

On Definition of Western Modernism and Its Characteristics

Zhimin Li

School of Foreign Studies, Guangzhou University, Guangzhou, Guangdong, China

Corresponding author: Zhimin Li; Email: lizhimin666@gzhu.edu.cn

Abstract:

The essay explores the complex and often contradictory nature of Modernism, a literary and artistic movement notoriously resistant to definition. While Modernism is frequently characterized as a revolt against tradition, the author argues that it is more accurately understood as an evolutionary step built upon preceding movements rather than a complete break. Despite disagreements over its precise timeline, scholars generally situate Modernism between 1890 and 1930, with its peak in Anglo-American contexts occurring between 1910 and 1925. Modernism encompasses diverse and often opposing schools — such as Imagism, Symbolism, Futurism, and Surrealism — making a unified definition difficult. However, a common thread is the pursuit of newness, whether through rebellion against tradition or innovative techniques. The movement’s rebellious spirit led to radical experimentation, yet many modernist figures (e.g., T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound) ultimately sought to establish new literary orthodoxies, only to be challenged by later movements like Postmodernism. The essay also examines Modernism’s broader cultural and intellectual influences, including philosophy (Kant, Freud), science (Darwinism, Heliocentrism), and social changes (Feminism). These forces reshaped artistic expression, leading to abstraction, fragmentation, and self-reflexivity in literature. However, Modernism’s increasing elitism and anti-popular stance alienated general audiences, contributing to its eventual decline. Ultimately, the author suggests that Modernism should be studied abstractly and historically, recognizing its contradictions while appreciating its innovations in form, ideology, and technique.

Keywords: Modernism; revolt and inheritance; imagism; symbolism; innovation in literature

It seems that no one has felt completely confident in defining Modernism. “Since its inception as a category of literary study during the 1930s, Modernism has been notoriously inhospitable to definition” (Levenson, 1999, p. 157). However, Modernism, to me, is in general “a revolt” against or “turn” from its precedents only superficially, while essentially “a further

step”, since nothing of a latter stage was able to happen without having based itself upon the former one; it is definitely newer, but not necessarily higher or more advanced, except in passage of time.

There is not even complete agreement about the duration of Modernism, as some have suggested a broader while others have insisted on a narrower period; either has a sound basis. But it must be against the very function of language for communication if no general agreement can be obtained on the greater part of a linguistic system, hence causing a total confusion in human society. It thus seems beneficial for a community to share a prescriptive dictionary of working definitions that can prevent many damaging misunderstandings. That is probably why some scholars have agreed, more or less, that Modernism happened between 1890 and 1930 and that “its peak period in the Anglo-American context lay between 1910 and 1925” (Levenson, 1999, p.9). Although none would risk one’s reputation by offering a concise definition of Modernism, most historians and critics of culture generally agreed on its content: “the term has been used to cover a wide variety of movements subversive of the realist or the romantic impulse and disposed towards abstraction (Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, Expressionism, Cubism, Futurism, Symbolism, Imagism, Vorticism, Dadaism, Surrealism); but even these are not, as we shall see, all movements of one kind, and some are radical reactions against others. In some nations Modernism has seemed central to the evolution of the literary and artistic tradition; in others it has seemed simply to visit and then go away again” (Bradbury & McFarlane, 1974, p. 23).

With so many different and divergent Modernist schools and movements, being often opposite to each other, it seems that Modernism is by nature resistant to definition in the

traditional way, and it is not strange that one often fails to find the common ground among all Modernist schools and movements as required for a traditional definition; or one is simply reluctant to do so because the unsettled application of a term can often leave a huge space for creative thinking and writing; since a sort of agreement on its duration and content has guaranteed a minimum basis of mutual understanding. It could be innovative, and not too absurd, to regard this non-definition of Modernism as a “modern” and descriptive definition of Modernism. Nevertheless, there are indeed some common features among all Modernist schools and movements that are adequate for a definition in the traditional way; the most obvious is that all modernists were craving for Newness. To be new, being usually a sign of being original, itself has a value.

There are usually two ways to be creative, one being to extend and complement some former theories or practice, the other to revolt. The easier way to create something distinctively newer is to revolt against the perceived constrictions of the old, and that is exactly what the modernists did. To be courageous enough to revolt is certainly a strong point, which, however, itself embodies its own weakness, as anything with a rebellious spirit will soon be rebelled against and overthrown by its offspring. “Like Modernism, postmodernism asserts its novelty by trampling on its antecedents; in fact, postmodernism travesties Modernism in much the same terms that Modernism travestied Romanticism” (Emig, 1995, p. viii). In a world that has faith in individualism and equality, no one would like any academic authority; this might well explain why modernists were in such hostility against their authoritative forefathers. But since most modernists themselves were interested in building themselves as an authority after

overthrowing their former authorities, they themselves were due to be overthrown soon by the postmodernists.

Being tired of the endless literary rebellions, some scholars went back to examine the possible inheritance that modernists might have acquired from their predecessors and concluded that “even at this early date, modern poetry looked to Jarrell as it appears to us today—squeezed on the one side by its romantic precursors and on the other by its postmodern inheritors (Jarrell himself first used the word *postmodernist* in 1947). Flying in the face of his New Critical teachers (and foreshadowing the work of Bloom or Kermode), Jarrell insisted that modern poetry was nothing but what romantic poetry ‘wishes or finds it necessary’ to become... Jarrell explained that any qualities associated with modern poetry—violence, disorganization, obscurity—are themselves romantic phenomena” (Levenson, 1999, p. 101). Even the most famous modernist T.S. Eliot was caught in this retrospective reconsideration. “Today, in the wake of pioneering work by Frank Kermode, Robert Langbaum, and especially Harold Bloom, Eliot not only seems indebted to Tennyson; his Modernism makes most sense when we understand it as part of a continuum beginning with the publication of the *Lyrical Ballads*” ((Levenson, 1999, p. 100).

Strangely, it was by “revolting” that the modernists “inherited” their literary tradition, which guaranteed them unlimited space for original activities while based, though in a reversed manner, on their predecessors’ literary achievements.

I. A Brief View of the “Modern” Background of Modernism in the West

To probe into Modernist poetry, it will be beneficial to begin with a general discussion of “Modern” in terms of religion, philosophy, science and technology, because: 1) it is only from

a very broad, abstract and historical viewpoint that we can see Modernism more clearly as an integrated movement; 2) one can hardly obtain a coherent understanding of Modernism from within, due to the divergent natures of all the different poetical schools of Modernism.

The “Modern Age” of the West, in contrast to the Middle Ages, is generally considered as started by the Renaissance that was initiated by a re-discovery of the ancient Greek or Roman culture, incorporating all sorts of Greek and Roman ideologies, among which the most important were the individualism expressed in democracy and equality; these were to shake the basic ideologies of the Middle Ages of the West where religion was prevalent, holding a tight control over people’s spiritual world. Before the Renaissance, Christianity, the major religion in the West, advocating “love” and “peace” among men, had been many times misused by assorted persons in the name of God to carry out notoriously inhuman crimes, causing huge disasters to Western societies and many losses of life. People were then generally heavily repressed by many priests or fathers armed with their own personal interpretations of the Bible; the many priests and fathers even divided Christianity into many sects and, eventually, caused much hatred and slaughter among them, which was certainly against the will of Jesus Christ. (It should be admitted here that these views of medieval Christianity in the West are themselves coloured by post-medieval interpretation, adopting a more secular view of the individual and the state; the negative judgement of the medieval world-view result from the success of the Renaissance ideas which opposed this world-view and largely replaced it.) The many failures of religion to bring happiness to human beings undoubtedly promoted the rediscovery of the ancient Greek and Roman civilisations, that could largely provide complements or alternatives

to the weak points of religion by largely depriving the priests' or fathers' absolute power over humans.

If we say that the Greek and Roman ideologies only undermined the dominance of religion in an unintended or underground way at the very beginning, the development of science, especially the formation of the Heliocentric Theory and, later, Darwinism, must have fundamentally shaken any religion as a ruling power, greatly enriching the concept of "the Modern Age". Science that is based on "proofs" was obviously in sharp contrast to religion that strictly ruled out any intention to seek for proof; religion demands pure faith. Since the rapid development of science, including physics, chemistry, astronomy, geography, technology etc., could directly provide fast material improvement to people's lives, it soon captured the favour of major population groups in Western societies, firmly establishing its unparalleled role in any modern human society up to the present day. In the era of science, Western philosophy that had started in ancient Greek grew rapidly stronger and stronger and very much took the leading role from religion in offering beliefs to people, largely contributing to the Modernist Movement. For example, it has been said that "Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* was a foundational text of modern thought" (Levenson, 1999, p. 18).

That the leading characteristic of modern society should be the development of equality among humans has found support from both modern philosophy and religion; the former advocates equality among every member of a society (except for "slaves" perhaps, an idea that could be traced back to ancient Greek and Roman philosophy, which had caused many disasters on earth in the form of colonisation), and the latter was reinterpreted as having faith in all humans being equal before God. Owing to the modern ideology of equality, people began to

evaluate their individual value and the importance of their “selves”, which remained as another vital character of the whole Modern Age, which in turn activated a growing awareness by women of their equality with their male counterpart. “Shifts in gender relations at the turn of the century were a key factor in the emergence of Modernism” (Levenson, 1999, p. 174). Not surprisingly, Feminism contributed a great deal to Modernism. “The radical implications of the social-cultural changes feminism advocated produced in modernist writing an unprecedented preoccupation with gender, both thematically and formally” (Levenson, 1999, p. 174). To say that Feminism produced a significant harvest during the Modernism Period is true more from a historical viewpoint than in comparison with the male modernists who certainly played the leading role in most Modernist movements; but the rapidly uprising trend of Feminism was also most significant.

As the self-emphasis of some modernists went to extremes, modernist literature gradually ran into a desperate confusion and withdrew itself from public circulation, leaving the majority of people in a world of no true literature. And yet it may also seem that at least some modernist artists responded to the growing divide between popular taste and advanced experiment by cultivating the difficulty of their own productions, becoming not just unpopular but anti-popular in their outlook. “Modernism’s view of itself as a *machine celibataire*, a celibate machine existing out of and for itself, has crucial implications for its self-reflective potential. ... Modernism is constantly in danger of losing control because of its limited self-criticism which is produced, paradoxically, by an overemphasis on self-reflection” (Emig, 1995, p. 62). The very fact of receding into itself can certainly be interpreted as the incompetence or failure of

modernists to influence the public as their forefathers had done, or, their abandonment of a public role in any of the previously traditional ways.

Later on, even some modernists who had worked together towards overthrowing the traditional literary authorities became somewhat interested in establishing themselves as literary orthodoxy, which, inevitably, caused many disputes among them. “This study must end with an irony, the modern movement consolidating its critical position, even as its leading figures discover irreconcilable differences among themselves. Individually, the English modernists would never want for an eager hearing, but they would never hear one another with the same sympathy. The muted conflict identified at the end of part II, the struggle between a desire for artistic alliance and a celebration of the individual artist, led finally to the dissolution of always fragile bonds” (Levenson, 1999, p. 215).

The struggles between some leading modernists, and the contradictory nature of Modernism, rule out the possibility of success in studying the Modernist Movement by solely concentrating on individual modernists. A better way is to separate Modernism as a movement from modernists as executors, with the realisation that the Modernist Movement could only possibly have happened within a certain historical and social context. Only then can we study Modernism in an academically abstract way, with frequent reference to some specific individual modernists when necessary. It should be admitted that any individual modernist embodies some characteristics of Modernism while none of them was an authoritative and infallible incarnation of Modernism; for example, if one should take every word uttered by T.S. Eliot or Ezra Pound as a central part of the Modernist Movement, this could only result in confusion leading to nowhere. In fact, T.S. Eliot himself insisted that “The value of any

particular artist, of any particular work, cannot be determined in isolation—just no object, no person, no fact, can be perceived in isolation. There must exist, already exist, a scheme into which the new phenomena can fit... No meaning without relations; no truth, no reality, no value without order, without system” (Levenson, 1999, pp. 187-188). T.S. Eliot’s viewpoints well my approach of placing Western Modernism and New Chinese Poetry within a historical system and of studying it abstractly from without rather than studying it in “isolation” (merely from within). Only in the very abstract and comparative approach can one possibly extract some common features among all Western Modernist schools, which is indispensable for an academic study of a certain literary movement; and only in this way can one understand the relationship between New Chinese Poetry and Western poetics in a profound manner and possibly find some good solutions to deal with the problems of New Chinese Poetry.

II. Some Main Characteristics of Western Modernism

No one could deny the preponderant success of Modernism, which main characteristics contained rebellion, originality and some experimental techniques.

Rebellion

It is common knowledge that Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot strongly denounced their immediate precursors’ literary achievement: Victorian literature as a whole, Romantic poetry in particular. But if there had been so many readers of Romantic poetry, how should it be so much belittled? T.S. Eliot insisted that poetry was “an escape from emotions” in order to counteract Williams Wordsworth’s idea of poetry being “an overflow of emotions”; however, it is not impossible that anything that “overflowed” would naturally run away, i.e. “escape”, to borrow a word from Eliot.

In his famous essay “A Retrospect”, Ezra Pound, taking Romanticism as its background voice, invented a lot of “Nos” (Pound, 1954, pp. 3-14). But at the very beginning of humanity, before attempting to say something complicated, human beings should have naturally said something much in the way desired by Ezra Pound. Since people had gradually learned to say something more complicated, there must have been some reasons, such as saying something more indirectly, more interestingly and in more literary ways, obtaining a flavour of freshness as many a modernist had desired. So long as some people had enjoyed reading Victorian literature, there should not have been any complete denial of it. Pound’s proposal would never have created a case for newness if many literary readers had not been already so familiar with the Romantic Poetry that was itself rebellious. “The movement has been variously described as the centre of a ‘revolution in the literature of the English language as momentous as the Romantic one’ (Graham Hough)...” (Bradbury & McFarlane, 1974, p. 228). It was also inevitable that the trend towards innovative poems suggested by Pound would again become a return to whatever came before Modernism as well as partly a walk forwards from it. “Devoting the rest of his life to *The Cantos*, Pound became the most exaggeratedly romantic poet of his generation” (Levenson, 1999, p. 118). And it is not at all strange that Imagism would be derived as being a “avant-garde”, quite the opposite of the desire and pride of the Imagists themselves. “Imagism, though commonly treated as the first avant-garde movement in English literature, was something quite different—it was the first anti-avant-garde” (Levenson, 1999, p. 39).

Whatever the modernists were proposing, they aimed at making literature more literary, which resulted in all kinds of rebellions----a revolt of the precedents. It seemed that many Imagists were interested merely in rebellion itself, since many of them were even unclear about

what they were doing; neither could they agree with each other. “Even contributors to Imagist anthologies cannot agree on the nature and significance of the movement they took part in” (Bradbury & McFarlane, 1974, p. 228).

Of all modernists the Italian Futurists were probably the most rebellious, judging from their declarations. “Italy had been a junk shop too long, he [Filippo Tommaso Marinetti] insisted; now it was time to burn her libraries, flood her museums and galleries, and tear down her sacred cities” (Bradbury & McFarlane, 1974, p. 243). They simply desired to overthrow everything Italian that was before and above them, completely and thoroughly. “Let’s break out of the horrible shell of wisdom and throw ourselves like pride-ripened fruit into the wide, contorted mouth of the wind! Let’s give ourselves utterly to the Unknown, not in desperation but only to replenish the deep wells of the Absurd!” (Marinetti, 1909/1998, p. 250) As anything develops into its extremity, it inevitably causes troubles or even disasters. “The first [part of the film *Futurist Life*] showed some dynamic young Futurists led by Marinetti attacking an old man at a restaurant in Piazzale Michelangelo because he was drinking his soup in an old-fashioned way” (Bradbury & McFarlane, 1974, p. 251). It was clear then that Italian Futurists had developed themselves as a sort of tyranny, while opposing anything authoritative or tyrannous against them. It was only natural, though undesirable and horrible, that many Italian Futurists would take so much interest in Nazism, as also in the case of Ezra Pound.

And I myself am constantly realising that my own commentary on Modernism is also very much influenced by the rebellious spirit of Modernism, which might be justified by a personal conscience and guarding against going too far, and which can even become relatively desirable, if it remains within certain bounds, since much originality often goes together with rebellion.

Originality

Anyone who is interested only in “overthrowing”, without being able to construct something instead, will achieve nothing valuable. It is undeniable that all modernists, who are generally highly valued by the literary world, could always originate something, demonstrating their marvellous power of originality. As Ezra Pound suggested many “Nos” against his precursors, he also advocated some constructive ideas: “1. Direct treatment of the ‘thing’ whether subjective or objective. 2. To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation. 3. As regarding rhythm: to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome” (Pound, 1954, p. 3). The same happened with the French Symbolists, who harvested much achievement of their own after instigating a revolution against their literary tradition. “What then did the Symbolist revolution achieve? Most fundamentally, it awakened an acute consciousness of language. Language was no longer treated as a material outcrop of the person but as a material with its own laws and its own peculiar forms of life” (Bradbury & McFarlane, 1974, p. 212).

In fact, most modernist schools or movements constructed something of their own in replacement for whatever they had destroyed, without which, Modernism as a whole would be essentially valueless. Unfortunately, New Chinese Poetry as a revolutionary movement did not create enough to fill up the great vacancy that was caused by much ruthless avant-garde destruction of the Chinese literary tradition, which will be further discussed in the later chapters.

Techniques

To cope with modern society, especially with its many modern social crises, the most efficient undoubtedly should be new ideologies that found their strongest proofs in Karl Marx,

Kant and Freud and other philosophers or social theorists. In the literary world, people also aimed at creating new ideologies, and they did achieve some; but the most obvious fact is that in the attempts at dealing with the modern world, the originality of many novelists and poets resulted most in new writing techniques, which themselves embodied many new ways of understanding the world.

In the Modern Age, philosophy and science changed the world spiritually and ideologically, while technology changed the world practically and materially. “Heidegger has always had a great many things to say about modernity, and especially about the connection he sees between the modern experience and ‘technology’, the transformation of nature into mere ‘material’ for use by self-defining human agents” (Pippin, 1991, p. 122).

The same case happened in the literary world: as ideology urged the change of literature, new writing techniques were consequently produced, such as in the Impressionist Movement: “Literary Impressionism is, not surprisingly, a matter of linguistic techniques, the attempt to make language the act of perception rather than analysis of the act, to make language experiential activity rather than a description of activity” (Bradbury & McFarlane, 1974, p. 222). Many modernists would insist that a new technique in writing itself embodied a new idea; and correspondingly, it is always new ideas that consciously or subconsciously demands the invention of new techniques. The most marvellous achievement of almost all modernist schools resided in their new and experimental writing techniques more than anything else, such as the application of the image in Imagism, the application of symbol in Symbolism, etc.

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