

JE Sorbonne Université – Le modernisme en errance / The Wanderings of Modernism

Date : 11 jan. 2020

Équipe de recherche : Voix Anglophones : Littérature et Esthétique (VALE – 4085). Axe PACT.

Keynote Speaker : Jean-Michel Rabaté

The return of peace in 1918 heralded a troubled period for Modernism. After years of tensions, the borders opened again: D.H. Lawrence travelled to France and Italy in 1919, while Joyce left the safe haven of Switzerland. But the euphoria and cosmopolitan openness of the early 1910s had receded in the aftermath of the horrors of war, as Joyce realised upon returning to Trieste, and personal tragedies compounded the general gloom. Mina Loy lost her husband, the poet and boxer Arthur Cravan, and started wandering across the Atlantic, while the increasingly tense atmosphere in the UK led to Pound's departure, and accentuated Eliot's inner struggles, ushering in a new period of major depression during which he travelled for his health, going as far as Lausanne. These comings and goings, however dire the circumstances, fostered new relations, and the encounters that took place in this period initiated a new phase of literary creation. Eliot became friends with Virginia Woolf, who published his collection *Poems* and *The Waste Land* at Hogarth Press, while in Paris, Sylvia Beach opened a new bookshop, Shakespeare and Company, surrounding herself with artists such as Pound and Joyce, and presiding over the publication of *Ulysses*.

Our aim will be to analyse the influence of this common experience of personal and cultural wandering in a shared moment of uncertainty, on post-war modernism.

Wandering first has to do with space. Unlike an itinerary with a set goal that can be reached through progressive stages, wandering implies that, wilfully or not, one is led astray, rejects the straight line and faces vagueness, obliqueness and chance encounters. In a space that was becoming increasingly organised, especially in the case of

travels, by the growth of tourism and its structures of consumption, modernist artists invented their own anti-itineraries, exemplified by Mina Loy's "Lunar Baedeker" or the one that Burbank reads in Eliot's "Burbank with a Baedeker, Blenstein with a Cigar". This relation to space is compounded by a question of temporality. The post-war experience questions all notions of temporal linearity, progressive and positivist outlooks, and calls for a new relation to the past. It is impossible to simply leave it behind: it always haunts the contemporary world, which, as Yeats expresses in his poem "Leda", is far from having outgrown the threat of the most archaic violence and tragedy.

Hence, wandering, through time and space, becomes a means to subvert the foundations of the present. It is the weapon of Stephen Dedalus, who uses "silence, exile and cunning" to circulate among the labyrinths of the present, and also to transcend them "shaking the wings of his exultant and terrible youth" – just as Joyce's Daedalian style plays with the linguistic structures of time and space. Modernism is founded on these stray, errant descriptions of experiences and concepts. The opening of *The Waste Land* bears the mark of both physical and mental wandering, from the "Hofgarten" to the streets of London, from the incomplete prophecy to the mysteries of cartomancy. Against the predetermined roles, classes and spaces which society assigns to individuals, wandering also fosters escapism, opening up the strange, fantastic realms that such works as Woolf's *Orlando* explore. Nevertheless, openness comes with its own dangers, with a precariousness that echoes the lives of Lewis's Tarr or Mina Loy's Insel, and the haunting aftermath of trauma. The post-war wanderings of Septimus from Italy to England symbolise a movement of flight, when faced with the void and with a terrifying absence. Far from being a simple case of escapism and *flânerie*, wandering is indissociable from a form of anxiety, a loss of bearings in one's own relation to oneself and to the others.

This is why the notion of wandering also touches upon questions of identity, of one's ability to find or return to oneself. Characters are often uprooted, feeling nostalgia – that is to say questioning their relation to the "nostos", where one comes from. Stephen and Bloom's wanderings in the streets of Dublin are a form of

exile: they meander, having left their keys, far from their home. This state echoes that of the Americans of the “lost generation”, their wanderings and loss of moral and well as spatial compass. And through these depictions of “strangers in a strange land”, modernism also questions notions such as hospitality, the encounter of the Other, surmounting differences and tensions – both personal and artistic, defending the foreignness of people, but also that of the new modernist works. Welcoming texts, and welcoming others, can take multiple form: competition and strife, misreading and mutual interpretation, but also a form of paradoxical community. For these years of errancy are the basis for what Woolf, in “How It Strikes a Contemporary”, called the “structure [...] built by common effort”, from which the major works of modernism have arisen.

Proposals, in French or English, will have to focus primarily on anglophone modernism, and investigate such topics as:

- The relation between the lives and personal experience of one or several modernist authors and their non-linear vision of time, space or style.
- The demonstration, through textual analysis, of the link between modernist style and experimentation and the notion of wandering or errancy.
- The artistic and cultural context of post-war modernism, through concepts such as those of margins, disorientation, uprooting, deterritorialization and nomadism as well as hospitality and care.
- Reflections on the cultural and political consequences of the post-war reconfiguration of space in Europe and throughout the world, and the commitments of modernist artists with regards to these changes.

These proposals (about 300 words), along with a short biographical note, should be sent by September 21st 2019 to modernisme.errance@gmail.com

Selective bibliography

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