From “Introduction” to Modernism by Peter Childs

**Romance** ‘In medieval literature, a verse narrative [recounts] the marvelous adventures of a chivalric hero…. In modern literature, i.e., from the latter part of the 18th through the 19th centuries, a romance is a work of prose fiction in which the scenes and incidents are more or less removed from common life and are surrounded by a halo of mystery, an atmosphere of strangeness and adventure’

**Realism** ‘literature that attempts to depict life in an entirely objective manner, without idealization or glamor, and without didactic or moral ends. Realism may be said to have begun with such early English novelists as Defoe, Fielding, and Smollett, and to have become a definite literary trend in the 19th century’

**Modernism** ‘Modernist art is, in most critical usage, reckoned to be the art of what Harold Rosenburg calls “the tradition of the new”. It is experimental, formally complex, elliptical, contains elements of decreation as well as creation, and tends to associate notions of the artist’s freedom from realism, materialism, traditional genre and form, with notions of cultural apocalypse and disaster.

Modernism is, for example, not realism, the dominant mode of the novel from its inception in Britain in the eighteenth century with the rise of bourgeois capitalism to the present day. Realism, according to many critics, is characterised by its attempt objectively to offer up a mirror to the world, thus disavowing its own culturally conditioned processes and ideological stylistic assumptions. It also, modelled on prose forms such as history and journalism, generally features characters, language and a spatial and temporal setting very familiar to its contemporary readers and often presents itself as transparently representative of the author’s society. The hegemony of realism was challenged by Modernism and then postmodernism, as alternative ways of representing reality and the world.

Very broadly speaking, the vast majority of attempts to offer alternative modes of representation from the middle of the nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth century have at one time or another been termed Modernist, and this applies to literature, music, painting, film and architecture (and to some works before and after this period).

In prose, Modernism is associated with attempts to render human subjectivity in ways more real than realism: to represent consciousness, perception, emotion, meaning and the individual’s relation to society through interior monologue, stream of consciousness, tunnelling, defamiliarisation, rhythm, irresolution and other terms that will be encountered later in the book. Modernist writers therefore struggled, in Ezra Pound’s brief phrase, to ‘make it new’, to modify if not overturn existing modes of representation, partly by pushing them towards the abstract or the introspective, and to express the new sensibilities of their time: in a compressed, condensed, complex literature of the city, of industry and technology, war, machinery and speed, mass markets and communication, of internationalism, the New Woman, the aesthete, the nihilist and the flâneur.

**Modern, Modernism, Modernity**

**MODERN:** Modernism is variously argued to be a period, style, genre, or combination of these; but it is first of all a word; one which exists alongside cognate words. Its stem, ‘Modern’, is a term that, from the latin modo, means ‘current’, and so has a far wider currency and range of meanings than ‘Modernism’.

**MODERNISM:** ‘Modernist’ is a comparatively old word which, in the late sixteenth century named a modern person and came by the eighteenth century to denote a follower of modern ways and also a supporter of modern over ancient literature. By contrast, ‘Modernism’ was first used in the early eighteenth century simply to denote trends characteristic of modern times, while in the nineteenth century its meaning encompassed a sympathy with modern opinions, styles or expressions. In the later part of the nineteenth century, ‘Modernism’ referred to progressive trends in the Catholic Church.

It was only in the 1960s that the term became widely used as a description of a literary phase that was both identifiable and in some sense over. Postwar dates for Modernism’s high-point make sense in terms of
British literature but not European. Its end is variously defined, in terms of time, as 1930, 1950, or yet to happen, and, in terms of genre, as neorealism or postmodernism. As an international art term it covers the many avant-garde styles and movements that proliferated under the names of Expressionism, Imagism, Surrealism, Futurism, Dadaism, Vorticism, formalism and, in writing if not painting, Impressionism. Its forebears were Darwin, Marx and Nietzsche; its intellectual guru was Freud. Modernist writing is most particularly noted for its experimentation, its complexity, its formalism, and for its attempt to create a ‘tradition of the new’. Its historical and social background includes the emergence of the New Woman, the peak and downturn of the British Empire, unprecedented technological change, the rise of the Labour party, the appearance of factory-line mass production, war in Africa, Europe and elsewhere. Modernism has therefore almost universally been considered a literature of not just change but crisis.

MODERNITY: In relation to Modernism, modernity is considered to describe a way of living and of experiencing life which has arisen with the changes wrought by industrialisation, urbanisation and secularisation; its characteristics are disintegration and reformation, fragmentation and rapid change, ephemerality and insecurity. It involves certain new understandings of time and space: speed, mobility, communication, travel, dynamism, chaos and cultural revolution.

Above all, modernity characterised by the attempt to place humanity and in particular human reason at the centre of everything, from religion and nature, to science and society. Modernity describes the rise of capitalism, of social study and state regulation, of a belief in progress and productivity leading to mass systems of industry, institutionalisation, administration and surveillance.

**Modernism has therefore frequently been seen as an aesthetic and cultural reaction to late modernity and modernisation. On the one hand, Modernist artists kicked against the homogenization required by mass systems. On the other, they celebrated the new conditions of production, circulation and consumption engendered by technological change (Harvey 1989:23). There were paradoxical if not opposed trends towards revolutionary and reactionary positions, fear of the new and delight at the disappearance of the old, nihilism and fanatical enthusiasm, creativity and despair.**

MODERNISM

When time-bound, it is often primarily located in the years 1890–1930, with a wider acknowledgement that it develops from the mid-nineteenth century and begins to lose its influence in the mid-twentieth century.

It focused on the micro- rather than the macrocosm, and hence the individual more than the social. It was concerned with self-referentiality, producing art that was about itself and texts that were self-contained rather than representational. It leaned towards the disjointed, disintegrating and discordant in opposition to Victorian harmony.

Modernist art stressed complexity and difficulty, and also emphasized that culture had changed in response to the machine age. In terms of sexuality and the family, Modernism introduced a new openness with candid descriptions often sympathetic to feminism, homosexuality, androgyny and bisexuality beside a questioning of the constraints of the nuclear family which seemed to hamper the individual’s search for personal values. Modernists did not view ethics as superior to art, seeing the latter instead as the highest form of human achievement. If Victorian literature was concerned with morality, Modernist writing was concerned with aesthetics.

Modernist texts often focus on social, spiritual or personal collapse and subsume history under mythology and symbolism.

Other characteristics are a focus on the city and a championing as well as a fear of technology; technical experimentation allied with radical stylistic innovation; a suspicion of language as a medium for comprehending or explaining the world; and an attack on nineteenth-century stalwarts such as empiricism and rationalism. Modernism can be taken as a response by artists and writers to several things, including industrialisation, urban society, war, technological change and new philosophical ideas. Because the
nineteenth century experienced a spreading disillusionment with existing models of the individual and the
social, the Western world was transformed and reinterpreted by Marx, Freud and Darwin, who respectively
changed established notions of the social, the
individual and the natural,

World War I and the years immediately before and after it, brought about the demise of many institutions
and beliefs; the class system was rocked by the rise of trade unions and the Labour party; beliefs in King and
Country, patriotism and duty were betrayed by the carnage of the war; the strength of patriarchy was
challenged as women went to work outside the home and the suffrage movement gained
hold.

The War resulted in the invention of new weapons, such as submarines, aeroplanes, poison gas and cannons
with ranges over 75 miles, and produced more than 33 million military casualties, and an additional 5
million civilian deaths, not counting the millions of war-related influenza deaths. With devastation on such a
scale, it became absurd to celebrate noble ideas like human dignity in art, or blithely to assert a belief in
human progress. The war produced a deep distrust of optimistic secular or teleological understandings of
history and seemed a climactic, severing event that showed conclusively the failures of nineteenth-century
rationalism.

There was also a new perception of reality and the function of art. The previous dominant modes had been a
poetics of mimesis, verisimilitude and realism. By contrast, Modernism marked a clear movement towards
increased sophistication, studied mannerism, profound introversion, technical display, self-scepticism and
general anti-representationalism… In fiction new writers spearheaded a rejection of several of the
fundamentals of classic realism, such as: a dependable narrator; the depiction of a fixed stable self; history
as a progressive linear process; bourgeois politics, which advocated reform not radical change; the tying up
of all narrative strands, or ‘closure’.