

Astradur Eysteinnsson & Vivian Liska (eds.). *Modernism*. 2 vols., Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2007, 1043 pp.

More than any other stylistic formation, modernism – a movement encompassed by a selection of works produced during the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first part of the last century – continues to have a powerful relevance for our own times. The prominent position these works have in our pedagogical practice and the importance of concepts they have spawned within our cultural discourses testify to the retentive urgency of the challenge that was mounted more than a century ago. The volumes under review are only an example of numerous publications that not only address this relevance but which also bring to the fore questions of temporal demarcation, of genealogy, and historical disruption. Due to space considerations it would be foolhardy to attempt even a summary description of how this is done in the two compendious volumes before us. I make mention of this simply to indicate the timeliness of this publication not only for literary studies but for all endeavors to map our contemporary moment.

With erudite and wide-ranging articles by 65 scholars, this publication is a part of the project to write a comprehensive history of literatures in European languages, sponsored by the International Comparative Literature Association. As its editors, Astradur Eysteinnsson and Vivian Liska, remark in the introduction, their aim was “to present an account of modernism based on explorations from several different angles; theoretical, conceptual and social – and cultural, with an emphasis on relations between literature and the other arts and cultural spheres, and generally on the interface of modernism and a multitude of

twentieth-century cultural and historical concerns” (p. 6). The articles, evincing a core archive of themes and research agendas, are grouped under 11 topical headings, spanning the range from attempts to delimit modernism to case studies that are embedded within distinct national literary traditions. In between the reader is offered accounts of the reevaluation of modernism, the way it negotiates the triad of tradition, the avant-garde, and postmodernism, the way it implicates time and space, mind and body, technology and science, and how literature relates to the other arts; before the cluster of case studies – articles that give the project a global scope (Brasil, Australia, Catalonia, France, Spanish America, the Nordic world, Central and Eastern Europe, Russia, Italy, Spain, the Netherlands) – the second volume explores the social and political agenda of modernism, looks at modernism within a number of cultural conjunctions, charts its routes, and describes the encounters that took place on this trajectory. Each sectional grouping of texts is preceded by a brief introductory summary of the main argument of the essays that follow and the issues that are raised by the authors. The volume ends with an afterword, a list of contributors, and an index of names.

Although it would be pretentious to unearth an abiding concern amongst the eclectic selection of methods and topics to be found here, Barren Watten’s formulation that new modernist studies are an attempt to reconcile “positive and negative readings, so that modernist work will be at once intentional and textualist, undecidable and contextualist” (p. 220) perhaps provides a description into which most of the collected papers could fit. Issuing from different institutional venues, the contributors address the extant traditions of reading the phenomenon of modernism, signaling both its historical framework and geographical

specificity. In regard to this, the comparativist geographical differentiation points to the non-synchronicity of modernist phenomena and the parochialism of many of the accounts that have been deployed to understand it. This opening up of modernism to the global uncovers revealing reverberations, a more nuanced landscape of intercultural borrowings and influences and the need to reconfigure the terrain on which literary study is to be conducted.

The sheer size of this multi-authored text raises the question of how it should be used. The individual chapters can stand alone, but they gain added weight when read under the rubric in which they appear. These rubrics, well chosen and explicated in a well-argued manner, provide not only coordinates to map modernism but also

heuristic tools to explore other historical periods, other geographies, and the literature that these have produced. As such, the volumes under review are a welcome reference book that will be consulted by scholars who work in fields other than modernism. If there is something that I should have liked to see addressed in a more sustained and systematic fashion in these two volumes, particularly in view of the urgent concerns of 2009, then it is the relation between modernism and the economy. If we sought to answer the question whether modernism has anything to do with this elision the texts gathered here would provide a good starting point.

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