Discontinuous Continuity: Facets of Time and Temporality in European Modernist Literature

Temporalities of Modernism. European Modernism Studies 9. Edited by Carmen Borbély, Erika Mihálycsa and Petronia Petrar. Milan: Ledizioni, 2022. Pp. 379. ISBN 978-88-5526-848-6.

Reviewed by Tamás Tukacs and Dávid Szőke
tukacs.tamas@nye.hu and szoke.david@nye.hu

That we are far from understanding the complexities of the experience in time in modernist literature and culture (and that, in fact, all three important lexical items in this clause, "time", "experience" and "modernist" could be almost endlessly scrutinised) is excellently attested by the present volume, the result of a broad international collaboration. The collection contains the studies of seventeen contributors, with six scholars representing the Faculty of Letters of Babeş-Bolyai University (Cluj-Napoca, Romania), and the rest of the book including writings of authors from the universities in Angers, Bangkok, Budapest and Eger (Hungary), Edinburgh, Florence, Perugia, Philadelphia, Prague and Venice. As the Introduction authored by Carmen Borbély, Erika Mihálycsa, and Petronia Petrar points out, "several key terms that can shed light on our own relation to the contemporary world are rooted in the turbulence of the modernist age: relativity, originality, reproducibility, irreversibility, (in)terminability, duration, fragmentation, contingency, necessity, (anti)messianism, revolution, and (perhaps above all), the threat of a future" (18). The volume offers several different perspectives both on the concept of time in European modernism and on the various micro-histories of modernist ways of writing. As Jean-Michel Rabaté lucidly observes in the first essay, "The task looks contradictory because on the one hand it suggests that we will need to keep open a discontinuous history of modernisms in the plural, while on the other hand we long for a modernism that remains a singular entity" (61).

The collection of essays is organised into five parts. Part One includes two essays of a more theoretical nature on modernist temporalities. "Modernism Terminable and Interminable" by Jean-Michel Rabaté examines unfinished works of modernism. While distinguishing between "unfinished" and "interminable" works and implying that not only have these works been left unfinished but modernism as a project has also not ended due to the very fact that it is also interminable, Rabaté heavily draws on the concept of Freud's concept of Nachträglichkeit and Ferenczi's speculations on

https://doi.org/10.33035/EgerJES.2024.23.83

interminable analysis. The essay analyses famous interminable works of modernism, such as Schönberg's opera *Moses und Aaron* (as contrasted with Schubert's unfinished *Eighth Symphony*), Mallarmé's "The Book," Pound's *Cantos*, Hugo von Hoffmansthal's *Andreas or the Reunited Ones* and Kafka's *The Castle*, while pointing out that "[t]he symptom of incompleteness dominates in the German-speaking world" (45). One common element is exhaustion and uncontrollable proliferation (51) and the very impossibility of totalisation and metaphysical absolute. Finally, Rabaté sets up three categories of unfinished works, emblematically represented by Duchamp, Eliot and Walter Benjamin.

The next essay, "Somehow Successive and Continuous: Bergson and the Modernist Moment Reconsidered" by Randall Stevenson, challenges the treatment of time as a continuous flow by Bergson, who was inimical to chopping things up, seeing even change as indivisible and favouring continuity over segmentation. However, as Stevenson points out, for several modernist writers, inspired or influenced by innovations such as the motorcar or the cinema, reality seems series of successive images, rapidly alternating perceptions. The author convincingly shows how Virginia Woolf, Wyndham Lewis, T. S. Eliot, and Proust continued, despite the apparent contrast between fragmentation and flow, to integrate individual moments or episodes as absorbed into "the continuous inner life of consciousness and memory" (78).

Part Two, entitled "Recasting Chronology, Temporalities Out of Joint" includes three essays, not so much on the concept of temporality but rather on the less-discussed histories of modernism, citing Italian, Czech and Polish examples, and calling attention to various disruptions and "no-man's lands" in modernism's landscape. "Modernism and the Disruption of History. The Italian Example" by Mimmo Cangiano looks into the problem of how certain tendencies of the Italian modernist movement served to underpin the emergence of nationalism, drawing the conclusion that "modernism cannot be understood as a mere epistemological theory or artistic phenomenon. Instead, it must be identified as the cultural logic of a specific historical moment." (86) The author gives a detailed analysis of how, through the works of various figures like Ardengo Soffici, Giuseppe Prezzolini, or Giovanni Papini, modernism developed in the historical context of the "failed Risorgimento" (100), and key terms of modernism, such as flux, contingency, becoming vs. being, and subjectivity, affected even the concept of History. He also demonstrates that the image of a fragmentation reflecting the uselessness of any ideology serves as a central theme of a decisive Italian modernist novel, Pirandello's *The Old and the Young* (1909).

The purpose of Louis Armand's and David Vichnar's essay "Rotation Rerotation Suprarotation: The Politics of Prague Dada" is also to nuance the monolithically-conceived history of modernism by uncovering the intricate case of the Prague

Dada movement, which, for a long time, was seen as a "German" product, but a "tendency to nationalist chauvinism and anxiety of influence cannot obscure the fact that 1920s Prague and Brno did spawn a significant, in some cases even unique, 'underground' Dada scene" (112). The authors start from the arrival in Prague of Dadaists Richard Huelsenbeck, Raoul Hausmann and Johannes Baader in 1920, to go on first with assessing the works of Tristan Tzara, Melchior Vischer, Walter Serner, Emil František Burian, Václav Lacina, and Karel Konrád, then to connect the ludic elements in Hašek's writing (*Švejk*), and philosopher Ladislav Klíma's writings with "Ur-Dadaist" features, and finally to arrive at the mid-1960s scholarly study of the Czech Dada movement.

What connects this and the next study, Verita Sriratana's "I Burn (Marx's) Paris: 'Capital' Cities, Alienation and Deconstruction in the Works of Bruno Jasieński," is the fact that both Polish futurism and the Czech Dada challenged post-WWI capitalist structures and reacted to the "panorama of futility and anarchy" in new and unique ways. This is a case study of Polish writer Bruno Jasieński (1901–1938), the leader (also fiercest critic) of the futurist movement in Poland during the interwar period, and a victim, as a Soviet emigré, of the Great Purge in 1938. Just like in the case of Italian futurism, which must be seen in the context of Risorgimento, and the Czech Dada, which also can be examined against the backdrop of national independence, Polish futurism was also underpinned by Poland's regaining independence after some 150 years; "realism and nationalism, therefore, were also imbued in the fantastic and grotesque of Polish futurism" (149). Sriratana's in-depth analysis of Jasieński's 1926 novel *I Burn Paris* convincingly identifies Paris as "a place which is simultaneously 'placeless' as it stands for the homogenised urban experience faced with modernisation" (161–62), and also as a palimpsest, where Paris's ghost of revolutionary past resurfaces.

Three essays in Part Three, entitled "Keeping Time in Modernist Works," discuss the work of Woolf, Sylvia Plath, and the Romanian modernist novel within the framework of subjective time-keeping practices. In "The Flux of Becoming and the Dream of Permanence in a Reflection by Virginia Woolf," Ilaria Natali examines the theme of mirroring, reflection, and temporality in the context of several short stories and essays by Woolf, also touching upon key novels such as *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and *Orlando* (1928). The essay draws attention to the paradoxes of mirrors and temporality, such as the one analysed in "The Lady in the Looking-Glass: A Reflection" (1929), where the looking-glass serves as a fixing and unmovable space as opposed to the fluctuating and dynamic quality of the protagonist's house. What mirrors offer or are expected to offer is "a state of permanence that is removed from the fragmentation of everyday life and disengaged from the flow of becoming" (183). However, mirrors and other reflective exterior substances (such as water) are

optical artifices connected to theatricality, bewitchment and deception (185) and, diametrically opposed to the first option, take away the promise of permanence and the coincidence of referent and image, as Natali convincingly proves with reference to several versions of the Narcissus myth as appearing in Woolf's short stories.

In "Modernist Plath," Annalisa Volpone draws a comparative analysis of Sylvia Plath's literary preoccupation with Woolf and James Joyce. Volpone's primary argument here is that Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963) offers much debate on whether and how modernism "survived" in her work. Like Woolf's novels, Plath's "prose-poem" is a terrain of an incandescent and penetrating autofictional narrative, where the moments of being unfold through the protagonist's psychological responses to them. Similar aspects can be detected in Plath's treatment of Joyce. As Volpone claims, for Plath both Woolf and Joyce employ a linguistic ingeniousness that forms a bridge between the linguistic chasms of prose and poetry. In this respect, "[p]oetry and prose are combined through the use of a challenging language; on the one hand the omnipresence of an author, who continuously baffles the reader as he/she tries to decode the text, and on the other his abdication to the reader and his/her ability to produce meaning at each reading" (214). For Esther Greenwood in *The Bell Jar*, Woolf and Joyce are ideal literary models in her search for being a poet, a writer, a wife, and a mother, and her wondering if all this can be possible in a social environment designed to silence the artist in her.

Corin Braga's essay "Inner Temporalities in the Romanian Modernist Novel" discusses the interwar period, when Romanian writers began to follow the routes of the Western literary canon. Firstly, Braga takes note of the three philosophical principles and schools, William James's theory on the psychological continuum, Bergson's idea of intuitionism, and Husserl's phenomenology, which paradigms fascinated and inspired Romanian authors between the two world wars. Then, Braga's focus falls on the somewhat ambivalent way contemporary Romanian criticism responded to the paradigm shift that came with the new form of poetic art, the "much freer, more open, and sometimes uncontrollable structures designed to capture the flow of consciousness, the stream of thoughts, doubts, aspirations, affirmations, negations, or memories" (230), which pervaded the Romanian literary scene of the era. By discussing the novels of Max Blecher and other interwar Romanian writers, Braga explains how the novel benefited from Proust's inversion/introspection, whereby the narrators, alienated from the reality with all its horrifying effects on the inner life, are caught up in the semantic pool of consciousness.

The three essays in Part Four explore the idea of time out of joint within the framework of anarchy and predetermination. Angelika Reichmann's "A 'panorama of futility and anarchy' Reimagined in David Jones's *In Parenthesis*" analyses Jones's epic poem in its historical and mythical intertextual references to the literary tradition and

its narrative and visual recollection of the English medieval heritage. As Reichmann reveals, for Jones, calling forth the spirit of cultural history, evoking a sense of timelessness, and moulding images with different visual and textual allusions into a visual cohesion, are components to make sense of his traumatic experiences of the First World War, and to create a shrine both for those soldiers whose lives were wasted in the frontlines and the for the culture that started to recover among the ruins. The world of *In Parenthesis* is nothing short of a waste land, where human life is constantly threatened with self-annihilation, and where war and human sacrifice, infinite in time, are mere reminders of our futile existence.

Chloé Thomas's essay underscores the prevalence of prophetism in modernist poetry, particularly delving into Gertrude Stein's wartime prose. Thomas explores Stein's interest in occultism and her use of prophecy and prophetic sources as key to her quest for a narrative mode. One significant narrative approach in Stein's work involves the use of signs and faith as fundamentally empty concepts. Thomas elucidates this by highlighting how "a meaning (the end of the war) is associated to a sign (the box hedges in the garden being all pruned) and one just has to wait for the sign to occur – an occurrence which is, interestingly, tightly controlled by the prophetess herself, as she is the one gardening" (268). Another literary device for Stein, explains Thomas, is repetition, i.e., her choice of freezing the war into a literary trope and making it a-temporal in her autobiographical novel *Wars I Have Seen* (1945), which allows her to turn it into "a reality as a narrative, not a reality as an experience" (271). Thus, for Stein prophecy is a chronicle of a future already laid out and constantly re-written and war (and history) is the constant repetition of the same pattern.

In "Revolution as Fractured Time in the Modernist Romanian Novel," Sanda Cordoș examines the historicity of twentieth-century Romanian modernist literature. Here, the author explains how modernism emerged in Romanian literary circles as an ethos entwined with the sense of nationhood in writings by Eugen Lovinescu, Ion Vinea, and Mircea Eliade – a movement that was regarded as dangerous and which became largely extinct with the advent of Communism. As Cordoș argues, for Lovinescu, Vinea, and Eliade, this ethos rooted in the idea of revolution was crucial. They saw the concept of revolution as a creative force for aligning Romanian culture with Western standards. However, in postwar Romanian novels, the concept of revolution shifted to fractured time, focusing on individuals impacted by the war. The essay concludes by highlighting the aftermath of the 1989 Revolution in Timișoara, acknowledging the palpable loss of faith in modernism, while noting ongoing efforts for social and literary modernisation in Romania.

Part Five examines modernism in a postwar aesthetic context. The two essays of this part revolve around the question triggered by Adorno's statement that "[t]o write poetry

after Auschwitz is barbaric": How can we talk about the catastrophe of war and the Holocaust without aestheticising suffering? In "Auschwitz: Writing, Life and Literature in Three Novels by Imre Kertész," Gábor Schein discusses writing, life, work, existence, and writerly ethics as key aspects of Kertész's concept of modernism in *Fatelessness* (1975), *Fiasco* (1988), *Kaddish for an Unborn Child* (1990) and *Liquidation* (2003). The debate of these features of Kertész's writing might inevitably tempt one to read Kertész's work along the blurring lines between the fictional and the autobiographical. Indeed, Schein argues that the self-referentiality in Kertész's novels gives way to two different interpretations, one seeing his novels as a form of life-writing rather than works of fiction, and the other maintaining that "if writing is carried out under the skies of Auschwitz, it is perpetually forced to face the limitations and effacement of the modern daydream of one's 'own' life and death" (307). Schein suggests here that authors should embrace and reshape life's uncertainties, move beyond self-referentiality, and, while not necessarily experiencing a Barthesian death, consistently confront the possibility of their own demise.

Aura Poenar's "Witnessing Trauma: A Study on the Temporalities and Ethics of the Image" seeks to critically examine the complexities surrounding images and their ethical implications for reality and truth. The study refers many times to Judith Butler's theory on the "certain framing of reality/certain reality," i.e., how war is "framed" in visual and textual discourses to "recruit" viewers and listeners to the war effort and create the perception that some lives are less "grievable" than others. However, it notably overlooks engaging in a dialogue with Susan Sontag's criticism of the presumed veracity of (wartime) photographs – in fact, Sontag is relegated in this essay only to a single footnote. Together with Butler's theory of trauma, the author's use of Sontag's idea of "images frozen in time" could have placed the concept of trauma and the victim/perpetrator duality in visual and especially cinematic representations (besides Alain Resnais' pioneering Holocaust film *Nuit et Brouillard*, the essay also features the films of Jacques Rivette, Gillo Pontecorvo, Harun Farocki's *Inextinguishable Fire*, and Claude Lanmann's *Shoah*) in an excellent theoretical framework. Nevertheless, the essay powerfully problematises the dangers of spatial and temporal distance between image and audience, the truth and the reality that are either revealed or concealed by photographs, our empathy with what is represented, and the creative effort to turn the viewers into witnesses by fuelling their imagination.

In conclusion, the works in the present volume provide a distinctive investigation of the broad spectrum of temporal encounters in modernist literature, prompting a reconsideration of how modernism has been perceived during watershed moments in history. These essays not only call attention to the reciprocity between time and narrative, as well as time and our experiences of time, but also shed light on the frail

and divergent forms of truth, reality, and meaning. Thus, the book's interdisciplinary approach and its array of perspectives make it a worthwhile addition to the academic discourse on time, experience, and modernism in literature and culture.