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Modernism: Evolution of an Idea

Sean Latham and Gayle Rogers

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgments vi

Introduction: Is There a There There? 1

1 The Emergence of “Modernism” 17

2 Consolidation 67

3 Iron Filings 103

4 Networks 149

Glossary 211

Critical bibliographies for the New Modernist Studies 233

Works cited 247

Index 261

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Introduction: Is There a There There?

What is modernism? This question has now beset, driven, and often befuddled generations of students and scholars alike. It is not, however, the question this book will answer. That's because there is no such thing as modernism—no singular definition capable of bringing order to the diverse multitude of creators, manifestos, practices, and politics that have been variously constellated around this enigmatic term. As we'll see, even for the experimental authors most often associated with it, modernism was a mobile, expansive, and ultimately unsettled concept. In 1922, Ezra Pound wrote that T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) "is I think the justification of the 'movement', of our modern experiment, since 1900" (*Selected Letters* 180). He praised Eliot for having "modernized himself *on his own*" and sent his own poems to Alice Corbin Henderson to publish in the magazine *Poetry* (1912–) with the note, "I give you your chance to be modern" (24, 40; italics in the original). In the 1930s, Pound still believed that he and Eliot had founded a "movement," but that it remained one "to which no name has ever been given" ("Harold Monro" 590). At the same time, competing claims for the name, origins, and nature of this "movement" or period were proposed, from Gertrude Stein's assertion that she "started the whole thing" by writing *The Making of Americans* (1925) to Virginia Woolf's famous declaration that "on or about December 1910 human character changed" (qtd. in Benstock 18; "Mr. Bennett" 320). No one definition or contention, however, has answered the question.

So make no mistake, the word "modernism" is a problem. Its strange temporality is disconnected from political history (unlike the crisply defined Victorian era) and even from the Western calendar itself, leaving it unmoored from something as vague as twentieth-century studies. Instead, "modernism" insists on a kind of ahistorical,

even paradoxical presentism, an art for a boundless now. It became a pervasive term even though many of the figures we now consider foundational didn't think of themselves explicitly as modernists, and even though generations of critics have been dissatisfied with it. Graham Hough believed "Imagism" was the more accurate term for the literary revolution that began around 1910, while Hugh Kenner fashioned a "Pound Era"; others conceived of "Post-Impressionism," "Symbolism," or "Futurism" (see Hough; Kenner; Fry). Furthermore, several Marxist critics have seen "modernism" as anything from a wholly empty category to a dangerous, even nefarious concept (see Anderson; Eagleton; Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*). Sensing the weird shiftiness of "modernism," Frank Kermode distinguished the pre-Second World War "palæo-modernism" from "neo-modernism," a second phase that arose later, now often called "postmodernism" (*Continuities*). Putting his finger on the problem in a series of lectures in 1987, he observed the strange way the term "modernism" itself, despite its energetic novelty, actually announces a worrisome, even threatening end to aesthetic history: "The reasons we give for choosing periods and authors always change, along with changed valuations. Sixty years ago the propaganda for current changes and preferences was so successful that we now identify that period as Modern (later, Modernist) which of course all periods once were, though none can be henceforth" (*History* 125).

In just the last few decades, furthermore, the once dominant emphasis on modernism as a purely aesthetic concept has been transformed by attempts to understand its imbrication in the social, material, and economic structures of a globally conceived modernity. Thus, scholars might locate the origins of modernism in any number of world-historical events and circumstances, from the women's suffrage movement to the Berlin Conference (1884–85). The result is that "modernism" has become an ingrained yet somehow weightless concept. Lawrence Rainey notes with some amusement that defining modernism and locating its origins has been "something of an academic obsession" particular to scholars of literature, and that, by contrast, this endeavor has not been as pronounced as in other fields ("Introduction" xx). Art historians, he observes, are generally satisfied to point to Édouard Manet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* or *Olympia* (both 1863), or perhaps to Pablo Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)* (1907); music scholars look to the premiere of Igor Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du printemps* (1913);

architectural historians often cite the work of Le Corbusier or Frank Lloyd Wright. By contrast, Susan Stanford Friedman has provocatively argued that modernism across the arts *must* be linked to modernity, and thus might extend across historical periods and geographical boundaries to encompass any cultural response to “accelerated societal change brought about by a combination of new technologies, knowledge revolutions, state formations, and expanding intercultural contacts [that] contribute to radical questions and dismantling of traditional ontologies, epistemologies, and institutional structures” (“Definitional” 507). Seen from this vantage, modernism can include the literature of 1920s Paris, the ceramics of Tang Dynasty, China, and the music of contemporary Afghanistan. The problem, of course, is that in coming to mean so very much, “modernism” also comes to mean so very little.

Thus do scholars, readers, and students alike find themselves increasingly disoriented by the polymorphous term “modernism.” Our concern here is not the validity of any individual claim or definition; instead, we will explore the shifting history of the idea and its consequences for how we have tried to understand the arts and cultures of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. We will examine, that is, the stakes and implications of assertions that modernism began with Charles Baudelaire’s *Les fleurs du mal* (1857), that Immanuel Kant was the first modernist, or that an alternative but interlaced tradition began in Booker T. Washington’s Atlanta Compromise speech in 1895. There are other books that have traced the background of the modernist spirit or the array of creative texts in which various critics have found something called “modernism.” This book is different; our focus is the *formulation* and *reception* of modernism—the ways in which its intellectual and cultural histories have been made. Ours is a work of historiography in the field of modernist studies, which has seen anything but a straightforward trajectory or continuous teleology in its development from a descriptive adjective in aesthetic discussions to a contested concept in discussions of contemporary art and the institutions that shape its meaning, circulation, and reception. So be warned: we offer not a way out of the many problems posed by the term “modernism,” but, instead, a way into a daunting yet still pressing set of questions concerning how we have argued about the concept for over a century.

When Gertrude Stein returned from Paris to her childhood home in Oakland, California, she wittily remarked, “There is no there there” (289). As we’ll see, the same is true of “modernism.” As Kermode realized, the word itself insists on a radical yet paradoxically continuous break with the past—an attempt to locate the artist within a liberated and liberating present somehow freed from the constraints of history. Pound insisted that artists must “Make it new”—a move that evokes rupture and escape as well as marketing and effervescence. The Futurist avant-garde movement embraced this idea, with its manifestos pronouncing a love for explosions, war, and violence, all in an attempt to break definitively with a past that became less a resource for classical order than a fusty burden on the creative mind. By the same token, large-scale movements around the turn of the twentieth century were called the New Woman, the New Negro, the New Imperialism, and, several years later, the New Criticism. To break with the past, however, is also to embrace it as essential to one’s own creative project, if only as a negative image of the thing against which the artist must struggle. As this book traces the history of modernism, therefore, it will examine not only the theorists and practitioners themselves, but also their own complicated positions within the institutions, histories, and systems that at once enable and constrain their work.

The itineraries we trace will be various, overlapping, and, at times, contradictory, carrying us through a broad range of critical, intellectual, and aesthetic traditions. This is a short volume, however, so we offer a concise overview and make no attempt to be encyclopedic or comprehensive. The figures we treat made their modernisms through revealing inclusions and exclusions, and we have had to do the same; yet we have aimed to account for, rather than replicate, the patterns of the past. Certain sections of our book will focus more heavily on Anglo-American academic scholarship, not out of bias, but out of historical necessity, so we can trace succinctly the rise and dominance of that branch of work—especially since the midcentury. This will also help explain why “modernism” remains such an “obsession” in English, but barely signifies, for instance, in Francophone discussions of the avant-garde, Symbolism, or literary experimentation in general. Indeed, there is a certain irony in the fact that the English language was belated in accepting the claims to newness carried both by the term and by the aesthetics of “modernism”: Manet had been dead for almost thirty years,

for instance, when Roger Fry organized the Post-Impressionist show of 1910 in London. This is even reflected in the names of the professional organizations that have developed to study the period. The Modernist Studies Association (MSA) was founded primarily by scholars in the United States, Canada, and England, and its business is conducted entirely in English. Its counterpart on the European continent, however, is called the European Network for Avant-Garde and Modernist Studies and conducts its business in English, French, and German. This complicated alignment with language and the boundaries it creates means that literary theory and criticism will play a central role in our story. But we will focus also on a diversity of disciplines and interests, from cinema and queer studies to book history, celebrity studies, mass media, philosophy, and translation—following the tendrils of the new networks that now carry the field beyond its bastions in individual disciplines. While these fields, their research, and their insights will factor into our account, other books forthcoming in this series will give greater depth to the writers, critics, and cultural figures which, for reasons of space, we are only able to treat partially.

The conversations, debates, and critical revisions of “modernism” did not take place in a single arena; the terms changed as the players shifted positions; the conversations were sometimes parallel, sometimes orthogonal, sometimes deeply intertwined, and sometimes sharply divergent. Modernism will at times appear to cohere as a single, unified concept in this book; but at other times it will emerge as a kind of strange attractor around which different creators, events, objects, and media can be gathered and dispersed. A similar tension between unity and fragmentation was, in fact, essential to the work of many artists and writers who were first labeled “modernist.” In “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919), Eliot imagined there might indeed be a single thing called the literary tradition, though it stood ineffably beyond the comprehension of any one poet or critic. Reflecting his own bias, he called it the “mind of Europe” and suggested that it contained a “simultaneous order” to which any writer or thinker must fit himself or herself and then channel poetically (38, 39). In a roughly contemporaneous essay, he argued again for the importance of this single, unifying sense of order, finding in the Homeric allusions of James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922) a means of “giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which

is contemporary history” (*Ulysses* 177). To paraphrase Stein, Eliot looked at the aesthetic world and found a “there there”: a common history that ordered art while simultaneously helping to cleave authentic accomplishment from mere pretense, genuine art from mass fiction, poetic beauty from sentimental dross, what some critics grew to call “modernism” from the vast expanse of twentieth-century culture.

This tension between tradition and the apparent chaos of “contemporary history” structures much of our thinking about art and literature in the twentieth century. Eliot’s reading of *Ulysses*, after all, is wrong in many ways but certainly right in identifying the struggle evident throughout the book’s bulk between the apparent chaos of everyday life and the idea that there might be some way of organizing it into something deeper and more cohesive. Stephen Dedalus, himself a kind of figure for Joyce, thus walks along a garbage-strewn beach and looks to make the corpse of a dog, a buried bottle, and even a handbag carried by some women into complex symbols that open onto the deeper truths of the universe. “Signatures of all things I am here to read,” he thinks, seeing in that handbag, for example, “a misbirth with a trailing navelcord,” a “strandentwining cable of all flesh” that links him to the moment of creation itself (31, 32). Walking on that same beach later in the book, Leopold Bloom doesn’t see sacred symbols, but only sand and water before which “all fades” (312). In these echoing scenes resides the very tension over “modernism” itself—an apparent contest between the order that Dedalus so desperately desires and the flotsam of the everyday that washes endlessly in and out at Bloom’s feet. Even Eliot, in *The Waste Land*, found it difficult to affirm a belief in the order and tradition he desired. Thus, after assembling the poem’s often brilliant lattice of classical and Christian allusions, he concludes with a speaker who confesses that these are merely the idiosyncratic “fragments I have shored against my ruins” (50). Far from discovering the “mind of Europe,” the poem, which concludes by pointing to the East (“*Shantih shantih shantih*”), is finally rent by the contradiction between eternal order and everyday chaos it sought to contain.

In their own ways, Eliot and Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus looked to the past for some sensible tradition or storehouse of symbols, hoping to find a “strandentwining cable” that might indeed forge a link to the present in a mystical chain of being. For Pound, however,

the past was just as fragmented as the present and it was up to the poet or the critic to *impose* form on it. Writing about his own attempt to forge a new order, he used the following metaphor in a 1913 article for the journal *The New Age* (1907–22):

If you pour a heap of iron filings on to a glass plate they form a heap; no amount of care and thought would make you able to arrange them bit by bit in a beautiful manner. Clap a strong enough magnet to the underside of the plate and at once the filings leap into order. They form a rose pattern on the lines of the electric force; move the magnet and they move in unison. (“Through Alien Eyes” 252)

Creation here becomes the constitution rather than the discovery of form and involves pulling together otherwise seemingly chaotic fragments into an organized pattern, then encouraging others to see it. In a later essay on “Vorticism” (1915), Pound uses this same metaphor, this time insisting that “the design in the magnetised iron filings expresses a confluence of energy” (277). Unlike Eliot, whose fragments have been arranged “bit by bit,” Pound evokes the powerful forces of the imagination to make and unmake the past into patterns useful in the present.

As a term and a concept, modernism has wavered for over a century between these two different ways of understanding culture, tradition, and the everyday. For some critics—especially those who first helped formulate the idea—it constitutes a “strandentwining cable” that weaves together a distinct group of writers and artists around shared aesthetic practices. That cable, however, becomes not just a lifeline but also a boundary and a barrier—a way of separating modernism from something else. Over the decades that we will survey in this book, that boundary was drawn in different ways and used to exclude a vast amount of writing and cultural production from different people, different places, and different times. Certain works seem to run steadily through its core, like Joyce’s *Ulysses*, Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, and Picasso’s *Guernica*. Others, like Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*, D. H. Lawrence’s *Women in Love*, or Jean Toomer’s *Cane*, are woven in by some critics or excluded by others. This mode of critical thinking helped galvanize the idea of “modernism” as a substantive concept and thus created a canon of works, but it has often been criticized for its sometimes

overt (and sometimes more subtle) twists that exclude women, as well as nonwhite, queer, and postcolonial creators—or include them for strictly formal and not identitarian reasons. As we'll see, this cable runs almost exclusively through Europe and pieces of the Americas, though other critics later graft new strands onto it in an attempt to widen its diversity without compromising its cohesion. Even as its constituent strands change, however, the critical sense remains that only a handful of works are genuinely modernist and that they are bound to one another through a shared set of aesthetic practices.

This cable, however, is more than just an abstract idea, since the mode of thinking upon which it depends had very real historical and institutional effects. It determined what works would be made accessible to students and teachers and thus how modernism itself would be embedded within the larger arc of cultural history and tradition. In doing so, however, it steadfastly ignored, neglected, or excluded the enormous diversity of twentieth-century art and literature. To take one example: in the late nineteenth century, a revolution in media culture began with a fall in printing costs, a rise in literacy, the creation of an international copyright system, and the invention of new printing and distribution technologies. The result was a massive explosion in print culture that then fed into the Edisonian era of the early twentieth century, which saw the birth of new media like film and phonography, followed later by radio and television. Seen from this vantage, the “new media” of our own day are actually only the most recent in a series of media revolutions that have now spanned 150 years, in the process creating a vast yet fractious collection of works too large and too diverse to ever be organized into a single tradition. Modernism's cable, therefore, provides a way of cutting through this extensive archive to select a set of essential works, which are themselves edited, anthologized, taught, and debated as the fine distillates of aesthetic culture. Like Eliot's fragments, they are both boundary and bulwark—a way of “giving shape and significance” to a media-saturated world. As such, they endow “modernism” with sense, history, and purpose—a purpose, as we'll see, that often aligned with the consolidation of national literary, linguistic, and aesthetic traditions alongside a growing fascination in universities and beyond with the art, literature, and culture of the present day. As its tendentious name implies, “modernism” sought not only to

segregate some aesthetic objects from the rest of mass culture, but also to invest those objects with a special expressive power—one derived from their deep engagement with *now*—even while all of these objects were connected, as the art critic Clement Greenberg put it, by an “umbilical cord of gold” (“Avant-garde” 1:11).

This understanding of modernism produces a certain map of the modern, its contours running along lines that converge in great cities like Paris, New York, London, and Berlin and even in specific neighborhoods like the Rive Gauche, Greenwich Village, Bloomsbury, and Harlem. In other cases, it attempts to bind together often quite disparate groups of people, such as the Men of 1914 (Joyce, Eliot, Pound, and Wyndham Lewis), the members of Gertrude Stein’s coterie (Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Picasso), the Harlem Renaissance (Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Dunbar Nelson, and W. E. B. Du Bois), and the Bloomsbury Group (Woolf, E. M. Forster, Lytton Strachey, and J. M. Keynes). Other threads emerge as well and are sometimes grafted onto the central cable, like the one running from the Irish Revival through Dublin’s Easter Rebellion in 1916—a circuit so powerfully charged that W. B. Yeats wondered late in his life, “Did that play of mine send out/Certain men the English shot?” (345) Sometimes the attempt to preserve a single cable of tradition ends up binding creators and critics together through competition rather than collaboration, producing tensions that eventually undermine the very idea of modernism as a coherent, synthetic term. Indeed, in the early twentieth century, artists themselves sought to weave their own cables in order to cement their place in a larger tradition. Here we can trace competing cables that run from Symbolism to Fauvism to Futurism to Vorticism to Cubism to Surrealism, to the all-encompassing modernism itself (and through it to postmodernism and now to the new modernism). As these brand names suggest, writers and artists were themselves well aware of their institutional futures, and in the pages of magazines, chapbooks, and broadsides, they often competed openly to consolidate a tradition, a movement, and a school—to wrap themselves in the cables that they thought might lend their work permanence. It has now passed to anthologists, critics, teachers, and writers of introductions like ourselves to trace modernism’s tangle—to look at how the cable of tradition sometimes knotted, looped, or even snapped as different writers tried to bring some Eliotic sense of coherence to the archive.

The problem with treating modernism as a cable, however, is that it inevitably excludes so much of the boundless cultural production of the twentieth century. In the introduction to their influential anthology *Modernism: A Guide to European Literature, 1890-1930* (1974), Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane proclaimed confidently that “Modernism, while not our total style, becomes the movement which has expressed our modern consciousness. . . . It may not be the only stream, but it is in the *main* stream” (28; italics in the original). Few would express such confidence today; rather, it might be possible to see the history of modernism as a history of exclusions such as these and their interactions—hidden or in plain sight—with all that they attempted to occlude. As Pound’s image of the iron filings suggests, culture does not necessarily fall along clear boundaries, but can instead be pulled into mutating, contingent patterns. If Eliot’s tradition is about subtraction and stasis, Pound’s magnetic patterns function by addition, movement, and even disaggregation. New iron filings—in the form of new artists, new works, and new media—are constantly being cast onto the critic’s glass plate. Indeed, the more recent history of modernism is characterized precisely by such additions and reorientations. Feminist critics in the 1960s and 1970s helped excavate the work of writers like Hurston, Jean Rhys, H. D., and Mina Loy; here, what might have seemed at first like the addition of new threads to the cable of a still coherent modernism eventually helped fray, and even unwind, it. This was followed by a range of critical and archival interventions that added an ever-growing collection of cultural filings that included works by black poets, subaltern artists, and those who wrote or worked beyond, in only tangential relation to, or even with contempt for, Eliot’s “European mind.” To this was added work, first in film and then in the other new media of the twentieth century, including photography, sound, and the uncountable number of magazines that carried print and visual culture around the globe. The pile of filings grew also to include texts in new genres and subgenres such as science fiction, film noir, the musical cabaret, the pantomime, and advertising. Our own digital technologies are now making more and more of the twentieth century’s archive readily available, piling the glass plate Pound imagined with so many filings that it becomes impossible to see the clear lines of transmission so essential to Eliotic tradition. (A Google search for the term “modernism,” for example, returns

millions of results, led by a Wikipedia entry that has been edited over 3,000 times.) Seen this way, the term “modernism” becomes not a cable, but a magnet—a critical force field that can be used to pull all of this material into different, often competing or contradictory, shapes detached from a strong sense of “tradition” or affiliation. This archival turn means that modernism gives way to modernisms, to a plural, even pragmatic array of patterns and shapes produced as different critical magnets are dragged through the heaped filings of the twentieth century.

So is modernism a single tradition or a fluid pattern—or something in between, like a shifting tradition of antitraditionalism or self-proclaimed novelty? Rather than answering that, this book explores the tension inherent within the ever-changing idea of modernism in order to trace the life of a polymorphous term. But where to begin, and how to form our own boundaries? We start with the incredibly sharp rise in the use of the word “modernism” and its kin (modern, *modernisme*, *modernismo*, *Modernismus*) in the late nineteenth century. At this time, as we have already seen, writers, artists, and thinkers around the world believed that *something* was happening, that the established conventions of realism, representation, and poetic form seemed to be failing in the face of new experiences, new audiences, and new things. In the arts, for instance, Impressionism opened up a whole range of experiments with form and color that moved away from material reality and toward the expression of some inner truth or vision. Just as color and canvas began to displace the object of representation in painting, so too in literature, traditional poetry and prose began to give way to a series of increasingly radical experiments that would lead to the complete abandonment of meter and rhyme in verse, and to the almost entirely unpunctuated stream of consciousness in the novel. Nor was it just a question of inventing new forms, since the very objects of representation themselves began to change. Picasso painted boxers and prostitutes; Samuel Beckett tried to construct a play in which nothing happens; Stein lyrically described the queer, erotic nature of household objects; William Faulkner tried to imagine the life of a mentally ill man in a family torn by the racism endemic to the American South; Dziga Vertov made a film in which the cities of Odessa, Kharkiv, and Kiev are the main (indeed nearly the only) characters; Rhys wrote brutally honest stories about life on the fringes of bohemian Paris; Joyce and D. H. Lawrence both

tested the very bounds of what might constitute art, writing so frankly about sexuality that their books were banned.

These aesthetic revolutions, furthermore, took place within and alongside a series of equally radical technological, social, and political changes—events that had not always registered in the work of critics who first conceived and consolidated the idea of modernism. Women took to the streets to demand and eventually win the right to vote and to take up more visible positions in the public sphere. A small Irish revolt in Easter week of 1916 gave new force to a growing wave of anticolonial struggles that helped to bring European imperialism to an end and to completely remake the global map. Media, communication, and even military technologies—the machine gun, the aerial bomb, and the concentration camp—created new kinds of experience and indeed new landscapes that seemed beyond human comprehension. Nor were these new spaces confined to the devastated fields of Flanders, the ovens of Dachau, or the pulverized cities of Berlin, Guernica, and Hiroshima. Steel and concrete enabled the construction of massive skyscrapers, thus facilitating the growing concentration of national populations in teeming metropolises: new spaces there were lit day and night with the artificial glow of electrical bulbs and traversed by oil-fueled automobiles. The city itself became synonymous with the modern, its dense population, cacophonous voices, and soaring towers so overwhelming that the sociologist Georg Simmel believed it would overwhelm the human mind and the philosopher Georges Sorel feared that individuals would collapse into the violence of mass identity.

Amid such tumult, new kinds of laws arose to regulate the flow of cultures, peoples, and ideas. The sailor-turned-writer Joseph Conrad imagined an “earth girt about with cables” across which information moved in new and unexpected ways (67). Thus a writer or dissident in Buenos Aires, Delhi, Des Moines, or Sydney could connect with someone in London, Paris, or New York, and often did so through the pages of magazines, newspapers, and books. At the end of the nineteenth century, new technologies and new routes of trade made publishing inexpensive and led to a flowering of both local and international print cultures. Thus could Joyce, an obscure Irish writer living in Trieste, become famous in the United States when his *Ulysses* appeared in a New York-based magazine called the *Little Review* (1914–29) after it had been read and forwarded to editors by Pound, himself an American who served as the

journal's European Editor from his bases in London and Paris. This unprecedented flow of information fed new political movements, fueled revolutions, built national communities, and opened new spaces between and beyond political borders. Governments passed obscenity, copyright, and libel laws in attempts to regulate this information, even as they also began to declare some of it an "official secret" and turned other parts of it into a tool of statecraft and warfare as propaganda. It wasn't just information that flowed across borders, but also people, and thus laws governing refugees, emigrants, and citizenship also came into being, often alongside the harrowing violence of racist and nativist movements ranging from the American South to the ghettos of Eastern Europe.

All of these changes—aesthetic, technological, political, and legal—form part of what came to be understood as and named a modern body of experiences. Increasingly, "modernism" now refers broadly to the widely distributed networks of writers, artists, and institutions that sought to cast these events into a characteristic form. For our part, we will remain agnostic about the term "modernism" and we will not seek to provide or privilege a single definition of the term. Instead, we will offer a history of the way it has been used, of its power and its incoherence, both of which have traveled globally in ways that a term like "Naturalism" did not. In doing so, we will move between Eliot's "tradition," Pound's "iron filings," and newly visible, often transdisciplinary networks that now seek to connect disparate works, writers, artists, and spaces into a "new" modernism. Chapter 1, "The Emergence of 'Modernism,'" traces the earliest travels of the word "modernism" and its cognates. We follow their diverse, seemingly incommensurable courses as they cohered slowly around a growing sense of cultural, political, and aesthetic crisis exemplified by the papal encyclical against "modernism" in 1907. We then home in on the successful purposing of "modernism" as an expressly aesthetic term at a moment when "modernism" was also becoming a powerful brand in commercial culture before examining the way it became associated with a particular lineage of difficult works. Here we treat modernism primarily as a cable—part of a self-conscious attempt to assemble a tradition that connected a handful of works like Joyce's *Ulysses* and Eliot's *The Waste Land*. This chapter thus includes a brief survey of the critical histories that caused these works to become so tightly bound up as exemplars of modern experience and expression.

Chapter 2, “Cables,” then explores the ways in which modernism became (and for many remains) a proxy for aesthetic difficulty, a subtle but profound shift in the concept that allowed it to assemble a canon of works by writers and artists who had varied relationships to the concept’s initial formation. This focus on complexity and on the idea that art should be experimental in its aims and resistant to traditional or popular codes of taste was codified by a number of otherwise disparate thinkers. Marxist, New Critical, formalist, and psychoanalytic critics all offered different (though sometimes overlapping) ways of interpreting works that typically privileged form over content. These critical practices themselves coincided with the increasing professionalization of literary criticism within the university; the difficult works and the difficult theories needed to interpret them reinforced the idea that art was formally complex and had to be taught by experts. As difficulty became synonymous with modernism, it also allowed a new field of study to expand considerably the kinds of texts that the term could now encompass.

The evolving definition of modernism, of course, did not take place in isolation, but was instead part of a larger series of debates among critics, historians, scholars, and teachers about the very nature of aesthetic form, narrative content, and linguistic traditions. In this context, the close connection between modernism and difficulty made it appear increasingly isolated, elitist, and apolitical. Even for Marxist critics like Theodor Adorno and Fredric Jameson, who argued that the movement’s aesthetics had a political core, the emphasis ultimately fell on “negative dialectics” or a textual unconscious that might register politics but could not intervene in the public sphere (see Adorno, *Negative*; Jameson, *Political*). Chapter 3, “Iron Filings,” examines alternative attempts to move modernism away from the relative autonomy of aesthetic difficulty and toward a broader engagement with political and social issues that inhere within an increasingly global modernity. In place of the single cable of difficulty, an array of alternative critical magnets arose, each pulling a particular array of cultural filings into new shapes. Thus do feminist, ethnic, media, and political modernisms begin to cohere within or alongside a growing interest in works that are not evidently experimental, resistant, or difficult. This new pluralism opened up wide new swaths of twentieth-century culture for critical analysis and in the process began to challenge the assumption that

modernism itself might be confined to a single place (the West) or a single time (roughly 1890–1940). Amid this enormous expansion, however, modernism becomes less a single tradition or a byword for difficulty than a prismatic way of describing all kinds of aesthetic responses to the turbulence of modernity.

At this moment, the concept of modernism appears to be losing its cohesive force. If it is neither a tradition nor a delimited set of aesthetic practices, then what is it? If the works that it seeks to describe can now be differently constellated around a growing array of critical magnets, then does it even make sense to use the term to describe a fixed historical period or a canon of works? Chapter 4, “Networks,” looks at the way modernism’s coherence around novelty and difficulty has aligned it with an array of professional practices that now govern the intellectual life of the university. Seen in this way, modernism becomes not a single thing to be discovered or finally resolved, but the product of some dynamic institutional practices that still remain entangled in Pound’s original charge, “Make it new.” Thus, when the field began to redefine itself in the late 1990s, a “New Modernist Studies” emerged that set out explicitly to make modernism new again. Now, nearly two decades later, the “new” in that original title seems suspect even as the desire for new approaches, new texts, and new ways of reading continues to escalate. This chapter analyzes not only the ways in which recent attempts to redefine modernism partake in the movement’s own logic, but also the ways in which the concept creates new interdisciplinary connections that weave through fields as diverse as law, architecture, and media studies.

Initially conceptualized as a site of resistance to modernity’s regulatory and routinizing practices, modernism has become part of an institutional system. And yet, the troubling nature of the term—its relentless reinvention, its slipperiness, and its conceptual dissonance—suggests that it retains the potential to trouble our habits of consumption and disturb our interpretive assumptions. Grappling with a few lines from César Vallejo’s *Trilce* (1922), looking even briefly at Picasso’s distorted faces, listening to atonal music, reading Mina Loy’s “Feminist Manifesto” (1914), or watching Expressionist cinema—these things are still jarring and indicate that the many and varied definitions of modernism this book traces are still inadequate to the works they hope to describe. Thus, this book will end by articulating some of the questions that

continue to unsettle modernism while also surveying the other books in this series to which this slim volume, with its glossary and critical bibliographies, is but an introduction. These books include studies on globalism, race, war and violence, print culture, science, new media, environments, law, and gender, all constellated around a fluctuating idea of modernism to which aesthetics, despite itself, remains vital. Perhaps “there is no there there,” but as with Stein’s writing, what matters might be more the process of trying to make sense of our unsettled and unsettling relation to modernity’s complex expression in art and literature than the always insufficient cables of tradition or the shifting patterns we trace in iron filings of a past that may not yet be past.