MA in Modern and Contemporary Literature and Culture

2019-20

CORE MODULE: READING MODERNITY

AUTUMN TERM

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This module addresses some of the major literary trends and cultural debates of modern and contemporary times. It considers the different ways that ‘modernity’ has been understood – whether it be as a period or as a particular constellation of values or some combination of both – and focuses on the multiple art-forms and theories of art this yielded. We will proceed in a loose chronological fashion, examining a broad swathe of writers, genres and intellectual disciplines. The aim is not to provide an exhaustive survey, but to focus on some salient or representative moments of recent cultural history that will allow you to make informed choices about more specialised options of study. The module is conducted through seminars, offering a broad variety of teaching styles and critical approaches. For each seminar there is core reading which is compulsory preparation, and also a selection of further reading which you are encouraged to sample as widely as possible.

THE TERM AT A GLANCE

Week 1: Introductory Meeting (Adam Kelly)*
Week 2: Of Modernity and Modernism(s) (Nicoletta Asciuto)
Week 3: Modernist Poetry and the Politics of Allusion (Hugh Haughton)
Week 4: Expatriate Modernism: An American in Paris (Hannah Roche)
Week 5: Confession and Death at Mid-Century (JT Welsch)
Week 6: Reading Week
Week 7: Masters and Slaves, Race and Modernity (Adam Kelly)
Week 8: Paul Muldoon and Contemporary Poetry (Matt Campbell)
Week 9: The Contemporary Novel’s Aesthetic Debts (Alexandra Kingston-Reese)
Week 10: Signifying Katrina (Bryan Radley)

*Note that this meeting is for students on the MA Modern and Contemporary Literature and Culture, rather than all students taking Reading Modernity.

All seminars meet on Tuesdays at either 11am or 2pm.
2) Of Modernity and Modernism(s)

Nicoletta Asciuto

Do we live in a modern age? Are our experiences in the twenty-first century “modern”?

In this seminar we shall investigate what we mean exactly when we talk about the modern in literature, and also think about how best to approach modernist texts. Can the word ‘modernism’ be applied to a variety of texts beyond the canonical names of T. S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf, and James Joyce?

We will look at the various declinations of modern and modernist, starting with Charles Baudelaire's own influential definition of modernity and Virginia Woolf's famous statement that 'On or about December 1910 human character changed.’ We will then move on to consider how the scholarly conversation on the modern has developed from the second half of the twentieth century onwards. You will be joining a lively scholarly debate which is still ongoing!

By the end of this seminar you will have gained a deeper understanding of the debates surrounding modernism/modernity, its theorization, and its current appropriation stretching out to global literature.

Preparatory questions to consider:
- What do we mean by ‘modernity’? And what do we mean by ‘modernism’? Do these terms overlap?
- What makes a text modern? How do we go about locating and labelling literary texts? Can we recognize a modernist text when we encounter one?
- How have different authors (from Charles Baudelaire to contemporary scholars) theorized the concepts of modernity and modernism?
- Can we define a geography of modernity and modernism(s)? If so, what would that look like in your opinion?

Core Reading (in this order)
Harry Levin, ‘What was Modernism?’, The Massachusetts Review, vol. 1 no. 4 (1960), pp. 609-630. [JSTOR]
Peter Brooker and Andrew Thacker, ‘Locating the Modern’, in Geographies of Modernism (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), pp. 1-5. [VLE]

Further Reading


Fredric Jameson. Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism (London: Verso, 1991).


3) Modernism and the Poetics and Politics of Allusion: ‘Difficulty’ and Inter-textuality in T.S. Eliot and Marianne Moore

Hugh Haughton

In his essay on ‘Metaphysical Poetry’ of 1921, T.S. Eliot wrote that:

We can only say that it appears likely that poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be difficult. Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results. The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning.

Addressing the question of ‘difficulty’ and the claim that modern poetry must be ‘more allusive’, the seminar will focus principally on T.S. Eliot’s The Waste Land (1922) and Marianne Moore’s poems ‘Marriage’ (1923), ‘Poetry’ and ‘The Octopus’ (1924), published in Observations (1924). The Waste Land and Observations presented 1920s readers with verse that was multiply allusive, poly-vocal and often palimpsest-like. Both books also notoriously included extensive notes alongside the texts of the poems, para-textually foregrounding the dimension of allusion within their texts.

I would also ask you to read two essays by Randall Jarrell that bear on the problem as seen from the mid twentieth-century, ‘The End of the Line’ and ‘The Obscurity of the Poet.’ Taking off from there, the seminar will reflect on related questions.

Preparatory questions to consider:
- Is modernist poetry inherently difficult? If so, is it more so than poetry from earlier periods? Is it more allusive, or simply allusive in a different way?
- Is there a crisis of transmissibility and the accessibility of poetic experience? Is the allusive modernist text necessarily elitist? What is the relationship between poet and audience in these poems?
- How does poetic form impact on notions of history and ‘tradition’ and vice versa?
- Is ‘Modernist’ poetry of the kind represented by Moore and Eliot now irrevocably past and passé?

Core Reading (these texts will be available on the VLE)


Further Reading

Victoria Bazin, Marianne Moore and the Culture of Modernity (Surrey: Ashgate, 2010)
I.A. Richards, ”The Allusiveness of Modern Poetry,” in *The Principles of Literary Criticism* (1924)
4) Expatriate Modernism: An American in Paris

Hannah Roche

In 1903, shortly after her expatriation to Paris, Gertrude Stein finished her first novella, *Q.E.D.* The final part of *Q.E.D.* opens with a reflection on homesickness:

There is no passion more dominant and instinctive in the human spirit than the need of the country to which one belongs. One often speaks of homesickness as if in its intense form it were the peculiar property of Swiss mountaineers, Scandinavians, Frenchmen and those other nations that too have a poetic background, but poetry is no element in the case. It is simply a need for the particular air that is native, whether it is the used up atmosphere of London, the clean-cut cold of America or the rarefied air of the Swiss mountains. The time comes when nothing in the world is so important as a breath of one’s own particular climate. If it were one’s last penny it would be used for that return passage.

Although she would go on to make ‘that return passage’ only twice in her lifetime, Stein spent much of her writing career exploring new ways of articulating her own ‘dominant and instinctive’ passion for America. Focusing on two key texts, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933) and *Paris France* (1940), this seminar will examine the many problems and paradoxes that have come to define Gertrude Stein. How might we read the relationship between Stein’s expatriate identity and her experimental aesthetics? Why did Stein claim that ‘writers have to have two countries, the one where they belong and the one in which they live really’? Where does Stein’s expatriate identity intersect and interact with her sexual identity? Why would a ‘completely and entirely american’ [sic] writer choose to absent herself from America?

Preparatory questions to consider:
- *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* and *Paris France* are two of Stein’s most accessible texts. What makes them modernist?
- How would you describe the relationship between art and modernity in these texts?
- ‘[T]he director of the Grafton Press is under the impression that perhaps your knowledge of English. But i am an american, said Gertrude Stein indignantly’ (*The Autobiography, 76*). Why would Stein’s American identity free her from the rules of English grammar?
- How does *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* subvert the genre expectations of a memoir? Why would Stein adopt the narrative voice of her own partner?

Core Reading
Extracts from Ernest Hemingway, *A Moveable Feast* (London: Arrow, 2011) [available on the VLE].

Further Reading
5) Confession and Death at Mid-Century
JT Welsch

Content Notice: Much of the reading material (and therefore seminar discussion) for this week concerns mental illness, suicide, and other potentially difficult themes.

This seminar will explore the sense of cultural and personal loss in the work of John Berryman and Delmore Schwartz. We’ll consider their fraught associations with other mid-century ‘confessionalist’ writing, focusing on the elegiac forms by which both writers registered a perceived death of modernism. Berryman and Schwartz’s use of personae will also be an opportunity to consider the critical challenges posed by radically autobiographical writing. The main reading will be Berryman’s Dream Songs and selections from Schwartz’s writing, although you are encouraged to explore both writers further.

Preparatory questions to consider

- Both writers were resistant to associations with ‘confessionalism’. Is this a useful term? How does the use of persona affect their ‘confession’?
- What are their perspectives on death? How are these influenced by personal history or a sense of more general cultural loss?
- How do different forms capture different aspects of grief or nostalgia (for Schwartz especially)?
- Can the social consciousness of Berryman’s elegies be reconciled with his appropriation of minstrel voices?

Core Reading


- The text of the poems is the same in any edition, but please read Michael Hoffmann’s introduction to the 2014 FSG Classics edition.
- Within the whole, please focus on the elegies for Delmore Schwartz (No. 146-158), and other writers: Theodore Roethke (No. 18), Robert Frost (Nos. 37-39), Sylvia Plath (Nos. 153 and 172), R. P. Blackmur (No. 173), Ernest Hemingway (No. 235), Randall Jarrell (No. 259), Louis MacNeice (No. 267), and William Carlos Williams (No. 324).

Delmore Schwartz, Once and for All: The Best of Delmore Schwartz, ed. Craig Morgan Teicher (New Directions, 2016).


Further Reading

Philip Coleman, John Berryman’s Public Vision: Relocating the Scene of Disorder (University College Dublin Press, 2014).
Eric Haralson (ed.) Reading the Middle Generation Anew: Culture, Community, and Form in Twentieth-Century American Poetry (University of Iowa Press, 2006)
Robert Lowell, ‘For John Berryman’ and ‘To Delmore Schwartz’, Collected Poems
7) Masters and Slaves, Race and Modernity
Adam Kelly

This seminar will address arguably the most important American novel of the twentieth century, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), against the specific background of a Hegelian reading of modern consciousness. Hegel's dialectic of master and slave is among the most famous passages in modern philosophy, and we will consider its impact on Ellison and its usefulness for a reading of the themes and forms of his major novel. We will also consider the racial coding of "modernity" itself, and the kinds of possibilities and limitations the concept affords to a history concerned with equality and freedom.

**Preparatory questions to consider:**
- What makes *Invisible Man* a modern novel? Is it also a modernist one?
- In what ways does the notion of "modernity" allow us/encourage us to think about race?
- What is the relationship between modernity and visibility?
- What conception of freedom does Ellison's protagonist seek?

**Core Reading**


**Further Reading**

*From the debate about African American writing at mid-century (all available in the Norton Anthology of African American Literature):*

*On Marx's critique of Hegel and its relevance for Invisible Man:*
Barbara Foley, from *Wrestling with the Left: The Making of Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man* (Duke UP, 2010), pp. 1-10. VLE

**Key later texts on race, slavery, and modernity:**
Patterson, Orlando. *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Harvard, 1982).
8) Paul Muldoon and Contemporary Poetry: From the Local to the Geopolitical

Matthew Campbell

This seminar will explore the early achievement and influence of Irish poet Paul Muldoon through the last volume he wrote before moving to the USA. It is a very influential book, treating in an oblique way the matter of poetry and violence, innovation and experiment, the limits of representation and the limits of form. Its poems are sometimes very short and sometimes very long, as in the extraordinary sonnet-narrative “The More a Man Has the More a Man Wants,” which closes the book. Muldoon and his contemporaries used to be called “post-modern” and this seminar will address the validity of that label. We will also explore Muldoon’s significance for broader UK and US literary culture, given his subsequent influence on Anglophone poetry – as a critic, poetry editor of The New Yorker, Princeton Professor and (part-time) rock musician.

Preparatory questions to consider:

- How does poetry function in times of extreme political violence?
- What does it mean to write innovative poetry?
- How do seemingly traditional matters, such as rhyme, figure in contemporary poetry?
- Is obliquity of address - through metaphor, allegory, metamorphosis - adequate to ideas of the modern or post-modern?

Core Reading

Paul Muldoon, Quoof (London: Faber, 1983)
- More recent poems will be made available in the seminar.

Further Reading

Kendall, Tim and McDonald, Peter (eds), Paul Muldoon: Critical Essays (Liverpool English Texts and Studies, 2003)
Muldoon, Paul, To Ireland, I (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008)
Princeton University Library Chronicle (Special Issue on Irish Poetry), 59, 3 (1998).
9) The Contemporary Novel’s Aesthetic Debts
Alexandra Kingston-Reese

This seminar will explore the aesthetic and formal legacies of modernism in the contemporary novel. Critics often compare the works of modernist authors (Woolf, Eliot, Joyce, Kafka, Beckett) to contemporary inheritors, but how do contemporary writers continue to engage with modernity’s aesthetic concepts, strategies, and techniques, even when they seek to recast them?

We’ll be taking a specific look at contemporary modernism through Zadie Smith, one of the 21st-century’s most innovative and exciting novelists and her critically lauded novel, On Beauty (2006). “It should be obvious from the first line that this is a novel inspired by a love for E.M. Forster, to whom all my fiction is indebted, one way or the other”—so goes Smith’s Acknowledgements to On Beauty, an “homage” to Forster’s classic modernist novel, Howard’s End (1910). Here, we will consider what methods contemporary writers like Smith use to extend and alter modernist aesthetics (through an attention to style, affect, and ethics) when they feel in aesthetic debt.

Preparatory questions to consider:

- What makes On Beauty a modern novel? Is it also a modernist one?
- Building on your discussions in Week 7, in what ways does the notion of “modernity” allow us/encourage us to think about race in the 21st-century?
- In what ways can we think about influence, homage, and allusion as tropes of modernity?
- How would you characterise the relationship between modernity and the present, and modernism and the contemporary period?
- What do you make of altermodernism and metamodernism?

Although we won’t be doing a one-to-one comparison between the two novels, I thoroughly recommend you read Forster’s Howard’s End, since knowledge of the plot that Smith modernises will be helpful in discussion.

Core Reading

James, David, “Modern/Altermodern” in Time: A Vocabulary of the Present, eds. Amy J. Elias and Joel Burges, NYU Press, 2016: 66-81. [VLE scan]
https://www.theguardian.com/books/2003/nov/01/classics.zadie smith. [Web Link]

Further Reading

10) Signifying Katrina: Disaster Capitalism, Displacement, and Race
Bryan Radley

This seminar will examine the political and cultural legacies of Hurricane Katrina, the storm that devastated much of the southern United States in 2005. The focus will be on Mary Robison’s 2009 experimental novel One D.O.A., One on the Way. Does Robison’s fragmentary, blackly comic, and generically mutable narrative provide an apposite aesthetic response to the challenge of representing the political ruptures, psychic wounds, and temporal discontinuities of New Orleans after Katrina? The critical coordinates for our discussion will include the biopolitics of disposability and ideas of disaster capitalism / apartheid (via the work of Henry Giroux and Naomi Klein respectively).

Preparatory questions to consider
(In each case, please key your notes to specific textual examples and pages from the core reading. If referring to a passage from One D.O.A., One on the Way, you should make a note of the page and section number. This will allow discussion to move smoothly.)

- Is One D.O.A., One on the Way simply a novel in pieces or something altogether stranger? What (other) descriptor of genre or mode would you use?
- Building on your discussion of the contemporary novel’s aesthetic debts in Week 9, what do you make of One D.O.A.’s experimental form? Did you spot any (dis)continuities with the techniques of modernism—or, indeed, postmodernism?
- What is the relationship of this fragmentary narrative to the real world of post-Katrina New Orleans? Why might this be a key question when considering the novel’s aesthetics?
- Does the concept of “disaster capitalism” allow/encourage us to think about the presentation of class, disability, gender/sexuality, nationality, & race in Robison’s book?
- What does One D.O.A. tell us about the modern city, life in 21st-century America, and/or contemporary subjectivity? Is this a political novel? (If so, why? If not, why not?)

Core Reading


Further Reading / Viewing

Nandini Gunawardena and Mark Schuller, eds., Capitalizing on Catastrophe: Neoliberal Strategies in Disaster Reconstruction (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2008), esp. the three chapters that comprise Part 3, “Exposing Katrina: Class, Race, and Displacement”, pp. 117-156.
Cynthia Whitney Hallett, Minimalism and the Short Story: Raymond Carver, Amy Hempel, and Mary Robison (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1999), 101-133. [This chapter provides a useful summary of the first twenty years of Robison’s career, with a focus on the short stories and her place within the minimalist movement.]
Chester Hartman and Gregory D. Squires, eds., There is No Such Thing as a Natural Disaster: Race, Class, and Hurricane Katrina (London: Routledge, 2006).
Spike Lee, dir., When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Act (USA: HBO Video, 2006).
Tia Lessin and Carl Deal, dirs., Trouble the Water (USA: Zeitgeist Films, 2009).