

## Different Interpretations of the Modern Era: Modernist Continuities and Discontinuities

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### Abstract

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The modern era is usually associated with discontinuity, chaos and disorganisation. While it is true that these characteristics are present in Modernisms, none of them is the authentic interpretative key, but rather the key to the past is the essential element. Modernisms find their sense in history, albeit they may be overlooked and not taken into account, or overcome, or bear fruit from what has happened. Hence, the importance of the past is the key to moving forward. There are many and varied authors who emerge, supported by the atmosphere of the period, and there are many styles and contents that artists develop through their works, which serve as a platform for individual exploration, because their aesthetic concept is beginning to expand now, and the modern 'I' is overriding the old 'we'. As one example of this, the aesthetic-literary theories of modernist Oscar Wilde are also worth studying.

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### 1. Modern Times, Modernity and Modernisms

Distinguishing the current era of modernity and modernism is not a trivial matter if this is pursued through an understanding of the historical context of the modern world. Modern times is a purely chronological concept, ranging from the 16<sup>th</sup> century until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Modernity is the mentality that accompanies this increasingly secular historical period, and modernism is the international aesthetic movement wherein personalities as diverse as Fernando Pessoa, Miguel de Unamuno, Antonio Machado, Marcel Proust, Oscar Wilde, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, T. S. Eliot or Ezra Pound appear. From the beginnings of human history, the term modern has been used to characterise the consciousness of those times that had a need to feel different from the immediate past, and wanted to show their superiority as compared to the previous period. In the V century AD, the fathers of the Christian Church used the term modern to refer to the new era of Christianity. The Renaissance, the XIV and XV centuries, is modern in terms of exceeding those that were considered like this in the dark medieval years. In the European enlightenment of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, modernity is not only the immediate past, but also that which is ancient, and at the same time, its superiority points to the future progress of mankind through scientific knowledge and the emancipation of human beings using reason. Thus, the modernisation or illustration process arises. This is a process of change and transformation of all the planes of existence, cognitive, moral, social, and artistic relations, etc. Science replaces religion as the preferred instrument for understanding the world, great distances cease to be so great, and time starts to be something fundamental (there were no watches until the late Middle Ages). The feeling of living in a world that is constantly changing is something that modern man perceives and modernity leads to that feeling of vertigo (LOZANO, 2008, p. 407). Here, 18<sup>th</sup>-century Modernisms, which are intellectual movements of all kinds arise, that created their works or speeches using these as the material of modern man's experiences. These Modernisms offer a balanced vision of modernity, taking account of their positive and negative aspects.

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But in late 19<sup>th</sup> century and the early 20<sup>th</sup>, unbalanced Modernisms emerge, whether these are positive because they see only the good in modernisation, such as the technology that will lead us to a better future, or negative Modernisms, which only see the crisis and disorder that is taking place in these fields in this new world that is emerging. We see modernity to be a large tree, and Modernisms to be the different branches of it. Since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century and throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the word "modern" has been applied to innovations in all areas, to anything that displayed an iota of originality. That situation was caused by the diversity that characterises it. It is for this reason that the examples here range across a very broad field: painting, sculpture, prose and poetry, music and dance, architecture and design, theatre and cinema. The diversity of styles shows great respect for imaginative individuality, which led to debates about tastes, expressiveness, morality, economics, policy and causes and social implications for two centuries. And although no researcher has attempted to include all of the manifestations of modernity in one historical epoch, there is one common symptom- the particular threatens to impose itself on the general. Despite these differences, modernity in any trend pursued two attributes, the lure of heresy and self-criticism. As regards the lure of heresy, artists get satisfaction in carving out a revolutionary path, the one that is theirs, and the fact of not being subordinated to the dominant authority. For that reason, a lot of happiness comes from creating a poem, a picture or a building, and this lies in the idea of going against the establishment. The fight is for the absolute artistic autonomy of its creator, and the exercise of self-criticism goes beyond opposing convention, and at the time it is an exploration of the self. But modern artists reacting against what has been established so far, is just one sign of the importance that the past has for them. The importance of what is stated above generates denial or it is overcome, something that is always displayed in an environment in which the particular individual is the Centre. For each individual his particular self is the most important thing and everything that happens to him is observed from there. The relevance of the individual against the group leads modernists to see view as something artificial, a union of selfish individuals. So, at the same time, a new era of risk and uncertainty emerges, leaving man isolated from a world that pretends to be new, and the specific individual wants to make a difference through his artistic work. According to Berman, modernity unites humanity in a paradoxical way, in the union of disunity (Berman, 2011, p.1).

But modernity is unthinkable without a significant and influential number of sponsors willing to back it. The breeding ground of modernity arose in the United States, due to a process of industrialisation and urbanisation, which -although it started at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century in England-, developed somewhat later in other countries (Belgium, Germany, France and the United States), carrying symptoms of social prosperity with it. The invention of the railroad led to a breakthrough in the transporting of passengers and goods. At the same time, one of the main routes of modern art re-appeared, the urban phenomenon, whereby cities grew rapidly, building concert halls and theatres and concerts that led consumers to fill them. At this time, Paris became identified as a cultural city. Another element to consider is the dissemination of art. This is because in earlier times this had been a monopoly of select taste makers responsible for defining fashion. The dissemination of art extended beyond the exclusive and cultural circles of the aristocracy, bringing about the making of the term bourgeoisie at the same time. The fact that art was targeted at a widening public contributed towards increasing its diversity. Capitalism developed techniques in order to make better use of its resources, and while the era of modern art took flight, mechanisation championed the process. At the same time, these changes resulted in unsafe neighbourhoods and in the excessive exploitation of workers, which some social critics denounced this as the selfishness of capitalists. In this atmosphere of progress, we can see the figure of Charles Baudelaire as the most plausible candidate that the paternity of Modernisms may be attributed to. For him, modernity lies in what is ephemeral, the fleeting and contingent, and the beauty does not lie in politics or the war, but in life itself. Baudelaire's talent was to combine technical knowledge with emotions which is the trait that turned it into a model for modern poets. He also contributed towards his characters enjoying a dubious reputation of Bohemianism in the field, consuming hashish and opium, to seek what he baptised as "artificial paradises". According to Matei Calinescu, with Baudelaire, modernity is no longer a given condition and it becomes a heroic choice, because the road of modernity is full of risks and difficulties (Calinescu, 2003, p. 64).

## **2. The Expansion of the Modern Literature**

The acceptance of the new literature was hardly an easy achievement, because the pioneering novelists asked readers for a degree of attention and concentration that other more accommodating writers saved them from.

Modern literature became an arduous task, not only for its creators, but also for the public, and so not all of its creators followed this path. It was possible to distinguish between three types of reading public: the first group was the largest and this was made up of the uneducated mass, which did not have any knowledge of what literature was demanding. The second group, smaller than the first one, but with a significant number of recipients, enjoyed easy access to culture one that is considered to be above the crowd, but they were reluctant to invest the time and effort that was a work of art would entail. Finally, there was a tiny elite of readers who were open to innovation and experiments. In addition, modern authors caused a certain degree of anxiety in their audience because of the entirely unpredictable quality of their works, and this difference was most noticeable between traditional novelists and their modern successors. In contrast, the techniques of the traditional authors did not require so much attention, something that the modernists did. The figure of the Anglo-American poet Thomas Stearns Eliot stands out here, whose modernism can be characterised by its innovation and the changing of the times, at the same time as trying to bring together and be influenced by traditional artists. The poetry of T. S. Eliot combines the English poets of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and the French symbolists of the 19<sup>th</sup> and Europe in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, were a period that saw the great development of mathematical and physical theories, but the poets foresee the universe as a machine, seeing it as something mysterious and less rational. Literature then moved to the individual soul, the romantic poet that describes things as you live through them, searching for their ultimate meaning. This was where the Symbolist movement, founded by Stéphane Mallarmé was born. He was a French poet who devoted his life to working with poetic language. According to him, accepting every such thing as it is, deprives the mind of delicious charm of believing that you are creating. Naming an object entails dispensing with three quarters of the pleasure of the poem which is derived from the satisfaction of guessing its nature, little by little. It is then necessary to suggest it and evoke it, which is what the human imagination needs. Getting intimate with things rather than simply stating them is one of the purposes of the symbolists. Mallarmé supposes something rather more, and the presumptions that symbolism relies on lead us to formulate its doctrine as follows: every feeling or sensation, every moment of consciousness is different. This makes it quite impossible to reproduce our feelings, as we experience them, in reality, by using conventional language or current literature. Each poet has a unique personality, so his task is to find a special and specific language that suits the expression of his personality and his feelings, always bearing in mind that each element is equal to the combination of other elements. The symbolism invents a new artistic language using symbols, because it is not possible to directly express something that is peculiar, fleeting and vague in the form of statements and descriptions, but only through a succession of words and images, which will be used to make suggestions to the reader.

The Symbolist movement was born in France and was limited to a rather esoteric kind of French poetry, but over time it was destined to spread throughout the Western world. In 1899, the poet and critic Arthur Symons, influenced by the theories of Mallarmé's theories, published an essay entitled, "The Symbolist movement in literature". In that essay, he said that the soul of things can become visible through symbols, and he proposed experiments in poetic prose and original ways of exploring the inner world of the poet in order to dominate subjectivity. As you have just seen, the Symons's vision raises questions about the language relating to the tone, touch, vocabulary and intuition. Another Symbolist poet is Jules Laforgue, the heir to much of Corbière's literature. Laforgue's work is closely associated with the poetic commentator, something that should be noted, as few modernists were willing to take on the role of interpreters of their own art. One of Laforgue's more defended theses is the need for the poet to have a historical approach: the past, as well as having the quality of being the past, is present in our lives and it affects us. Another of his ideas is to defend the impersonality of the poet, who lends his voice without sharing the feelings which it refers to. This greatly influenced the thinking of some modern authors such as William Butler Yeats, Gertrude Stein, T. S. Eliot or James Joyce, since, to a large extent, their works are a continuation or expansion of the symbolism. It is interesting to note here the idea of both Joyce and Eliot in their work was to abandon the development of a single theory that can explain everything, annulling the richness of the multiplicity of particularities. In the case of Joyce, his attitude towards the modernist climate is widely affected by the loneliness and experience arising from it. *Ulysses* was conceived as a book capable of expressing multiple styles and eighteen different points of view, as this was the only way to capture the essence of the present reality in relativity. And the various methods of narration of *Ulysses* are different ways of ordering experience. Eliot, in the same way as Joyce, although primarily in the poetic field, takes as a starting point the existence of a diverse and plural world where there is a multiplicity of individuals and experiences. The reality is too rich to be expressed through one single omniscient narrator who knows it all and understands it. The real thing is diverse and, from a literary perspective, this can be translated as the presence of different points of view and States (Wilson, 1996, pp. 221 - 222).

According to this conception, Eliot's poetry would be a ritual and a Cubist collage-like mystery. Thus, Walton Litz said that Eliot's main poem, *The Waste Land*, would represent the biggest revelation of the spiritual situation of modern man, "Hell seen from Purgatory", with its plurality (Litz, 1973, p. 8). Adams says two of the early Eliot poems titled *Pryfrock* and *The Waste Land*, that rather than express modernism, they express the personal disintegration of the author in the context of post-war Europe. For Adams, the modernism of Eliot took place during a brief and limited period, in which his relationship with the poet Ezra Pound was direct. It could be said that Adams only supports true modernism in Eliot's early work. Furthermore, Hugh Kenner argues that *The Waste Land* is a determining factor for a better understanding of modernism, and even perhaps of post-modernism (Kenner, 1973, p. 24). In the same way, Menand says that Eliot is modern, while rejecting the romantic trends of modernist literature, which in turn is a cause of liberalism, secularism and *laissez faire* that he personally detested (Menand, 2007, pp. 7 - 166).

### 3. The Past as a Modernist Interpretative Key: Oscar Wilde

The importance of the past for modern artists is defended throughout this study, although it is true that the particularity of each author is precisely what influences the past in it. So far we have shown different ideas and examples of the modern world and its manifestations. Below, and on the basis of a modernist author, Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde, we will explain the peculiarity of his modernism through his aesthetic-literary theory. In this way, we will carefully examine carefully his essay entitled "The Critic as Artist", from the 1890, so as to gain an overview that will help us to better understand modern times in general and the modernism of O. Wilde in particular. The slogan "art for art's sake" was a statement in defence of artistic works and a vindication of the sovereignty of its creators: the artist is only responsible to himself (Gay, 2007, pp. 68 - 69). This slogan has many followers, for some the work of the artist Baudelaire for instance, does not involve copying reality, but using the imagination and revealing the mysterious world. For his part, Wilde asserts the supremacy of the literature over the other arts, as this is only a reflection of the everyday activities of humans: "Life and Literature, life and the perfect expression of life" (Wilde, 2001, p. 20). Life is the highest form that exists in the world, and only literature is able to express its richness. Art is expressed through the subject matter. Artistic experience need a physical format, such as the contemplation of a picture painted in oil, or the reading of a poem written on paper: "Such things are less than the yellow trumpet of one daffodil of the field, far less than the meanest of the visible arts;" "for, just as Nature is struggling mind into matter, so Art is mind expressing itself under the conditions of matter, and thus, even in the lowliest of her manifestations, she speaks to both sense and soul alike" (184). There are very few human beings who are called upon to create, and not all who call themselves artists deserve that name, since in addition to a certain personal ability, it is necessary to have some preparation and effort. Which is not to say that art can be subject to the rigidity of a scientific formula and stop being a passion. But literature, as well as life itself, is required to perform its function, needing a creator make it true, which infuses it with his breath, a task that corresponds to the poet. This is why artists must have a notable social position, because the world needs them in order to have art.

Wilde, as a good modern artist, far from wanting to deny the self, defends it, urging all poets to develop it and to be themselves, this is, according to him, the only way that authors have of doing their job correctly: "If you wish to understand others you must intensify your own individualism" (155). If we continue delving into the issue, we discover that for Wilde the purpose of art is the same emotion, i.e., that art exists so man can enjoy it, to the delight of the senses, the slogan "art for art's sake" shows that life consists of enjoying the useless. This expressed through the dialogue between Gilbert and Ernest below, the two protagonists of the essay quoted above: "[...] for emotion for the sake of emotion is the aim of art, and emotion for the sake of action is the aim of life, and of that practical organisation of life that we call society-" (178). The enjoyment or experience that the human beings can obtain from their union with the work of art when they come into contact with it as recipients, and this forms part of it through the emotions, can only be achieved from an emotional point of view. If we want to enjoy art, it is necessary to set reason to one side as this is an impediment: "There are two ways of disliking art, Ernest. One is to dislike it. The other, to like it rationally" (218). In addition, for the artist beauty occupies a privileged place in the human beings, having its own identity. There is a sense of the beauty that is independent of reason and superior to the rest of the senses. The sense of beauty possesses a value that is similar to the soul, prompting some to create, and others, to pure contemplation. Another key issue to be noted is the relationship between the critic and the artist.

According to Wilde, authentic criticism is higher and more creative than the creation which gives rise to its activity, because it is a second form of creation from a piece of work that has already been created. Art criticism is more valuable than art itself because it echoes beauty in general, not stopping at particularities: "It is the highest Criticism, for it criticises not merely the individual work of art, but Beauty itself" (134). The artist cannot recognise the beauty of a foreign work because he is too stuck in himself and in his task. To conclude this study, it is necessary to take account of the first idea that we began this article with, and that is that Oscar Wilde takes into account the past and what has happened so as to be able to do away with it; the past is important, it exists, and I want to destroy it, because as happens to most modern artists, the author considers that the tradition is a loadstone that must be discarded. Finding the meaning of our existence from that which has already existed, would undermine artistic quality. We can only face the future if we are not tied to yesterday. In the words of Wilde: "The man who regards his past is man who deserves to have no future to look forward to" (210).

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