

Article

Modernism—Borders and Crises

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Abstract: This article discusses the concept of modernism, as reflected for instance in attempts to find a manageable narrative frame for the history of literary modernism. The article argues that this attempt is complicated by modernism as an unruly and complex trend that manifests itself in different ways, and at different moments, as it enters into a complex dialogue with other trends within various linguistic communities. These different times and places of modernism also turn out to interact with one another through translations and other forms of reception that sometimes entail renewed modernist creativity. Discussing these significant aspects of modernism, the article also considers the problems critics of modernism face as they attempt to come up with a narrative framework for the history of modernism and its ongoing relationship with realism. A key point argued in the article is that to come to terms with both these trends we need to appreciate the ways in which modernism is linked to historical crises and traumas of our time, including the first and the second world wars. Paying particular attention to the interplay of Nordic and European modernisms, the article discusses how aspects of modernism have manifested themselves in Iceland, a Nordic island which may seem doubly removed from the European centres of modernism in cities such as London and Paris.

Keywords: history of modernism; geography of modernism; literary periods; modernism and realism; modernism and tradition; narrative crisis; translation; reception



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1. Introduction

At the time of the first World War and after—in a Europe unsure of itself, overflowing with unsettled ideologies and ways of life, and pregnant with disaster—certain writers distinguished by instinct and insight find a method which dissolves reality into multiple and multivalent reflections of consciousness. That this method should have been developed at this time is not hard to understand.

These opening words come from Erich Auerbach's classic study, *Mimesis*, or, to be precise, from Willard Trask's translation of Auerbach's German original which was published in 1946. We are in the final chapter, which deals with radical modern forms of the mimetic representation of reality in Western literature. In fact, though, this final chapter concerns itself with the dissolution of realistic representation, and it could be called the chapter on modernism. Auerbach charts what are for him dismal signs of how a continuous sense and representation of reality elude the reader in one challenging modern novel after another. "There is in all these works", he adds, "a certain atmosphere of universal doom: especially in *Ulysses*, with its mocking *odi-et-amo* hodgepodge of the European tradition [. . .]" (Auerbach 1968, p. 551). He goes so far as to suggest that these works manifest hostility towards culture "brought out by means of the subtlest stylistic devices which culture and civilization have developed, and often a radical and fanatical urge to destroy." He notes that these features, including "haziness, vague indefinability of meaning", are "also to be encountered in other forms of art of the same period."¹

¹ The word Auerbach uses, "Kulturfeindschaft" (Auerbach 1946, p. 492), is rephrased here as hostility towards culture, since I find Trask's strong rendering, "hatred of culture and civilization", somewhat questionable.

This is how the new “method” in the art of fiction is presented in this book which Auerbach wrote during the Second World War. As for the “other forms of art”, and music specifically, Thomas Mann could be said to echo salient parts of this portrayal in his novel *Doktor Faustus*, which appeared a year later. Both Auerbach and Mann had been forced into exile by the Nazi reign of terror, and their works are shaped by this experience. In the case of *Mimesis*, this is especially pertinent as the final chapter is concerned: Auerbach’s analysis of aesthetic writing that bears on tradition with a destructive force—a force that he links (albeit not in any simple manner) with horrors that he has seen swelling in Europe in his lifetime: in other words, with contemporary history. This perspective is relevant for any discussion of the time of modernism, its history, and its places, along with its challenges in the domain of literary forms and styles of presentation.

It is equally significant that Auerbach does not conclude his inquiry by suggesting that the novel as art form should turn away from this twisted realism. Exploring the seemingly random levels of consciousness unfolding in Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*—his key example of this new realism or anti-realism—Auerbach finds a gleam of hope. Something in the method illuminates the way the world of modernity has shrunk, how we may perhaps all be connected. “The strata of societies and their different ways of life have become inextricably mingled. There are no longer even exotic peoples. [. . .] Beneath the conflicts, and also through them, an economic and cultural leveling process is taking place. It is still a long way to a common life of mankind on earth, but the goal begins to be visible. And it is most concretely visible now in the unprejudiced, precise, interior and exterior representation of the random moment in the lives of different people” (Auerbach 1968, p. 552).

It is from within the sphere of these modernist works of fractured space, of “realistic depth” and yet “dissolved reality” that Auerbach looks ahead. Thus, he connects this sphere with his contemporary scene of crisis, shaped by war and devastation and yet also hope for a different future. By concluding this major work, which focuses on the long tradition and legacy of Western mimetic representation of reality, with a chapter on the “destructive” yet probing edge of modernism, Auerbach poses a challenge that is still with us. How has this new literary force fared, and how has it impacted the ongoing mimetic tradition of Western literature?

However, when his book appeared, in 1946, many were undoubtedly certain that this wave of radical and “exploratory type of representation” (Auerbach 1968, p. 552) already belonged to history. That view was to be confirmed, if sometimes hesitantly, by leading scholars in modernist studies as the century wore on, for instance by Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane in the symposium *Modernism: 1890–1930* which appeared in 1976 (Bradbury and McFarlane 1976a). Even so, that symposium was born of the strong presence of modernism as a current or movement which had been avidly studied by Western critics, scholars, and students in the decades after World War II. Looking back, one may see a curious double effort at work, where the emphasis to close the period of modernism runs concomitantly with any ever-growing critical and scholarly attention paid to modernism. In the first half of this paper, the Bradbury and McFarlane symposium and the final chapter of Auerbach’s *Mimesis* serve as important nodal points from the history of modernist studies. These two critical manifestations of modernism could in fact be said to embrace a 30 year period during which the study of modernism became a major preoccupation of critics and scholars, even though there was (and still is) considerable uncertainty about both the aesthetic borders and the historical and geographic range of this “movement” (as it was sometimes called), and about the crisis this movement or current was often felt to be born of. As I pursue this inquiry, examining the conceptual and historical shape of modernism from several angles, other critical perspectives are gradually brought into this discussion of borders and crises.

As I attempt to trace the challenges involved in both situating and periodising modernism, some of the key questions materialize in a dialogue between Nordic and European/Western modernisms, in which the former is both a part of the latter and yet also

a separate domain with its own disparate units of nations and languages. The Nordic scene saw an early rupture in the notion of what “modern” meant as a term in mapping literature, such that Strindberg can be found to usher in Nordic modernism around 1890. In other Nordic instances, modernism made headway in the 1950s or 1960s. Such “late” breakthroughs are not necessarily belated, and they may still be in possession of the exploratory force and structural challenges of modernism, while also activating the border that both connects it with and separates it from realism and other literary traditions.

The term “border” is used not only in both the temporal sense of *periods* (with their beginnings and ends) and in spatial references to the different *locations* of modernism, but also in referring to the salient aesthetic and historical *borders of modernism and realism*. While they may be to some degree mapped as different entities in the following sections of this essay, these borders significantly intersect with one another while they also feed into a double-narrative crisis—a historical crisis of narratable experiences and narrative paradigms—a crisis that emerges not only in modernist writing but also in critical attempts to embrace the history of modernism.

2. Crossing Borders

Auerbach wrote *Mimesis* in a city loaded with history, a place which has often constituted crossroads of cultural worlds in dialogue or conflict—and still does. From his desk in Istanbul, he cast a glance over the history of Western narrative art, drawing on a selection of works that, from our contemporary point of view, might strike some as “Eurocentric”, to use a blame word which often is wielded with scant qualification of its reach. Perhaps I, from my desk in Reykjavík—which like Istanbul can be seen as one of the edges of Europe—should bemoan that Auerbach’s “Western” selection does not include one of the Icelandic sagas, brandishing the argument that they are as Western as Homer. However, I could then in fact also argue that Iceland, like many other parts of the geographically “Western” domain, has historically been a part of the “rest” rather than the “West”, and that like much of the non-Western world, it stood for centuries in colonial relation to reigning Western powers. The “rest” of the world has certainly been pulled into the maelstrom of the West and the process of modernization it engineered, a process often designated as progress, while it has also been marked by brutality on a global scale and has thrown the world into various situations of crisis. In his closing chapter, Auerbach responds to such a crisis—of history, narrative, form, and consciousness—as it appears in works illustrating that the centre does not hold—to recall Yeats’ words from “The Second Coming”, a poem written shortly after WWI—and it is relevant that Auerbach’s key example is a novel by an author born and raised in the heart of the British Empire—a woman who came to question many of its values and narratives.

The makings of Western modernity were shaped at once by the global activity of ruthless colonialism and the scientific and gradually secularized process of technology, mechanization, and mercantile systems on a grand scale, and also, albeit in the midst of the increased need for administration and control, by the struggle for human rights, democracy, and enlightenment (although generally only for some, not all). While it is tempting to discern in the aesthetics of modernism an acute and potentially critical awareness of both the triumphs and the fragility and failures of Western modernity, including its cultural traditions, it is also obvious what a daunting task it is to find one’s heuristic way through such a maze. Among the important elements of aesthetic modernism is arguably its critical stance vis-à-vis instrumental modernization, but this is not an inherently privileged position of modernism. Other strands of modern literature, including realist writing, also grapple critically with the upheaval and disruption entailed in various aspects of social and technological modernity, as do the songs and poems of ethnic groups that get pushed around by modernization, for instance the *jojk* poetry of the Sámi, in which these indigenous “first nations” of another edge of Europe—northern Norway, Sweden, Finland, and into Russia—speak out against the severe encroachments on their lands and the disruption of their reindeer herding and other rhythms of their nomadic life style.

The Icelandic poet Einar Bragi (1921–2005) was among those who made a modernist breakthrough in Icelandic poetry in the 1950s, although he was also a master of the traditional forms of poetry against which the modernists clashed. His border-crossing activity is also reflected in his inter-Nordic translations of poetry and drama. He translated some of the poetry of Edith Södergran and especially Gunnar Björling, pioneer modernists of Nordic poetry, but also collections of the major plays of both Henrik Ibsen and August Strindberg. In the early 1980s, he came to feel a strong affinity with the Sámi, travelled often and widely through their territories, which they call Sápmi, and devoted much of his creative energy during the last part of his career to translating their poetry. He brought out a total of seven books of Sámi poetry in Icelandic, the last one in 2003.

The closeness to nature in some of this poetry is breathtaking, and now, less than two decades on, it no longer seems surprising that an Icelandic poet-translator should shift his attention from a “central” scene in Nordic literature to the life and pursuits of an “islanded” and threatened people, whose existence becomes a mirror for a wider world that has drastically usurped its natural environment. Einar Bragi finds a place for this poetry in his modernism, extending it to bridge not only the gap between different cultures but also between complexities of feeling and an elemental touch with the environment, although he is also aware how this move harbours sentiments handed down to us from romanticist encounters with nature. Nevertheless, in this regard, Einar Bragi was always—as a friend and colleague in fact once remarked to me about Virginia Woolf—on the “precious side of modernism.” Perhaps there is a connection here with the scene Woolf creates in *To the Lighthouse*, where a precarious outside world is reflected in a garden and a house on the Isle of Skye. The title of the final chapter in *Mimesis*, “The Brown Stocking” and the opening scene it alludes to in Woolf’s novel, seem, in spite of the “haziness” and the “vague indefinability of meaning”, to imply a return to core questions of humanity and preparation for more modest but nonetheless meaningful journeys ahead. This is perhaps what Auerbach means when he talks about a “simple solution” (Auerbach 1968, p. 553): going back to basics, back to the everyday moment, every day being special. It is in Auerbach’s final chapter, which is elegiac in its portrayal of a deeply fractured sphere, that the book’s epigraph, from Andrew Marvell, finds its deepest resonance: “Had we but world enough and time”.

3. Times and Places of the Modern

For Auerbach, the fragmented kind of realism he seeks to come to terms with is not a thing of the past. He involves it in addressing his contemporary world, a world torn and twisted as he writes, having lived through times when Europe as a place of democracy seemed for a while all but lost, and he is, in spite of everything, looking openly to the future. Now, 75 years later, his discussion still raises questions about the times and places of the literary–historical phenomenon he is engaging with. The Nordic countries may often have appeared marginal in relation to the more populous and powerful nations of Europe. Moreover, if geography may be found to reflect this state of affairs, Iceland is a Nordic island which may seem doubly removed from the European centre(s). Does the history of modernism in these outlying regions of Europe contain any useful lessons when it comes to negotiating the function and relevance of this concept? At the turn of the twentieth century, or, say, “in or about December, 1910”, to stick with Virginia Woolf,² Iceland was one of the poorest countries in Europe. It was slowly wriggling its way out of the colonial grasp of Denmark, but it was still a Nordic backwater, except, arguably, in literary matters. In fact, it could make a rather solid claim about being the place where the medieval Norse culture was most avidly put down in writing. What was it like to observe the rise of modernism from a place seemingly entrenched in a longstanding literary tradition which formed no small part of its claim to independence? As a matter of fact, there were some

² The oft-cited phrase, “in or about December, 1910, human character changed” (Woolf 1966, p. 320), one of the better known attempts at temporally marking the onset or breakthrough of modernism, comes from Woolf’s 1924 essay “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown”.

interesting modernist experiments in Icelandic literature as early as the 1920s, but for a number of historical reasons, that had for instance to do with an ongoing struggle for full national sovereignty and the reliance of that struggle on an unbroken literary tradition, the scene was not ripe for modernism. In a country teeming with narrative legacies, the novel, as a genre in Icelandic, was still in a fledgling state, although it picked up stream quickly in the second quarter of the century, through both translation and original writing. Thus, with modern realism gradually moving centre stage, the emergence of modernism became a protracted affair, shaped by struggles and interaction between different literary practices. This interaction, involving a variety of expressive forms, is something that I find a fascinating aspect of the history of both modernism and realism, and this essay dwells in part on the salient relationship between these key concepts of modern literature.

Most of the works Auerbach discusses in the final chapter of *Mimesis* appeared in the 1920s. In addition to Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927), he touches on Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* (*À la recherche du temps perdu*, 1913–1927), and Gide's *The Counterfeiters* (*Les Faux-monnayeurs*, 1925). It has often been assumed that the aesthetic tremors in works like these and from this period are shaped by the cataclysm of World War I, seen by many as the breakdown of a civilization which supposedly had reached its highest peak in a Europe shaped by the Enlightenment, growing civic liberty, and prosperity. Some aspects of this radicalized aesthetics of modernism, though, have often been traced back to the mid-nineteenth century, to works such as Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* and Baudelaire's *The Flowers of Evil* (*Les Fleurs du mal*). In the unusual structural relations between form, representation, content, and implication in these works, scholars have detected forebodings of what was to unfold later, although a historical shift towards modernism is generally not supposed to occur until 1890, or even as late as 1910, and many of the signature works of modernism are frequently not seen to emerge until the 1920s—prominent works being, for instance, *Ulysses* and Eliot's *The Waste Land* from the often termed “annus mirabilis”, 1922.

However, scholars are not likely to be unanimous in drawing such historical boundaries or fault lines or in pinpointing individual watershed works. The relevance of *Ulysses* and *The Waste Land* may ride in part on the ever-growing international prominence of the English language since the early twentieth century, and when one starts looking in other quarters, the groundbreaking works of modernism manifest a variety of different turns and tunes—in different languages and emerging at different times—although many of them certainly did appear in the wake of the First World War.

When Auerbach was deliberating the dissolution of outer reality in the works of Virginia Woolf and other authors, the critical debate about this trend had been under way for some time, often under the rubric of the *avant-garde* or its various individual groups. In addition, such unrest and attempts at new departures in the works and world of literature were frequently signalled with a special emphasis on the words *new* or *modern*, for instance in English-, French-, or German-language discourse (also as nouns, e.g., *die Moderne* in German)—it was *modern* with an implied stress, indicating a departure from literary traditions. These variations in the meaning of “modern” are as relevant as they can be slippery. They had been employed differently by the Danish scholar and critic Georg Brandes as early as 1871 in the phrase “The modern breakthrough” (“Det moderne gennembrud”) which came to stand for a crucible of ideas and discourses, literature as well as non-fiction, over the next two decades, marking a break with conservative, authoritarian views, and opening Scandinavian culture and public debate to the liberal politics, scientific theories, and social criticism which had been on the move in Europe for some time. Significantly, a part of this breakthrough consisted in translations: the writer J.P. Jacobsen translated Darwin into Danish, while Brandes himself translated John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women*.

However, Brandes felt that literature itself should also be a platform for public debate, tackling the problems of modern society.³ It should not be surprising that this Scandinavian modern breakthrough was strongly represented by realist and naturalist writing. Nevertheless, in the long run, and as it spread to the other Nordic countries, especially Norway and Sweden, it did not turn out to be a streamlined movement at all and could even be described as a cauldron of ideas, approaches, and expressions in motion—and this can also be said of the ideas and opinions of Brandes himself. While this modern breakthrough helped feed the main trajectory of literary realism into the twentieth century, it also fostered elements of neo-romanticism and symbolism, and literary ventures that seemed to be driven by psychological energies more than obvious social concerns—or perhaps they met head-to-head, as in Knut Hamsun's novel *Sult* (Hunger 1890). The two writers most important for and illustrative of the dimensions of this breakthrough, also broke into the international limelight in the last quarter of the nineteenth century: The Norwegian Henrik Ibsen and the Swede August Strindberg. It is in no small measure because of their modern “unrest” that it has seemed propitious to search in this Nordic cauldron for early signs of the shift towards modernism.

The meaning of the word “modern” was thus in considerable flux in the latter half of the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth (and perhaps still is). The term “modernism” as such, however, was not regularly or widely used in Europe until well into the twentieth century, for instance in English and in the Nordic languages. Important elements in the early debate about avant-garde art and literature took place in what are often called “little magazines” which frequently brought together experimental literary works, aesthetic manifestoes, and critical commentaries. Concomitantly, scholarly exploration gradually increased, and in retrospect, it seems obvious that the discussion surrounding modernism, especially in the post-WWII era, is in various ways closely tied to the expansion of literary scholarship within the academy, in particular as it pertains to the enhanced presence of modern literature as part of the university curriculum.

However, if modernism is at once an object and a concept of the history of literature and the other arts, how do we make use of the concept in getting a *historical grasp* on relevant phenomena, their qualities, and contexts, in space and time? Can it be called a “movement” and allotted both a place and a period within which it can be observed and studied at a certain historical distance? The concept of modernism has long been employed for such demarcation. The widely read symposium *Modernism* from 1976, edited by Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, was probably the most influential book in modernist studies in the last quarter of the twentieth century (and at the same time, it helped firmly anchor “modernism” as a concept within English, which was rapidly securing its place as the new academic lingua franca). The book's subtitle was simply 1890–1930. It was published by Penguin Books as part of the series *Pelican Guides to European Literature* and one could therefore assume that this period in European literary history was in some crucial sense under the aegis of modernism. This was strongly underscored in 1991 when the book was reprinted with a new preface and a cover where the words “*A Guide to European Literature*” had been inserted between the two parts of the (previous) title: “*Modernism*” and “1890–1930”. The additional “European” emphasis sits a little awkwardly with the fact that North America is part of the territory covered by the book. The actual title page of the book, though, remained unchanged (Bradbury and McFarlane 1991a).⁴

It is worth taking a close look at this volume as a precursor to subsequent activity in modernist studies, up to the present. Bradbury and McFarlane's symposium can be seen as confirming Fredric Jameson's oft-quoted phrase: “We cannot not periodize” (Jameson 2002, p. 29), but it also illustrates how the defining traits of what we refer to as “periods” are sometimes units in motion, aesthetic and cultural paradigms whose shapes and times are determined by cultural geography. The scope of the volume is not limited

³ For an extensive portrayal of Brandes in English, see Oskar Seidlin (1942).

⁴ The new front cover, with what thus has the look of an expanded subtitle, is adorned with the portraits of nine writers, four of whom are American: Gertrude Stein, Wallace Stevens, Ernest Hemingway, and Marianne Moore.

to Anglo-American literature, as was often the case in books about modernism written in English.⁵ An ambitious attempt is made to pull together threads from a wide spectrum of European and to some extent American literature. This volume, like Auerbach's book, is clearly "Eurocentric", a designation that is in fact often made to include North America. Nonetheless, this is how the book is deliberately mapped out, and in the 1991 preface, Bradbury and McFarlane emphasize that "in the opening phases of the Modern movement the centre was unmistakably in Europe. European ideas and ideals, European dissents and crises, European developments and disorders, fed it" (Bradbury and McFarlane 1991b, p. 14).

Apart from introductory essays, this almost 700 page book is divided into three parts. A special section on the "Geography of Modernism" focuses on cities portrayed as prominent in the experiential world of modernism, i.e., Berlin, Paris, Vienna, Prague, Chicago, New York, and London. This is followed by a section of seven articles on individual literary movements of modernism, from symbolism through imagism, vorticism, futurism, and expressionism, to dada and surrealism. The second half of the book comprises 17 articles on modernism in poetry, the novel, and drama, frequently with an emphasis on works by key authors (mostly men), such as Rilke, Valéry, Eliot, Pound, Yeats, Thomas Mann, Proust, Kafka, Joyce, Strindberg, Brecht, and Pirandello. Elements of certain works are examined, but the process involves a portrayal of central authors, a modernist canon, or what some might want to see as a fleshing out of "high modernism". Although the use of that elevated category is often loose and unclear, it frequently seems to be two-pronged—referring to a *group* of eminent and firmly canonized writers during a certain *period*.

4. Distant Reading

The revision of modernism carried out in the early years of the twenty-first century involves a critique of both the geography and canon of modernism as it is staged for instance in Bradbury and McFarlane's book. In various studies of modernism, for instance recent attempts to map its manifestations in the Nordic countries, scholars have pointed out modernist innovations and interventions outside the beaten track of the Western cities that have been in the limelight, while also directing attention to authors other than those most discussed under this category. Such revision frequently involves untying the latter end of the period, illustrating how modernism constituted a breakthrough force *after* 1930.

From a present-day perspective, the book *Modernism: 1890–1930* might seem open to the objection that it "appropriates" this period, these four decades of literary history, by overemphasizing certain literary currents at the cost of others that also played a significant role within this time frame. There is, however, no indication that Bradbury and McFarlane were seeking a broad-based historical survey of the period; their primary aim was to map the main traits of modernism or "the Modern movement", as they also call it, which "transformed consciousness and artistic form" (Bradbury and McFarlane 1991b, p. 11). It could still be argued that the volume makes a claim to the period on behalf of the innovatory aesthetic achievements of modernism, and it is obvious that the publisher later made such a move with the new front-cover presentation of the book in 1991, tuning in with several other scholarly publications that actually go as far as to state that modernism was a *dominant* force in this period. This exemplifies a skewing motion that sometimes characterises the documentation of past literary history. In fact, the editors themselves open their new preface to the 1991 reprint by saying that their book has become "a key textbook on international literary Modernism" in the course of the past decade and a half, and that during this time the "Modern movement" has drawn "vastly more interest" and is "now generally seen as the dominant spirit in early-twentieth century art and literature" (Bradbury and McFarlane 1991b, p. 11).

⁵ This has changed dramatically since then, with the universal push to publish academic works in English, a push that could be called double-edged, at least in the humanities, where individual local languages are often strongly intertwined with the topics at hand and have shaped their discursive environments.

This is a highly interesting case of how an act of distant reading embraces forces entering and challenging the field and shifts them *retrospectively* to centre stage. Such an approach may make the period in question more manageable and more teachable, but this mapping risks ignoring actual mainstream activity in the period under discussion as well as missing the dialogue between different currents and methods. Significantly, it also risks presenting an unduly sedate view of the challengers, including the “high modernists” that appear to tower over the literary neighbourhood which they were in fact often struggling against during the time in question.

While an emphasis on innovation within any designated period casts a significant light on literary history, a different kind of distant reading may show that doing so stringently can obstruct broader insight into that particular historical stretch, not only in terms of the book market and other scenes of literary culture but also concerning the recapturing of the “literary institution” and its various levers of recognition and value.⁶ I will attempt a simple exercise in viewing the period 1890–1930 without modernist eyeglasses. In British fiction, for instance, this is noticeably the time of H.G. Wells, Rudyard Kipling, Arnold Bennett, John Galsworthy, and Somerset Maugham. In addition, across the Atlantic, we come across writers such as Edith Wharton, Theodore Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis, Upton Sinclair, and Pearl S. Buck. All these British and American writers were prominent and highly regarded during this time; in fact, four of them were awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. However, given Bradbury and McFarlane’s outlined premises, it may stand to reason that these writers do in fact *not* figure prominently in their book. We might think they had been dealt with in another volume in the same series, i.e., *The Age of Realism* (edited by F.W.J. Hemmings) which came out 1974. However, that book focuses on nineteenth-century realists, and the end of that century seems to coincide with the end of the age of realism.

However, realism did flourish in the early twentieth century, and after 1930, a new generation had emerged on the scene, in Britain for instance Evelyn Waugh, Graham Greene, and George Orwell. Thus, we can go on—also with examples from other languages—in underpinning the argument that mainstream fiction in the Western world in the first half of the twentieth century is of a realist rather than a modernist bent. Writing in 1959, Raymond Williams mentions the view or idea that realism “went out with the hansom cab”, wondering what this means in practice. “For clearly, in the overwhelming majority of modern novels, including those novels we continue to regard as literature, the ordinary criteria of realism still hold” (Williams 1959, p. 202). These criteria are resilient; I think it is safe to say that they have stayed strong throughout the twentieth century and up to the present day and that this also pertains to most branches of literature that are sometimes designated as popular culture—and it is ultimately hopeless and useless to try to find a clear line separating such literature from works that receive more critical or academic recognition.

Perhaps this situation is something that critics and scholars take for granted, unless they silently assume that “traditional realism”—I realize that the term may seem scandalously vague—is actually obsolete. In any case, it almost comes as a surprise, in this day and age, to see its relevance acknowledged, as is the case in Robert Eaglestone’s useful introductory book *Contemporary Fiction* from 2013: “Realism is the dominant form of the novel”, he states bluntly and clearly finds that it has been so for a long time. In fact, it seems that the strength and resilience of realism is so conspicuous, its place so secure, that it can be referred to as the obvious standard against which other motions can be measured. In addressing contemporary fiction specifically, Eaglestone writes, “Of course, the majority of novels published are realist, but there seem to be, as I’ve suggested, three sorts of areas of challenge to this realism special to the last ten years or so.” One of these is a “demolition of the barriers between the realms of fiction and non-fiction writing,” an interesting transgression which may disturb, if only slightly, the strong status of traditional mimesis in the various domains of non-fictional narrative of which we are indirectly but usefully

⁶ The term “distant reading” is borrowed from Franco Moretti’s article “Conjectures on World Literature” (Moretti 2002) and his book *Distant Reading* from 2013, although I may bend the term a little to suit my argumentative context.

reminded here, since they play a significant background role in our various encounters with literary texts. Another challenge, interestingly, involves a step back, as it were—“a retreat from the wilder edges of postmodernism towards a stronger sense of narrative. This retreat, however, has not forgotten the lesson of postmodern fiction: these texts are still playful, still complex over issues like textuality and closure.” This understanding of postmodernism owes more than a little to the legacy of modernism, and a third area of challenge does in fact manifest “a renewed interest in techniques of high modernism, associated with Woolf and Joyce” (Eaglestone 2013, pp. 8, 23).⁷ All these challenges, in the early years of the twenty-first century are by implication seen as confronting a realist mainstream, which breeds and feeds our narrative consciousness along with other sign systems in the symbolic order embracing us (see also David James 2012).

Has modernism perhaps retained, up to the present, its challenging status vis-à-vis long-lived realist paradigms, even though—or indeed because—realism has obviously found various ways of renewing itself? One of the defining features of modernist literature is in my view the complication, if not breakdown, of narratives—not necessarily of sequentiality as such, but of prevalent narrative referentiality, including the various codes and contracts involving both receivers and makers of literature. Many avant-garde literary practices can be fairly described in terms of narrative crisis. This is a crisis of the process or proceedings (“Prozess”, to cite the title of a Kafka novel, which also means “trial”) of the literary text in relation to individual identities and historical contexts—including the reader’s reconstruction of the links between text, identity, and history. Nevertheless, this very crisis foregrounds the urgency of capturing the relationship of modernist texts to historical circumstances and periods, as borne out in countless studies of modernism. Historical mappings of modernism as an aesthetic paradigm or “movement” partly spring from and in turn influence the reception of various individual modernist works and practices. These different levels of reception tend to situate their findings within historical-narrative frameworks, even when the modernist works in question—in the possibly radical dispersal of their non-organic units—may seem to defy such narrative groundings.

These are, of course, roughly drawn and un-nuanced dimensions of a struggle, and it not hard to understand the tendency to contain such a crisis; to wrap modernism up as something that happened between 1890 and 1930, even while admitting that it is “still, in some fashion, a shaping art behind the art of our own times” (Bradbury and McFarlane 1991b, p. 12), or perhaps also to stave realism off as mainly a nineteenth century affair. Unless realism is taken to be “dominant but dead”, to use words with which modernism was once laid to rest in the 1980s (see Foster 1983, p. ix). However, both these spectres are still very much with us.

5. The Border of Realism and Modernism

The above discussion may at times seem to imply that there is a clear and obvious border between modernism and realism. This is not the case. In all their significance, this border is often quite blurred. The density of discourse, structure, and reference in the last novels of Henry James, and in some of the works of E.M. Forster and Joseph Conrad, along with a seemingly realist narrative framework, may appear to open these texts up in both directions. Some of Ernest Hemingway’s narrative works reside in a similar but different border area. Hamsun’s novel *Hunger*, as already mentioned, is an early and very important case in point. Thomas Mann is an author who has been found vital to both modernism and realism. *The Magic Mountain* (*Der Zauberberg* 1924) is frequently seen as one of the key novels of modernism. In an article by J.P. Stern in Bradbury and McFarlane’s *Modernism* (Stern 1976), Mann’s career is interpreted as a trajectory towards modernism, with early signs already in the novel *Buddenbrooks* (1901)—which might seem to open up the gates of modernism quite drastically. Others have viewed Mann as a renewer of realism. The Marxist scholar Georg Lukács saw Mann’s career as an exemplary route of modern realism

⁷ Eaglestone lists these three challenges in a different order, but their sequence is not significant in this context.

and placed it in historical opposition to what he saw as the modernist aberrations of Franz Kafka—although he is also aware of Kafka’s masterful realist strokes (Lukács 1958).

The border and the interplay of realism and modernism are important for our understanding of the history of modern Western literature and concomitantly for the ways in which we weigh the role of modernism in the short and long term. Of course, the interpretive approach of the respective reader also weighs in heavily. Some may read Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time* as an example of the transformative capacities of realism, others as the extended birth of a one of the outstanding mind-worlds of modernist literature.

Such an approach, however dialectic, may seem to risk further entrenching an already oversimplifying dichotomy, especially in the realm of fiction. What about science fiction and the multifarious works sometimes grouped under the terms *fantasy*, *the fantastic*, or *speculative fiction* which have for some time been a major presence in Western literature and film? Certainly, literature and literary history need to be approached from a number of angles, and it is obvious that a great host of literary works are not “realist” in the sense that the world they portray matches the prevalent reality models of Western rationalism. However, if we accept the verisimilitude of such works, we tend to agree to a whole narrative scenario which in turn, however, often proves to be under the control of traditional motions and patterns.

Perhaps it even needs to be stressed that those who are drawn to literary modernism and its various ruptures are not automatically antagonistic to the fluidity or sequentiality of narrative. It may sound like a contradiction, but this narrative drive may be among the factors constituting the narrative crisis of modernist literature, in which classical narrative shifts may veer into real “interruptions”. The *time* inherent in the text turns into *place*, as it were—a place of contemplation, uncertainty, figuration, and the emergence of other narrative threads, which also impacts the self-awareness of the reader. It is this interruption which Italo Calvino explores and throws so brilliantly into action (and counteraction) in the novel *Se una notte d’inverno un viaggiatore* (If on a Winter’s Night a Traveller, 1979). Such metafictional self-consciousness was sometimes designated as “postmodernist” when it became prevalent in the late twentieth century, but it has been a feature of modernism throughout. As for constant narrative interruption, there are interesting similarities between this work by Calvino and Veijo Meri’s *Manillaköysi* (1957; The Manilla Rope), an important novel in the history of Finnish modernism and one that has been translated into several languages (Riikonen 2007, p. 853).

A fascinating but more recent work with strong modernist traits that are structurally and thematically interwoven with techniques and aesthetics of communication is the English writer Tom McCarthy’s novel *C* from 2010. McCarthy is very much in touch with the history of modernism and has been quoted as saying that to “ignore the avant garde is akin to ignoring Darwin” (Purdon 2010). Although *C* was well received by some, the response of the critic Christopher Tayler in *The Guardian* is an indication that modernism has not become as ingrained in the literary system as one might think. According to Tayler, this is an unusual novel, one that has taken aboard both high modernism and continental philosophy. He finds it refreshing that McCarthy has gone against the grain of contemporary literary culture which is “stubbornly non-modernistic”. Tayler appears to speak from within that culture when he notes that given the company the author keeps, one may expect the novel to be a “bit pretentious, in the style of Deleuze-loving architecture theorists or Lacan-quoting gallery notes. This suspicion isn’t totally off the mark, yet McCarthy is a talented and intelligent novelist; however pretension-prone the scene he’s interested in might be, his writing is tight and lucid, and he has a functioning sense of humour” (Tayler 2010).

The same year, on the other side of the Atlantic, the novel *Freedom* appeared, written by Jonathan Franzen, who had enjoyed rapid success, as reflected in his picture on the cover of *Time*, along with a familiar and time-word phrase: “Great American Novelist” (*Time*, Vol. 176, No. 8, 23 August 2010). Franzen has been unabashedly frank in his critique of modernism and experimental writing, and his accomplished novels are sometimes

compared to the works of Dickens and Tolstoy, as if nothing is less pretentious in our time than the company of these high chiefs of the nineteenth-century novel. Can the making of narrative fiction in our time be directly linked to the realist tradition of the nineteenth century, as if there had been no modernist “interruption” along the way? Franzen’s realist prose is of course shaped by the contemporary American reality he writes about and a matrix of modern textuality, and yet, it rests on traditional underpinnings that have come down to us through turbulent times in (literary) history and still carry significant weight.

Nonetheless, it is interesting, in this context, to look at another recent American novel whose author also has a firm grasp of realist discourse yet brings it into a charged dialogue with modernism—I am referring to *The Road* (2006) by Cormac McCarthy. When the modernist narrative crisis proves fertile, it is in no small part due to the creative activity of readers moving in a certain empty space between the “troubled” text and the mimetic reality they need to reconstruct as a kind of subtext in the work—perhaps most modernist works are double-coded in this sense. It is a challenge to travel through Joyce’s *Ulysses*, but at the end of the journey, readers have contributed significantly to the city and the community they have encountered. In Cormac McCarthy’s novel, this is turned around in a crucial sense, although it is a travel story as indicated by the title. Here, the background of the narrative, along with its various modern premises, has either vanished or lies in ruins: even memories cannot recall it. In *The Road*, the impact on the reader stems from a text which is realist in its surface details but moves eerily in a world which is at once new and lost, stimulating a surging yet troubling sensitivity in those grasping for the firmness that such texts tend to deliver.

The border of realism and modernism—however unclear it may be at times, but also because of that lack of clarity—is in my view crucial for those seeking to come to terms with the shape of modernism as a current in literary history. This shape—or in other words, the history of modernism—is itself presently going through a narrative crisis, almost as if scholarship were re-enacting the troubled terms of modernist fiction. What gets called realism in narrative fiction certainly has major touchstones in the nineteenth century but is also broadly understood as drawing in a continuous manner on the mimetic functions of language and other sign systems. The use of language in realist literary works is thus related to the verisimilitude of general socio-practical discourses, while modernism tends towards skirting or undermining various rationalized links that constitute the “representation of reality”, to use Auerbach’s phrase.

This is most definitely not to say that realists base their works on simple notions of the relationship between reality and language. Great realist writers have always been able to create multi-levelled narrative worlds and multifaceted views of reality. Moreover, as mentioned already, this is a matter of interpretive approach—for reading strategies can also be analysed in the respective terms. Jonathan Culler once wrote that we can read Flaubert as a realist or a modernist—and he chose to approach him as a modernist (Culler 1982).⁸ Much could be said here about modernism and the act of reading against the grain. However, I do not think that the employment of modernism as a general strategy of reading and interpreting various kinds of texts needs in itself challenge the argument that the border of realism and modernism, while an easy prey of deconstruction, is important in making sense of the modern literary landscape, especially as narrative is concerned (including the various narrative implications and subtexts of poetry). Even if someone were to carry out a brilliant reading of Dickens as a modernist (probably someone already has), I do not think this would change Dickens’ position as a major realist author. I think the same holds true for Henrik Ibsen. Toril Moi has argued in a recent book that Ibsen deserves to be seen as an important modernist writer, and her arguments are in no small measure

⁸ See (Eysteinsson 1990, pp. 190–91) and the broader discussion in that chapter about the connections between realism and modernism.

based on dismantling or bypassing the differences between realism and modernism as modern textualities (Moi 2006).⁹

6. The Edge

While the border of realism and modernism can arguably in itself be seen as a significant if constantly shifting tradition, modernism as a force in literary history is also shaped by its crisis-prone and searching edge. From this angle, as even Bradbury and McFarlane acknowledge, there is much in modernism that “remains contentious, perplexing or simply obscure, so that the larger map still stays vague” (Bradbury and McFarlane 1991b, p. 12), although it may seem tempting to clarify the map by drawing a firm line between the experimental and performative group activities of the *avant-gardes* and the individual achievements of certain *modernists*, those “certain writers distinguished by instinct and insight”, as Auerbach puts it.

Fredric Jameson has in fact argued that it is possible to identify four historical “moments or tendencies” of modernism, a kind of evolution from symbolism and other stirrings at the end of the nineteenth century, to early twentieth-century *avant-gardes*, but to these “should be added the modernism of the isolated “genius,” organized [. . .] around the great Work, the Book of the World” (Jameson 1991, p. 305), a description that would seem to fit modernists such as James Joyce and Ezra Pound.¹⁰ However, Pound’s career is a good example of how questionable such categorization can be: not only did he participate in *avant-garde* group activities, but his story as author is marked by the importance of social and aesthetic connections or networks for modernists that swam against the tide. Pound’s historical importance lies not only in his poetry, but also in his contribution as editor and intermediary. His editing of Eliot’s poem *The Waste Land*—an *avant-garde* intervention in its own right and enormously important in and for the history of modernist poetry—has sometimes been described in terms of midwifery. Work of this kind was in fact often carried out by women, who as supporters, assistants, editors, co-workers, or even publishers of modernists who met little or no response from leading publishers of the time; women who themselves were important writers, for instance Gertrude Stein, or had other roles in the literary world, such as bookseller Sylvia Beach, the first publisher of Joyce’s *Ulysses*.¹¹

In pulling modernism into perspective within the broad context of literary culture and focusing on its experimental, critical, and often controversial dynamic, one must not forget that it had from the start important supporters, both among writers and others within the field of literary culture, and this support grew steadily among critics and literary scholars. While modernism has not been a dominant current in the Western literary marketplace in the past hundred years, it gradually moved into a crucial position within the scholarly community, especially when the academy started shoring up cultural fragments in the wake of the Second World War, to echo T.S. Eliot’s words about poetic creativity at the end of *The Waste Land*. Certain modernists, authors such as Joyce, Eliot, Woolf, Kafka, Proust, and Beckett, have now for decades received a great deal of close attention which manifests that scholars and critics find in their works—in the formal expression and provocative connections between consciousness and reality—responses to modernity that demand thorough examination and interpretation. I cannot myself deny perceiving this attraction of modernist works, although I am also aware that these critical ventures take readers down various and different roads; the “messages” are often murky.

Hence, I also read signs of the times in Auerbach’s responses and in his very decision to focus especially on such writings in the final chapter of *Mimesis*. Rather than directing his attention to recent works that draw on the trajectory of the realist-mimetic tradition, he

⁹ I should stress that although I think Ibsen is a key realist author in the history of modern drama, this does not detract from his important role in a transition period which played a significant role in the emergence of modernism. I find it interesting, in this regard, to see how Inga-Stina Ewbank places Ibsen in the company of Henry James (Ewbank 2002).

¹⁰ Jameson’s fourth stage or moment is “late modernism”—more on that later in this article.

¹¹ In recent years a good number of books have appeared that highlight the roles of women in the history of modernism and its whole cultural environment. Shari Benstock’s *Women of the Left Bank* (Benstock 1986), remains among the most important studies of this kind.

looks to more structurally elusive and seemingly open-ended forms of expression. In this realism at the edge, or in its fracturing of traditional mimesis, Auerbach notes a radical response to modernity but also new attempts to convey perception, and thus, he broaches the melting pot of various modernist endeavours. Some avant-gardists declared their animosity towards traditions, and those who sought their material in the cultural heritage strove to reshape it or “make it new”, as Pound famously put it, whereby he had in mind some quite radical modes of cultural translation.

In 1942, the poet Steinn Steinarr wrote an article about the painter Þorvaldur Skúlason—both were modernist trailblazers in their respective fields in Iceland. Steinarr claims that modern art must aim “to broaden the sphere which is defined by artistic knowledge and the artistic capacity of its creators” (Steinarr 1942). In his view, artists must, by exploring and experimenting, push their own borders and those of their art, as if seeking to touch the unknown. This may risk breaking prevalent aesthetic contracts and conventions, and there is a potentially destructive force built into such endeavours, as Auerbach points out. In some sense, this is creativity driven by crisis. Steinarr’s own creative crisis, in his best-known work, the poem-cycle *Tíminn og vatnið* (Time and Water 1948), did not involve taking radical leave of the classical elements of Icelandic poetry, as is often the case in modernist poetry. Instead, he played these time-hallowed instruments—metric schemes, rhyme, alliteration, and rhythm—but without making them get a hold of his language and meaning, which might seem to flutter every which way. In this manner, he explored and reignited the sphere of both the music and the imagery of Icelandic poetry, opening formal expression to new knowledge.

This emphasis on the expansion of artistic expression may be seen as a one of the primary forces of modernism, especially when it appears in radical rupture or fragmentation of traditional expressive forms. However, in this regard as well, modernist literature spans a wide spectrum, from an apparent overabundance to minimalist asceticism. Such challenges can be a driving force in innovative, avant-garde work, but they entail no inherent guarantee for aesthetic achievement, howsoever that may be measured. The aesthetic appraisal of modernism has been under some scrutiny in recent years, and there are those who feel that the emphasis on form, innovation, and the rupturing of traditions has enjoyed privileges which need to be rescinded. This view is sometimes tied to attempts to broaden the concept of modernism, aligning it with modernity in broad cultural terms, rather than aesthetic ones, but some recent critics also tend to hang on to a more narrowly defined notion of modernist aesthetics when dovetailing it with “formalism”. Thus, the editors of *The Oxford Handbook of Modernisms* write in their introduction: “The formalist approach to literature and the visual arts was perfectly suited to linguistically complex writing and to abstract painting and was thus to a great extent responsible for the critical valorization of modernism, out of which the New Criticism had itself emerged” (Brooker et al. 2010, p. 7).

It is certainly fair to say that formal analysis has played a significant role in the valorisation of various works and authors associated with modernism, but formal analysis is by no means the exclusive domain of the New Critics. Moreover, missing here is the awareness that we saw in Steinn Steinarr’s previously quoted statement, of how the epistemological aspects of art may be thrown into sharp relief when prevalent borders of expression are challenged. Literature and the other arts are domains of knowledge as much as form, and it may not always be easy to separate the two. Meticulous attention to form plays a salient part in the approach of some who have grappled with the cultural discordance and the social contexts of modernist art, for instance Theodor Adorno, whose book *Aesthetic Theory* (Adorno 1970) focuses substantially on modern art and is a highly relevant contribution to modernist studies. Adorno finds formal radicalism vis-à-vis traditions and prevalent patterns of communication to be vital to modernism, and he goes as far as saying that there is within modernism an inherent negative attitude to, and even rejection of, tradition (Adorno 1970, p. 38). This may, ironically, appear to echo Auerbach’s view of modernism, although in Adorno’s case this stems from his highly critical view of conventions and modes of expression which have thrived under the double-edged

legacy of the Enlightenment and instrumentalised social patterns rooted in the Western world. I concur with Adorno that the critical dynamic of modernism constitutes an edge, a negativity which inclines against all tradition. In this edge reside in my view both the merits and the severity of modernism. That edge may be directed against mandates and directives, against stagnant conventions in behaviour, expression, and mindset, against various forms of orthodoxy. That said, there is no reason to assume a negative attitude to all traditions. Rigorous negativity can result in turning a blind eye to the values and resources of traditions, and their modes of adaptability to new times and conditions.

In some of her essays from the 1920s, Virginia Woolf was highly critical of the prominent British novelists Arnold Bennett and H.G. Wells. These challenging views do not come from someone who was among the “dominant” writers of that time (to refer to my previous discussion). Woolf directs an edge towards centrally reigning traditions and realist methods that she associated with “ruin” and “death” (Woolf 1966, 1972). The sharp wording is reminiscent of some of the avant-garde manifestoes, proclaiming and seeking to enact an artistic revolt. Perhaps we cannot expect those struggling for new creative space to dwell on the tenacity and adaptability of traditions. “In the arts there is no way back”, to quote one of the most memorable declarations from the struggle for modernist space in Icelandic literature. It dates from 1955 and is the title of a preface that the poet Einar Bragi, who has already been discussed above, wrote for the first issue of *Birtingur*, a journal that sought to promote an awareness of aesthetic modernity across the artistic fields (Einar Bragi 1955, p. 25). It may seem obvious that a spiritless repetition of older forms of expression is not a promising way forward, but one could also argue that there are several ways to re-explore certain travelled routes, even while heading forward. Along with his co-editors—including the writer Thor Vilhjálmsson, who helped spearhead the “late” breakthrough of the Icelandic modernist novel in the late 1960’s and into the 70’s—Einar Bragi managed to run *Birtingur* continuously until 1968 as a platform for various kinds of modernist activity, inquiry, translation, critical discussion, and new Icelandic writing. Avoiding the local contests created by the (political and cultural) cold war, the journal managed to push the frontiers of both critical and aesthetic space in Iceland.

Modernism’s urge to keep pushing its creative frontier is sometimes discussed with reference to the career of James Joyce: how he moved from his early narrative works to just about toppling the form of the novel as a genre in *Ulysses* and then went beyond that point in *Finnegans Wake* (1939), raising questions about the limits of the genre and about how one can go on experimenting with language. These questions have been prevalent ever since. While many find *Finnegans Wake* to be a master stroke of modern literature, one is hard put denying that it radically foregrounds the narrative crisis which is rife in modernism, although the crisis rarely reaches this extent. The Czech author Ivan Klíma says in his essay “Our Tradition and the Limits of Growth”, that literature and the arts have already reached the outermost edge of innovation; that Joyce and Beckett took originality to the borders of incomprehensibility, which is as far as literary expeditions can take us (Klíma 1994, pp. 149–50).

It is not hard to understand this sentiment, but the borders of incomprehensibility are hardly to be drawn with any such clarity, and the history of modernism is not a single or straight road leading to such borders. I am tempted to react in similar terms to the question whether modernism has not itself inevitably become a tradition, given that some of the key experimental works of modernism have been around for a hundred years. This can be answered in the affirmative: works of Joyce, Woolf, Beckett, and other modernists have been continuously and intensely explored and discussed by scholars for decades now, and may, in these circles, be among the best-known items in their repertoire. At the same time, however, it seems highly unlikely that modernism has, in the wider realm of reading and writing, become a tradition in a traditional sense.

Whether it is due to an inherent conservatism of language or the strong mainstream of narrative traditions up to the present (and the two may be intertwined), radical modernism has maintained its estrangement in the public sphere. It has not become an openly accepted

paradigm in the “representation of reality in Western literature” and this may help explain the elasticity of the concept of modernism up to the present time. This does not mean that new authors can repeat previous works of modernism, but the uncanny “tradition of modernism” may strikingly elucidate the diversity and the maze of “rewriting” and the innovative potential within the field of literature. This is relevant when accounting for the situation of authors that go against the mainstream at different times, whether it be Guðbergur Bergsson in the novel *Tómas Jónsson. Metsölubók* (*Tómas Jónsson: Bestseller*) in 1966 or Tom McCarthy in *C* in 2010. Both have recourse to the storehouse of previous modernist exploits and make their own use of them in challenging works, although *C* is clearly not as much of a “game changer” in British fiction as *Tómas Jónsson* was in Iceland in the sixties. Modernism enters a complex dialogue within each linguistic community, depending on time and place. This is a major issue in the history of modernism if we want to come to terms with it as an international phenomenon—and it does so in no small part by rubbing up against the heritage and development of narrative realism, which has itself of course often learnt from the twists and turns of modernism, while both have also kept their eyes on other streams of social discourse.

7. Finding a Beginning . . .

My above description of the parallel existence of modernist and realist practices may seem to clash with approaches that emphasize the successions of movements, with each one being an active and sometimes dominant force within a certain period. Looking back to the period of 1890–1930, it is worthwhile taking a closer look at how Bradbury and McFarlane, in the *Modernism* volume, describe the scene of the “Modern Movement” in their lead article, “The Name and Nature of Modernism”. This is a rich essay, teeming with observations that often jostle uncomfortably against one another, which in itself evinces the challenge of the task at hand. It opens with a discussion of “cultural seismology”, the third and most radical degree of which involves “overwhelming dislocations” and “cataclysmic upheavals of culture” that “question an entire civilization or culture”—and “we have [. . .] increasingly come to believe that this new art comes from, or is, an upheaval of the third and cataclysmic order” (Bradbury and McFarlane 1976b, pp. 19–20). The authors then touch on “attempts to locate the Great Divide”, such as Roland Barthes’ statement, in his book *Writing Degree Zero* from 1953, that around 1850 classical writing disintegrated “‘and the whole of literature, from Flaubert to the present day, became the problematics of language’” (pp. 20–21).

This is how the essay opens, with modernism and its style seen as characterized by “the shock, the violation of expected continuities, the element of de-creation and crisis” (p. 24), along with other arguments “as to why Modernism is our art; it is the one art that responds to the scenario of our chaos” (p. 27). Then, some argumentative backtracking kicks in, for it “is clear” that “not all artists have believed this to be so—that indeed, ours has been a century not only of derealization but of realism, not only of ironic but of expansive modes” (p. 27). Followed by: “Today it must surely seem to us that the truth lies somewhere between the view that Modernism is the supreme modern expression and the view that it is of marginal importance” (p. 28).

This sounds like a most elusive truth, to say the least, one that furthermore lies in the past, for instead of “Modernism is our art” we are now told that “Modernism *was* indeed an international movement [. . .]” (p. 30; emphasis added). As we move into the argumentation, the more it strives, at times admirably, to contain this beast of a “movement”, to put it in its proper place. In fact, *place* is a key issue in this discussion, and the authors acknowledge that modernism “viewed from a New York-London-Paris axis” may not rhyme with its signatures in “Berlin, or Vienna, or Copenhagen, or Prague, or St Petersburg”, and the attention subsequently shifts to “Germanic Modernism”, including the Scandinavian “modern breakthrough” mentioned above and its connection with Germany, and especially Berlin as a cultural centre. One of the two authors, James McFarlane, is here in familiar territory, being a specialist in Scandinavian Studies and an Ibsen expert.

As the authors try “to pin Modernism down”, Georg Brandes is mentioned as a key player in making “the epithet ‘modern’ [. . .] a rallying slogan of quite irresistible drawing power” (p. 37), but when this German–Scandinavian scene is scrutinized, there emerges at some point a significant shift in the meaning and reference of “modern”. This is a kind of “reorientation”, a “Wendepunkt”, occurring “about the year 1890” (p. 40). “To get at a quality of this change”, the authors take a “roll call”: “When, in the early 1880s, Georg Brandes wrote of the ‘modern minds’ [. . .] of whom did he speak? Of Ibsen and Bjørnson, of Jacobsen and Drachmann, of Flaubert, Renan, John Stuart Mill. But particularly of Ibsen.” Moreover, Ibsen was also at the centre of attention in Germany through the 1880s.

When, however, the 1890s generation of critics—often the same men as before—looked for specifically ‘modern’ qualities, to whom did they turn? To Strindberg and Nietzsche, Büchner and Kierkegaard, Bourget and Hamsun and Maeterlinck. But especially to Strindberg. This is a sharp change, and nowhere is it more dramatically revealed than in two successive articles by the Viennese critic, Hermann Bahr—one of 1890 [. . .] and the other of 1891 [. . .]. (pp. 42–43)

In the 1890 article, Bahr highlights the “synthesis of naturalism and romanticism, and urged the example of Ibsen as the supreme exponent”, but less than a year later, “he speaks of ‘the wild frenzy of the galloping development’” (p. 43), and all of a sudden, Strindberg is the central figure.

What occurs here seems somehow to be both *development* (albeit “galloping”) and *rupture*; there is a “crossover point” when “something happens to the fortunes of realism and naturalism, themselves modern but not quite Modernist movements [. . .]” (p. 43). It is both striking and illuminating—given the complexity of the issues at hand—to notice how a crisis caused by a “Great Divide” here re-emerges as what may sound like a subtle difference between what is *modernist* on the one hand and *modern but not quite modernist* on the other. As if this were a crack or a crevice, but one that may turn into a canyon. In fact—as if anticipating how the plural “modernisms” came to be used later on, the authors could be said to make a conceptual slip as they go on to note that “looking at the two Germanic Modernisms, early (before 1890) and late (after 1890), one can see clearly in this context—something that the more confused events elsewhere perhaps disguise—the one growing out of the other.” However, after that, it appears that they both keep growing, perhaps in contention as well as dialogue with one another, “not simply an extension but a *bifurcation* of the impulse to be modern” (p. 44). My discussion above should make it clear that I cannot but concur, and the analysis, earlier in this essay, of the selection of writers emphasized in *Modernism: 1890–1930*, should make it clear that one of the premises of the book is a pertinent difference between the concept of *modernism* and the word *modern* as used for instance in the more general concept of “modern literature”.

8. . . . and an End to Modernism

The role of modern Scandinavian literature in the birth pangs of modernism, as outlined by Bradbury and McFarlane—especially of course the plays of Ibsen and Strindberg and Brandes’ critical initiative—is interesting, a kind of “dislocation” in itself, considering the generally assumed centres of modern Western literature. However, the Nordic countries seem to step aside when we move closer to the temporal “epicentre of the change” (p. 32) and the “peak of intensity” of modernism in the early 1920s (p. 33). The material the authors draw on in that respect is mainly the Paris–London–New York axis and the German-language literary scene. They admit that while some critics would in fact see “the Modernist impulse” reaching “a point of exhaustion” already in the 1920s, others argue “that Modernism, far from being exhausted, has continued as our essential art right up to the present” (p. 34).

Bradbury and McFarlane, towards the end of the article, seek to defend their decision to draw the line at 1930: “After that it seems that certain elements of Modernism seem to be reallocated, as history increasingly came back in for intellectuals, as, with the loss of purpose and social cohesion, and the accelerating pace of technological change, modernity

was a visible scene open to simple report, and as the world depression tends increasingly to bring back political and economic determinism into the intellectual ideologies" (pp. 51–52). The two "seems" early on underline the hesitation in the sentence, even as it seeks to plough quickly through the 1930s and the pathway towards another world war. Earlier in the essay, looking back from their vantage point in the mid-1970s, the authors note of the post-World War II-period that it had "first appeared to be moving away from Modernism in the direction of realism and linearity" (a move frequently seen to occur already during the 1930s), but that there is now a "new entity" on the scene, "called Post-Modernism. The term is acquiring high currency now to talk about a compound of that art of chance and minimalization, that 'literature of silence', in which, as in Beckett and Borges, the idea of absurd creation, random method, parody or self-exhausting fictionality is paramount [. . .]" (p. 34).

Therefore, here we are in the mid-1970s, close to half a century after the surge of modernist energy had reportedly exhausted itself in the late twenties, still grappling with it in the form of "post-modernism". Bradbury and McFarlane cite Frank Kermode's article "Modernisms" from the late 1960s, in which he argues for a plurality of modernisms and their continuity up to present-day forms of "Neo-Modernism" but notes that "there has been only one Modernist Revolution" and "it happened a long time ago" (Kermode 1968, p. 24). Others had less faith in such continuities, and this was only the beginning of lively debates under the heading of postmodernism in the last few decades of the twentieth century, a multifarious stretch of an often cross-disciplinary inquiry into art but also culture in the broadest terms, frequently intertwining with a great deal of theoretical activity which has sometimes been summed up under the general term "theory", although salient parts of it have also been gone by another post-name: "poststructuralism". This was a time when the boundaries between scholarly and literary explorations would tend to open up; therefore, it is perhaps not surprising that "postmodernism" also came to be used in summing up tendencies in theoretical and critical work, at times even making the two *posts* seem all but synonymous. However, insofar as "postmodernism" was used for literary developments, these were often (but not always) seen as taking place *after* modernism, although the various "ends" of modernism kept cropping up (see Eysteinsson 1990, pp. 103–42, and Eysteinsson 2000).

This is not the place to map the complex critical post-activity from the late 1960s onwards, but it evinces various links to the legacy of literary modernism, which had radicalized textuality and helped bring about linguistic and cultural turns that went far beyond the connection with New Criticism which is so often brought up. The American historian Hayden White has emphasized how relevant "modern literary theory [is] to our understanding of the issues being debated among theorists of historical thought, research and writing", in part "because modern literary theory is in many respects fashioned out of the necessity of making sense of literary modernism, determining its historical specificity and significance as a cultural movement, and devising a critical practice adequate to its object of study" (White 1999, p. 26). Stephen Ross goes even further in his introduction to the volume *Modernism and Theory*:

Modernism's critique of modernity animated theory's invention of postmodernity, while theory's anti-foundational stance extended modernism's indeterminacy, linguistic complexity, and reflexivity. The relationship between them is unique; though certain specific theories no doubt have particular relevance for other literary movements or eras (e.g., the New Historicism and the renaissance), theory *per se*—that massive influx of challenges to conventions of form, aesthetics, ideology, race, class, sex, gender, institutions, and subjectivity dating from the mid-1960s to the 1990s—is integrally bound to modernism. (Ross 2009, p. 2)

Perhaps this influx of challenges, aesthetic as well as theoretical, can in both cases be traced to the rupture Henri Lefebvre discusses in an important book from this theory-rich period, where he claims that "around 1910 a certain space was shattered. It was the space of common sense, of knowledge (*savoir*), of social practice, of political power, a space

thitherto enshrined in everyday discourse, just as in abstract thought, as the environment of and channel for communication; the space, too, of classical perspective and geometry, developed from the Renaissance onwards on the basis of the Greek tradition (Euclid, logic) and bodied forth in Western art and philosophy, as in the form of the city and town” (Lefebvre 1991, p. 25). Alternatively, is this yet another attempt to pinpoint a moment—relatively, dramatically, or playfully—this one being in consensus with Woolf’s “in or about December, 1910”, but one also thinks of Kermode’s insistence on the single modernist “revolution” which happened “a long time ago”, an attempt, that is to say, to pinpoint in time a change which in fact is protracted, although writers, artists, and theoreticians may all seek to express the sense and perception of that change in a compact form?

Furthermore, there is a similar urge to fix with some precision the moment of modernism’s demise. When the study of literary modernism gained new momentum towards the end of the twentieth century, the discussion was still marked by the urge to find an end to modernism, that is to say modernism “proper”, although this may usher in another post- or after- term. Along came “late modernism”, which was perhaps meant to cope with certain uncomfortable inconsistencies or to account for an interim or transition period. Peter Nicholls’ fine book *Modernisms: A Literary Guide* largely covers the same territory and time as Bradbury and McFarlane. Nicholls is willing to let modernism advance a little beyond the 1930 mark, but by 1936, we seemed to have moved beyond modernism; this is the year of Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!*, which is found to be a “late modernist” work and of Djuna Barnes’ *Nightwood*, which stands “outside modernism” (Nicholls 1995, pp. 222, 254). My perspective is different from that of Nicholls, and I find *Nightwood* to be an important modernist novel, one that is significant for the history of modernism, in no small part due to its strength as a mid-1930s expression.

Tyrus Miller, in his book *Late Modernism* from 1999, begins to see the “funereal signs” of modernism already by about 1926, and for him Wyndham Lewis, Djuna Barnes, and Samuel Beckett serve as “exemplary late modernist figures”. He does allow, however, for the corpus of “high modernism” to develop for a while alongside late modernism, in the case of modernists who were already under way, allowing Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake* (which others have claimed for postmodernism), Woolf’s *The Waves*, and Pound’s *Cantos* to retain modernist status (Miller 1999, pp. 5, 10).

However, there is too much leakage in this system. The categories are too narrow, the arguments too forced. With Pound’s late *Cantos*, we are already well into the second half of the century. What about Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* in the fifties or even later works of his—how far does *late modernism* stretch? This is a crisis, and the boundaries do not hold (not to mention the centre). Modernism may have been contained in some sense, but instead, we have an open-ended late modernism that once let loose is hard to stop. In 2002, David Holloway’s book on *The Late Modernism of Cormac McCarthy* appeared, and 2005 saw the publication of Varun Begley’s *Harold Pinter and the Twilight of Modernism*, with a chapter called “A Last Modernist”. The indefinite article may be significant, here; I wonder if we can find a last one yet. Furthermore, the twilight has been there all along.

9. Double Crisis

How can we begin to comprehend the historical shape of modernism, if we: (1) hesitate to see it as a literary force that becomes dominant in the early twentieth century, showing signs of exhaustion already in the late 1920s (even if certain signs of its revolution are said to appear as after-effects of one sort or another for a long time); and (2) recognize its longstanding dialogue and struggle with both a stronghold of realist literary paradigms, theoretical activity, and a broader social discourse and symbolic order which services modernity on many fronts? The elasticity of the shape of modernism is indeed precarious, for, to repeat words from Bradbury and McFarlane, cited in the above discussion, “Today it must surely seem to us that the truth lies somewhere between the view that Modernism is the supreme modern expression and the view that it is of marginal importance” (Bradbury and McFarlane 1976b, p. 28). Wherever the truth may lie, I would

argue that both these views are still vibrant and very much with us. A great deal of recent literary activity is grounded on mainstream traditions which seem not to have been seriously shaken by the formal and structural activities or experiments of modernism. In such “stubbornly non-modernistic” literary cultures, modernism may appear to be “of marginal importance”.

From the other point of view, someone might argue—along the lines of my previous discussion—that even traditionally minded realist writing has often been more impacted by modernist ideas and activities than first impressions may indicate. A stronger argument for modernism as a force at centre stage may come from two other sources that have a great deal to do with the history of modernism: First, while modernism is generally not a popular aesthetic domain, it draws strength from its diverse expressions in different languages and places, and at different times—a strength that manifests itself in translation and other forms of cultural connections. Second, the critical reception of modernism, especially from the mid-twentieth century on, has sometimes pushed modernist writing to the forefront of literary education in several countries, which in turn has strengthened its position in the broader literary “establishment”. Variants of this reception can of course be traced to early responses to modernist writing, but it is only in the second half of the twentieth century that they take on the solidity of critical paradigms—which then also played a significant role in the fervent theoretical activity starting in the late 1960s.

The historical positions of modernism do not, therefore, depend solely on its “newness”, although the characteristics of radical modern art have sometimes been explained by its “shock” effect on the audience (as in the TV series *The Shock of the New* and synonymous book on modern art by Robert Hughes in 1980). Furthermore, the novelty and experimentation in creative writing and the other arts can only in a limited sense be compared to innovation in science and technology, although art may enter into an intense dialogue with these realms, which have shaped modernity in irrevocable ways. What I have called the narrative crisis of modernism has much to do with the relations between language, narrative, and the reality of modernity—the process of modernization which has provided certain sectors of humanity with prosperity but also enhanced violence, exploitation, and human-caused disasters that transgress the enlightenment, rationalism, and humanism that many have been seen as core elements of progress.

Fredric Jameson finds that modernism in literature is a result or product of a double crisis: a “social crisis of narratable experiences” and a “semiotic crisis of narrative paradigms” (Jameson 1984, p. 211). The two inevitably mesh and are shaped by circumstances that can make it hard to convey historical experiences in traditional narratives. Hayden White argues that although literary modernism appears to show hostility to narrative discourse, it does

not so much reject narrativity, historicity or even realism as explore the limits of their peculiarly nineteenth-century forms and expose the mutual complicity of these forms in the dominant discursive practices of high bourgeois culture. In the process, literary modernism revealed new or forgotten peculiarities of narrative discourse itself, potentialities for rendering intelligible the specifically modern experiences of time, historical consciousness, and social reality. (White 1999, p. 26)

In fact, White goes so far as to say that instead of viewing modernism as “a rejection of the realist project and a denial of history”, it can be seen as

an anticipation of a new form of historical reality, a reality that included among its supposedly unimaginable, unthinkable, and unspeakable aspects: the phenomena of Hitlerism, the Final Solution, total war, nuclear contamination, mass starvation, and ecological suicide; a profound sense of the incapacity of our sciences to explain, let alone control or contain these; and a growing awareness of the incapacity of our traditional modes of representation even to describe them adequately.” (White 1999, p. 41)

It is often said that language does not fathom major traumas that individuals experience, and White here points to such traumas on a large, historical scale. This may remind us of a significant moment in Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) where language is found to be vacuous, exhausted by the war, especially words describing heroic behaviour: "I was always embarrassed by the words sacred, glorious and sacrifice and the expression in vain. [. . .] There were many words that you could not stand to hear and finally only the names of places had dignity" (Hemingway [1929] 1957, pp. 161–62). The mid-section of Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, describing the interplay of weather, time, and an empty house waiting for its inhabitants, may bring home a more powerful sense of the first World War than any mimetic rendering of the war itself. Then along comes the Second World War with disasters on a more massive scale. Later still, in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, the unspeakable has all but submerged the world and its narrative leverage.

Hayden White's analysis of literary modernism as an endeavour to capture the experience of various extreme predicaments of modernity may certainly account for important aspects of the crises and challenges of modernist narratives. The expressive "trials" of modernism no doubt often spring from attempts to capture experiences felt to exceed the mimetic or descriptive conventions of realist discourse, not only in moments of disaster but also in the details of everyday life as they take on their internalized shapes. Can we read White as saying that literary modernism has shouldered its historical destiny and pushed "classical" realism out of its central role? In an interesting article, the Slovene scholar Jola Škulj refers to White's arguments, discussed above, and concurs, saying: "With modernism, the traditional mode of narrative in literature and in historiography has become inadequate" (Škulj 2006, p. 194). Taken at face value, this comment would seem to indicate that literary modernism is more authentic in grappling with modernity than traditional narrative texts, which might further lead to the assumption that the ruptured and fragmented narrative of modernism does in fact create distinct aesthetic spaces and mobilities.

This in turn brings us back to the alleged "privileged" position of modernism that has come under substantial criticism in recent years. This situation is perhaps best described by words to be found at the end of Guðbergur Bergsson's novel *Anna* (1969): "If the story-line is given a punch, the system goes haywire and turns into multifarious fiction which gets stuck in the chicken brain of the reader" (Bergsson 1969, p. 249, my translation).¹² Like so many raucous statements in Bergsson's works, this one is not as unambiguous as it may seem. Some might take this as a somewhat arrogant statement by a modernist writer, to the effect that disruptive and multifarious fiction—"high" modernism indeed—is only for those who do not have a "chicken brain". From another angle, "the reader" could be anyone, with the implication that we all receive our punches at one time or another and have to cope with storylines being interrupted or severed. As for the history of modernism—perhaps that is a narrative which will remain in constant crisis, as paradoxical as that may sound.

10. Modernist Rhizomes and Formations

It should be obvious from my discussion so far that I am sceptical of ideas of total paradigm shifts in literary history, just as I am sceptical of periodisation in the name of a single concept. We may feel that we need specific concepts to pinpoint and outline various features of the literary landscape in the second half of the twentieth century, but it seems constrictive to do so without accounting for both realism and modernism as salient forces of literary culture and aesthetics, advancing through the Second World War and the Cold War, up to and into a new century.

Moreover, as noted earlier, modernism is in significant ways shaped by its reception and construction in the post-WWII period—I would hazard to say that it is only then that it assumes, in certain areas, the kind of "dominance" some claim it had in the early decades of the century. Moreover, if Bradbury and McFarlane are correct in say-

¹² "Sé söguþræðinum gefið á hann, ruglast kerfið og snýst í margbrotinn skáldskap, sem stendur fastur í hænuhaus lesandans."

ing that modernism is an art “that responds to the scenario of our chaos”, driven by “a notion of a relationship of crisis between art and history”, and in no small part by a recognition of the First World War “as the apocalyptic moment of transition into the new” (Bradbury and McFarlane 1976b, pp. 27, 29, 51), then one cannot but wonder about the significance of the Second World War for both the reception of earlier modernism and the activity of writers who pursued work in this vein after another apocalypse had struck. This second moment of transition into “the new” brought us the Holocaust (after a rapid breakdown of democracy in Germany), the devastation of cities through fire bombing, and finally the use of the atom bomb (which opened up a whole new dimension of what “total war” could mean). The role of the Second World War for modernism and its history has been underestimated.

This takes us back to Auerbach who in writing about modernism of the 1920s can also be seen as responding to the scene of chaos which he watched from his exile—such displacement being in itself a chaotic and estranging experience. The same is true of Mann’s *Doktor Faustus*, and there is little doubt that the insightful analyses of modernism we find in the writings of Adorno are also shaped by exile and WWII, and the course of events leading up to it. In its aftermath, modernism takes on a renewed urgency, even if combined with new ironic edges, whether we find these in the persistence of avant-garde experiments or in a playful or sardonic self-awareness of narrative reoccurrences. The modernist scene in the post-WWII period was to some extent a complex meeting place of “old” and new modernisms. For instance, while several works of Kafka had been translated into a number of languages by the late 1930s, his presence as a key European writer only began to be seriously felt in the post-WW II era, when the impact of his oeuvre is contemporaneous with the writings of authors such as Camus, Borges, Celan, Grass, Sarraute, Nabokov, and Lispector—and the charged but slippery affinity between Kafka and Beckett is important for the long view of modernism.

During this period, it also becomes doubly obvious how frequently the aesthetic ventures of modernism tend to involve the predicaments of displacement as well as the meeting or clashing of different worlds—whether in terms of culture or subjectivity. This is true of Kafka, Joyce, Stein, and Pound, and also of Celan, Nabokov, Nelly Sachs, Salman Rushdie, and Herta Müller—to move right up to the present. There is an internal restlessness in many modernist works, although it can also morph into a kind of stasis which can be hard to pinpoint in place and time, although sometimes it seems akin to exile (see Olsson 2007).

However, such speculations about modernism before and after the world-altering events of WWII also make one conscious, as pointed out above, of the ways in which modernist works and ideas about modernism have themselves travelled between languages and cultures. Documented literary history has always been full of missing pieces or blind spots, even large, eclipsed territories, vis-à-vis the historical scene of literary culture and productivity. Nowhere more so than in the realm of cross-cultural relations, as they materialise in translated literature and in original writings about foreign culture—which are also acts of translation, in a looser or broader sense of the word (see Caneda-Cabrera 2007). Insofar as modernist writing constitutes a challenge to prevalent traditions—and even broadly to *culture as tradition*—its international dissemination in the form of translation and critical dialogue constitutes a terrain full of interesting stories and points of contact, resistance, and renegotiation of the new, the foreign, and the native.

What happened, for instance, to modernism in the Nordic world after Strindberg had made his international breakthrough in or around 1890 and moved into the new century with even more radical experiments, notably with *Ett drömspel* (A Dream Play) which was published in 1902 and first performed in Stockholm in 1907? Was modernism subsequently lulled back to sleep in the North? About a hundred years later, or from about 1999 to 2014, I was involved with a research group from six Nordic countries, focusing—at conferences and in various publications—on the routes, reception, and local manifestations of modernism from Finland to Iceland, including Sweden, Denmark, Norway, and the

Faroe Islands (see for instance [Tysdahl et al. 2002](#); [Jansson et al. 2004](#); [Jansson et al. 2008](#); and [Lothe et al. 2014](#)). There is little doubt that modernism took root early on in these countries, in some form or another. For quite some time there were very few contiguous formations of this kind, but rhizomatic activity was confirmed in a number of individual endeavours, such as the Danish poet Johannes V. Jensen's book *Digte* (Poems) in 1906, while a number of years elapsed before a major modernist breakthrough in the Danish novel materialized in Tom Kristensen's *Hærværk* (Havoc) in 1930. Around the same time, in the early 1930s, the Finnish writer Volter Kilpi brings out structurally innovative novels, akin to those of Joyce and Proust. By that time the Icelandic writers Halldór Laxness, with the novel *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* (The Great Weaver of Kashmir 1927), and Þórbergur Þórðarson, with his multi-genre prose work *Bréf til Láru* (Letter to Laura 1924), had also challenged the development of the realist novel. In the Norwegian novel, there is also a time lag between the modernist stirrings in Hamsun's *Hunger* of 1890 and the contributions of novelists Cora Sandel, Aksel Sandemose, and Sigurd Hoel in the second quarter of the 20th Century. Hoel was an early admirer of Kafka and instrumental in getting *Der Prozess* (The Trial) translated into Norwegian in 1933, the first translation of the novel to come out in any language. Hoel was himself a translator of Conrad and Faulkner. Thus, a modernist web begins to emerge through the intertwining of original writing, translation, and critical reception, and after another time lag due to WWII and the German occupation of Norway, a new modernist wave is brought into motion, notably in Tarjei Vesaas' novels of the 1950s and 1960s (see [Lothe and Tysdahl 2007](#), p. 865).

There is, however, one significant Nordic modernist "formation" in the early decades of the twentieth century, one that is in itself cross-cultural, since the group in question belonged to the Swedish-speaking minority in Finland: Edith Södergran, Elmer Diktonius, Gunnar Björling, and Rabbe Enckell "formed a modernist front from 1916, the year of Södergran's debut, until around 1930, when the group gradually disintegrated" ([Jansson 2007](#), p. 838). By that time other modernist poets were emerging on the scene, most visibly in Sweden, where throughout the 1930s, a modernist network of modernism was gradually assembled, especially in the domain of poetry. There, and in fact throughout the Nordic domain, the impact of Södergran and her colleagues is quite perceptible—in Iceland as late as around 1950, when modernist poetry finally made a breakthrough there. However, this impact was everywhere intermingled with other impulses, coming for instance, via translation and critical debates, from T.S. Eliot and the French surrealists. Eliot's poetry, especially *The Waste Land*, had a significant impact on Nordic poetry, but it did so in multifarious company with other modernist works, both local and foreign. In the realm of fiction, the significance of translation and of the critical discussion of foreign literature is striking, in the midst of a local scene that is going through a transition, fast or slow. The Swedish writer Karl Vennberg, an important poet in his own right, writes critical essays about Kafka and translates Kafka's *Der Prozess* in 1945. In 1946, Thomas Warburton's Swedish translation of Joyce's *Ulysses* is published in Stockholm and Helsinki. Thus, in the post-WWII era, Kafka and Joyce assume roles that are both new and iterative.

By that time, the Swedish "literary institution" is on its way to becoming "decidedly pro-modernist"—one can only wonder if that could be said of any broad-based literary institution in any other language community before 1950. Which means of course that neo-avant-groups would soon start questioning the status of "high modernism" ([Jansson 2007](#), pp. 842–45). This is one of the ways in which modernism regenerates itself, as it has done ever since in the Nordic countries, in fertile co-existence and struggle with other currents. It is shaped not by or during a single continuous period, but by various and not always easily visible laws of timeliness, anachronism, and displacement. Furthermore, it can take a long time coming. When I started translating the works of Kafka into Icelandic in the early 1980s, along with my father (yes, a somewhat ironic arrangement in the case of Kafka), only the novella "Die Verwandlung" ("The Metamorphosis") and a few other short stories had appeared in Icelandic, even though modernism had made its initial breakthrough in Icelandic prose literature some time ago. We were driven by our interest in Kafka but

also by our awareness of the lasting impact of modernism, its ways of reinventing itself, through both original writing and translation. Therefore, we found it relevant to bring the works of Kafka, that master of warped selves and fragmented texts (or was it the other way round?), into the Icelandic language. We gradually translated most of Kafka's narrative corpus, with the longest novel, *Das Schloß*, not appearing in Icelandic until 2015. *The Castle* in 2015—that must be “late modernism”, if ever there was one. However, K., the lonesome traveller, is still as perplexed and arrogant as ever, as he stands on the wooden bridge leading to the village and looks up into the void that appears to be there.

Much remains to be learned from translation and other cultural contacts in the realm of modernist research, and this is a branch of scholarship that seems bound to grow and prosper, considering that in the past two decades, modernist studies have sought to expand their international horizon. Since I can only touch very briefly on this development, I shall restrict my attention to a few projects that can be said to have followed in Bradbury and McFarlane's footsteps in bringing together a team of scholars exploring literary modernism as a cross-cultural and multilingual phenomenon. These new endeavours have also sought to move out the borders of modernism, both geographically and chronologically, as well as conceptually.

Some years ago, I co-edited, with Vivian Liska, a two-volume symposium on modernism brought out by the International Comparative Literature Association (ICLA) as part of its series *Comparative History of Literature in European Languages*. It involved close to 70 contributors in various countries working on a project that revolved around a single concept—a daunting and fascinating task, especially since this concept does not have a narrowly defined realm of meaning even though it serves a key role in designating major currents of ideas and aesthetic practice (Eysteinnsson and Liska 2007). The concept could be said to constitute a forum capable of embracing considerable critical and theoretical disagreements, but it also needs some framework to insure stability and functionality—its sheer usefulness.

While such a large collaborative project is in progress, one has a strong sense of both the constraints and the mobility of the borders of modernism. The ICLA *Modernism* symposium takes a long historical view of modernism and addresses its topics through a broad range of theoretical and interdisciplinary approaches. It is based in part on the premise that modernism is a salient current in modern literature, one in which the avant-garde plays a significant part, but it is not presented as an overarching or dominant paradigm of twentieth-century literature. Its geographical reach is different here and more diverse than in Bradbury and McFarlane's book, and wider in that it includes for instance case studies on Latin America and Australia, as well as for instance Western literary connections with Africa and Japan. However, it does not have the global or planetary aspirations which were on the rise at the time in modernist studies, concomitantly with an equally interesting resurgence of *world literature* as a sphere of scholarship.

The global turn in modernist studies has been signalled by a number of important publications, including the volume *Geomodernisms* (Doyle and Winkiel 2005), and two large Oxford University Press volumes, *The Oxford Handbook of Modernisms* (2010) and *The Oxford Handbook of Global Modernisms* (2012). In these symposia, the literary world can certainly be said to emerge as a modernist stage, and this has opened up the question of modernism for a whole new inquiry. What happens to modernism as concept and designation when it is used as a key term in such planetary mapping enterprises? Ideally, it will enter a forum for various comparative explorations in world literature, but hardly in order for us to find semblances of it elsewhere. Although modernism became a significant and challenging force in Western urban centres, usually emerging a little later in more “outlying” territories—sometimes with a time lag which might entail enrichment rather than belatedness—it is obvious that it cannot, as such, serve as any kind of measuring stick on a world-wide scale. On the other hand, this does not mean we can, in broad, global contexts, ignore modernism as a historical and aesthetic concept and the roles it has played where it has proven to be relevant.

Moreover, it is one thing to be critical of modernist aesthetics and another to make it a scapegoat for Western blindness, due to “privileges” it may enjoy. Morag Shiach has stated that scholarly discourse about modernism has “tended to iron out the complexity of competing styles at any given historical moment in favour of a map which identifies particular form of artistic experimentation as more truly expressive of their moment” (Shiach 2004, p. 135; cited in Brooker et al. 2010, p. 5).

If this is so—and I agree that this is sometimes the case—then it seems to me that the strongest response to such simplification is a critical reassessment of the complexity and validity of these competing styles, which may not have been acknowledged on their own terms. Such a move would potentially augment the critical discussion about the varieties of modern literary currents, forms, and methods, and the ways in which they interact. Some may have felt that this was impossible, given the strong status of modernism within parts of the literary culture, especially within the universities. For a while postmodernism appeared to have undermined this “regime”. However, modernism made a comeback—fired up by new approaches and the “new modernisms”—and may by now have swallowed up much of the difference that had been claimed on behalf of after-modernisms (both “post” and “late”). Nevertheless, one should not, in seeking to understand its renewal, ignore historical factors, some of which I have sought to touch on in this essay. How then, one may ask, do we distinguish between the history that we seek to grapple with through sign systems like literature, and the history of these sign systems, including the history of certain perceptible currents, and the history of the concepts identifying these currents? In a 1992 essay, surveying the state of affairs in modernist studies, Marjorie Perloff noted memorably that modernism “after all, now has the charm of history on its side, even as it remains, at the end of the twentieth century, our Primal Scene” (Perloff 1992, p. 175).

Which history is Perloff talking about? Does the primal scene involve the potentially traumatic meeting of history and art, during which history brings along not only its charm but also its brutal force? However, the charm of history could also refer to the formal endeavours modernism has pursued in coping with experiences that are not easily put into words. Can aesthetic form meet the force of historical moments? Alternatively, can the disrupted or “troubled” referentiality of modernist works be critically (and justifiably) whittled down to “form” in a narrow and negative sense of “formalism”?

Concomitantly, one cannot bypass the history of the concept of modernism and of what we call “modernist studies”. I do not think anyone who has worked intensely in modernist studies in recent decades can deny that significant *value*—in more than one sense of that word—has been amassed in the name of modernism. As a term for aesthetic activities that have both highlighted and frustrated our notions of modernity, modernism has been a significant academic preoccupation for quite some time, and it is probably safe to say that it has acquired a fair amount of cultural capital. It is a concept in which literary, critical, and academic establishments have invested heavily, as have a great many researchers, teachers, and authors of academic and other critical writings. This value comes from a claim, in the name of modernism, to a radical cultural grasp on the modern world, based in aesthetic responses to the scene of modernity—and here, again, we may perhaps spot the “primal scene”. However, if critics claim that modernism “responds to the scenario of our chaos” or that it works—significantly also in its formal inventiveness—through moments of crisis in both history and subjective realms, then all such evaluation contributes to this “value”. This also explains, in part, the privileges modernism is found to enjoy and the “authenticity” sometimes ascribed to it. The strong position of modernism, as a literary “institution”, also and in no small part, stems from individual writers who have come to be seen as the prominent figures of this current; the creators of literary works on which modernism thrives as an enterprise and a concept. Many of these names are well known and come immediately to mind. Here, as elsewhere, for better or worse, the canon holds sway, although it is not immutable.

One way to respond to the power of such an institution, instead of labouring to reassess the “competing styles”, as I suggested earlier—especially perhaps the sleeping giant of

realism as a concept—is to step inside this privileged sphere and push out its borders, making the critical and aesthetic space linked to modernism more and more inclusive, and thus gradually change the game. At the risk of grossly simplifying a complicated process, I would suggest that this is an important and interesting factor in some recent modernist studies. The editor of *The Oxford Handbook of Global Modernisms*, Mark Wollaeger, discusses in his concise introduction the difference between the terms “modern” and “modernist”, noting candidly that in the recent approaches of several scholars this difference is fading, and he refers to Neil Lazarus’s view that modernism is not tied to any specifications of form and that “any cultural production that attempts to grapple with the realities of modernization might qualify as modernist” (Wollaeger 2012, pp. 11, 14).

If, in the process of modernism’s global conquest, the difference between *modernism* and *modern*—the crevice we saw turn into a canyon in Bradbury and McFarlane’s essay discussed above—has not only turned to crevice again but has in fact disappeared, we do indeed have a crisis in the narratives that constitute the history of modernism. Perhaps it simply flatlines, as the air is let out of not only “form” but also “difference”, that darling term of much modern scholarship. We would then presumably use “modernist” and “modernisms” for any kind of modern literary (or aesthetic) expression. Arnold Bennett, John Steinbeck, and Jonathan Franzen would be as modernist as Virginia Woolf, Samuel Beckett, and Toni Morrison. We might as well then just use the word “modern”—unless all these writers, along with many others, are modernists because they all “grapple with the realities of modernization”, whereas there may be others who do not. That potential distinction might seem to open up a strangely familiar Pandora’s box, but we probably have enough to cope with as is—since while the borders of modernism may be both moving out and fading as we speak, various aspects of the modernist crisis that Auerbach called our attention to still seem to be in full force—primal scene or not. Before we ultimately conflate “modern” and “modernist”, there are still issues to contemplate and discuss. Given world enough and time.

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