collection.
- Oudart, Clément. 2009. *Les métamorphoses du modernisme de H.D. à Robert Duncan : vers une poétique de la relation*. Université de la Sorbonne nouvelle - Paris III. <https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/tel-00947767/document>
- Tomiche, Anne. 2005. "Manifestes" et "avant-gardes" au XXème siècle. Manières de critiquer: colloque sur les avant-gardes à l'Université d'Artois, Oct, France .<halshs-00112236> <https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-00112236/document>

---

**Sonia Elvireanu** is affiliated with the Technical University of Cluj-Napoca, Romania, and with the Speculum Centre for the Research of the Imaginary in Alba Iulia, Romania. She got her M.A. in French, and her Ph.D. in Philology from the "Babeş-Bolyai" University in Cluj-Napoca, Romania. She has published articles and books of poetry, criticism, translations, and essays, and has contributed papers to reputed periodicals. She got awards for essays and criticism in Belgium and Romania. Her book of poems, *Între Răsărit și Apus (Between East and West)*, was launched in Paris in 2015.

---