

# The Retroactive Canon: Constructing a Network of Modernisms

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*“History may be servitude,  
History may be freedom. See now they vanish,  
To become renewed, transfigured in another pattern”*

T. S. Eliot

THE LINES above are T. S. Eliot speaker’s words in “Little Gidding” of *Four Quartets* also quoted in one of the latest published histories (understood as “historical perspectives”) on aesthetic movements of the past.<sup>1</sup> The four poems, written over a period of six years, were not collected until Eliot’s New York publisher printed them together in 1943 and were first published as a series in Great Britain towards the end of Eliot’s poetic career, in 1941 to 1942. They are, as it seems, four interlinked meditations with the common theme being man’s relationship with time, the universe, and the divine. To the scholar, the lines above are *the* eliot-esque *tour de force* in positing his argument about the past’s configuration in the present and the present’s *retroaction* over the past. Not wisely able to discern “certainties” in the past, T. S. Eliot’s responses to it may impart to the contemporary (public and) scholar altogether a rather skeptical frame of mind (entangled in modernity’s nihilism and skepticism) and engage him critically with earlier traditions which implies “a life in conformity with nature.”<sup>2</sup> What Andrzej Gasiorek suggested in his amazing analysis about the ties of modernity to tradition (and the past) bracketed in the Modernism of the 1930s is clearly this aspect of “retroaction” we are referring to, in the incipit of our paper, and it can be related to some of T. S. Eliot’s writings about the criticism of capitalism and mass production for corrupting human beings and for destroying the environment. It is also identified in Eliot’s liberal life long belief in the concept of the sovereign individual who prevails over the socio-economic system but who is sadly forced to live in modernity in a world of “values arising in a mechanized, commercialized, urbanized way of life.”<sup>3</sup> One of our major concerns in the present inquiry about the Modernist canon formation is the *impetus* of the retroactive perspective also observed in this section of *Four Quartets* we have chosen as an epigraph to this paper. A retroactive perspective refers to something *happening now that reflects the past* (“retroactive” from the Latin “retroagere,” drive or turn back). Reflected by its present configurations of Modernism(s), canon formation is, in

itself, a process viewed by the Modernism(s) latest re-visitations as being grounded in retroactive rather than retrospective close examination of the past. The frequent reference to “retro-”action is meticulously accurate in Gasiorek’s “history” of modernism whenever the author considers the work of a modernist poet and novelist within a strain to give a “new configuration” to the remains/recollections of the past. Such is the case with Eliot’s 1930s poems and the strategic innovative recreation of the past by re-framing the pieces of the past’s puzzle together into a new form evoked to probe and question the validity of contemporaneity. “These lines,” says Gasiorek, “indicate that Eliot was not so much seeking to recreate the past as *to sift through history* in order *to make new configurations* out of it so that they could be made relevant to an altered present. Moreover, the *discontinuities between past and present* were equally important to his thinking because he believed that to be aware of the ways in which the past differed from the present was *to reflect upon modern life* and *to call the contemporary assumption into question* (our emphasis).”<sup>4</sup>

Published five years earlier and edited by Peter Brooks and Andrzej Gasiorek (among others), *The Oxford Handbook of Modernisms* uncovered with its trains of significance, the “making new” of the science of literature, at the outset of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The book is an inductive-deductive analysis of a systematic change in the history of literature as indicated by changes of paradigm in theory(ies) and criticism with the moving away from simple periodizations and chronologies to other accounts of modernism development. Such is the one defended by afore mentioned analysts and their co-authors contemplating the attention given to the topic in the last fifteen years when Modernist Studies have turned into Modernism(s) studies, much acclaimed and targeted by academic re-reading and revision and sustained by academic close attention.

Apparently, the new century had come with *an*-other and more complex view, in which the concept of literature submitted to an inductive-historical analysis based on the empirical collecting of data had tentatively opened ways into new version(s) of literature studies, further moving to *interpretive models* of literature, understood as a *deductive* and *dynamic* phenomenon. This new “model” is set against an *outline of interconnections* of three perspectives (history, theory and criticism), so far understood to separately serve the institution of literature. As we have already demonstrated in one of our researches about relatedness and connections in the science of literature,<sup>5</sup> part of the new perspective is the assumption that the *science of literature* with its well-organized system (involving the historical, the theoretical and critical perspective) can exchange and use information on basis of *interconnection* and *complementarity* in its field of action. As analyzed before, such vision about literary studies in which opposites coexist on basis of complementarity, thus substituting the geometric approach by its dynamic, plural, variety is conjoint to the new perspective on the material reality (reflected in literature itself) as triggered by discoveries in physics, in a post-Einsteinian age.<sup>6</sup> Not only new approaches commenced on the issue of the cultural dimensions of globalization in the early and mid-1990s but also this other view about literature may have encouraged scholars and readers alike to accept the thought that modernism can be fairly regarded as “a network of alternatives” and “a range of practices” rather than a temporally neat construction, and yet diluted or mixed with influences within a formally organized aesthetic

programme. The authors of *The Oxford Handbook* disclose this aspect of Modernism(s) underneath Modernism, tentatively defining the latter as “an overlapping and multiply *networked range of practices* that were always caught up in a *dialectical process* of affirmation and negation (my emphasis).”<sup>7</sup> In other terms recommended as either “creative adaptation” to cultural and geographic circumstances or “uneven development” informed by “alternative modernities,”<sup>8</sup> such fact or truth of the statement is set up on the (more or less) firm basis of the modernist new productive re-visitations, beyond the traditional chronology. This is an attempt to ascertain the cause of modernism in a breakthrough: in a “*relationship of crisis*” and in the *type* of such relationship that may trigger innovation. We understand Andrzej Gasiorek’s terms, as a platform of *inter-operability* where the co-existence of “past, present and future [...] in a relationship of crisis” may become active.<sup>9</sup>

For the purpose of our research, the question is whether the *complexity* of this type of breakthrough can be identified in the modernist canon formation, when it comes to the long history of the world literature. It is evident that changes in the canon cannot be commanded but only suggested and any research or study must record and take notice of the natural processes of selection that have taken place over the years/decades. Canons *are not* resources for analyses in humanities as they are nothing but *selections* made by readers and institutions over a long period of time on “canonical candidates” of literary texts, which come to occupy a place in literary history and are registered as *matters of consequence* in various accounts on literature.<sup>10</sup> As already demonstrated the “matter of consequence” is *canonicity*, which must be taken seriously because it also means the manifold selections of the literary system.<sup>11</sup> However there is *an*-other face of the “matter of consequence” which we assume to have ties with the *operational mode* of the Reader, the Historian and the Writer, as shown by the two “epistemological conditions” or ways in which contemporary bibliography operates: one with address to the past (or retrospective) and the other with address to the relevance the past may have to contemporary literature (retroactive) when one accepts that the historical and cultural background of today has definitely changed the conditions of being. A third way of operating (one with address to the future) has been suggested by Franco Moretti to whom a view which is interested in the *prospective evolution of literature* is made active around the year 1800 with the emergence of the international book markets and the constitution of an international literary system.<sup>12</sup>

With the three operational modes in mind, our inquiry about modernism considered as a network of alternatives is directed to the study of the process of canonization addressed to retroaction but also to a mixture of influences either retrospective or prospective. Such an idea occurred from the presence, in every version of modernist literary history with their respective temporal and spatial mapping of literature (contextually bound), of a large amount of canonized (modernist) works in the 1920s. It appears that this is greater than in any other decade and, although other decades (such as the 1910s and the 30s) have had their revolutionary pasts, the impressive account of Modernism in the 1920’s may be used to define the potential of literature from a historical perspective. It means that the 1920s was not the “threshold” itself so many writers crossed, but the “span of time” necessary for these writers to identify themselves as belonging to the

new literature and to finally self-define as modernists. Triggered by the *relationship of crisis*, the “span of time” would show that the selection of works—active throughout the years 1910-18 and 1920-29—may indicate these years as “threshold years,” (only symbolically referred to 1910 and 1920) somehow crossed over by modernist writers. With the former, early modernist writers are associated, with the latter, high and late modernist writers. The paragon of the first category is Virginia Woolf’s much praised statement about the “transformation of the human being” (i.e. “human nature”) at somewhere around December 1910,<sup>13</sup> Woolf’s frequent references to the Victorian literature, embodied in a Mrs. Brown but basically to the Victorian character and the enormous influence of the First World War or the Great War. For the modernist writer the proper “business” of fiction is to focus on character – or else, a “Victorian” acquired pattern of narrative conduct—extremely necessary, she assumed, on “the verge of one of the great ages of English literature”<sup>14</sup> as she called *her* contemporaneity in a clearly framed address to her predecessors.

This is, partly, what a later contemplation about the “making of the modernist canon” suggests with a similar reference to the “Englishmen being alive in the 1600 not living in the Age of Shakespeare” simply because *that age* was invented long afterwards. The presumption is that Shakespeare could *not* have been assimilated into the canon while he lived because in 1600 there was no canon, literary (English) history not yet having been invented:

[Only] by 1783 Dr. Johnson had collected his *Lives of the English Poets*, working from a canon established not by him but by a syndicate of booksellers. It included no poet born earlier than the 16<sup>th</sup> century: none, in short, whose conventions of spelling, syntax and image would be apt to strike an Augustan browser as odd. It was possible to wonder about the present state of literature. If that means to ask with what names posterity might associate one’s own time, then it concedes that *our posterity will know us in ways we do not.*<sup>15</sup> (my emphasis)

If “*our posterity will know us in ways we do not,*” in the like manner, the future may know the past in ways that the past *cannot* know the present. What we are striving to do in this paper is to throw what light we can on the process itself of the retroactive construction of the literary modernist canon within the record of its history with similarities and differences examined on two writers contemporary to each other, but representative of two different literatures of the English speaking world. As a matter of chronicle posited against the diachronic arrangement of facts and viewed within a synchronic perspective, our intention is to find the resources (if not even the roots of) for the retroactive construction of the literary canon with two writers of the 1920s, Virginia Woolf and Elisabeth Bowen, hardly recorded as modernist writers until the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the last decade of the very same century, and long after their death. We are really interested in *what* caused such a delay or slow recognition. We shall also consider the important effects of the “threshold” they had to cross over at the outset of the 20<sup>th</sup> century we have referred to, in the first part of this paper.

Above and beyond idiosyncrasies, the modernist literary canon construction disclosed, in the most relevant of its aspects, the English self-centrism in the rejection of what retroactively Modernism really was, with the masterpieces located in a cosmopolitan movement called International Modernism but also with English as the language of the three (literature) provinces. The good evidence is the first edition of *New Bearings in English Poetry* by F. R. Leavis, published in 1931. It exposed what the acclaimed academic from Cambridge (who was one of the contemporaries of English modernist writers) established as “the new bearings” or connections:

Whatever else *New Bearings* was, it was an intelligent start at canon defining, given the state of knowledge in 31. Pointless now to ironize at the expense of Leavis’s later career: his disenchantment with Eliot, his growing obsession with Lawrence, his virtual dismissal of Joyce, his grotesque determination that what at bottom had prevented Eliot from being a major poet was American birth.<sup>16</sup>

By the time Joyce had explicitly rejected the Irish Literary Revival as provincial, and decided to leave Ireland to write his literature in English (as many Irishmen have done that), F. R. Leavis decided to dismiss Joyce from his position as innovative writer because Joyce was Irish. *This* innovative writing is modernist for us today, but it was “uneven” and shockingly “unusual” for Joyce’s generation yesterday. It is the effect of the operational mode defined as retroaction. In his critical perspective on such contemplation of ties and connections, Hugh Kenner only saliently criticized F. R. Leavis for his conservative attitude. An attitude which, in 1931, prevented him from recognizing the “new bearings” in Joyce’s impulse “to make literature new.” From a historical perspective, Joyce’s decision to leave Ireland not only in person but also, somehow, in spirit by adopting alien canons (such as the Greek epic) is *that* matter of consequence with its *other* face, making English turn-of-the-century literature “new”—within and along and with a process tied with the *operational mode* of the Reader, the Historian and the Writer. Visible in Joyce’s *Ulysses*, this is usually associated with aloofness of tone, uncertainty of the author’s position and the mapping of alien territory in the reading-understanding of this novel in an appropriate readership mode. To F. R. Leavis, Joyce’s identity is adumbrated by “English expectations.” To Hugh Kenner, a graduate of Yale school of criticism and history, addressing his critical approach to F. R. Leavis and his problematic understanding of “new canon” (the word was not even familiar to literary historians in the thirties) was part of the new approach to literature as a dynamic cultural phenomenon which started to be active in “the English speaking world literature” beginning with the early 1980s:

...the parts of *Ulysses* that resemble a novel resemble continental, not Victorian narratives, and its sense of what business a large work of fiction ought to be about is continuously alien to English expectations. Its fit reader is not someone schooled in a tradition it augments...; rather, anyone willing to master the book’s language, its procedures, its Dublin materials, must do so all on the book’s own terms. In

Ireland, peevishness about its authenticity is apt to fasten on the claim that most of its devotees are American, and indeed many of them are...<sup>17</sup>

By the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was clear, if not to everyone, that three countries, Ireland, America and England were conducting national literatures in English and that it was no longer convenient to retain for the “new” canon only what readers in England were prepared to like. The “decentralization” of English was a fact and the new literature had a new center located on *no* map but in the books written and in what we know today as a “transnational movement” (defined as supranational yesterday) called Modernism. Virginia Woolf’s statement that in the late 1910 “human nature changes” appears of value to us today because we tentatively understand that she obviously meant that by 1910 one could see the International Modernism coming with English language and *not* the language of Proust.<sup>18</sup> In the like manner, “the sprinkling children of the new,” as Lewis named the occupants of the new movement, did not have in mind to return to the past but to ingather the powers of every kind of experience, perhaps the past included. Such is the “case” of Virginia Woolf whose legacy rests on the assumption that in both her fiction and her non-fiction there is a constant “converse” between past and present. Such is the case of Elizabeth Bowen, the Anglo-Irish writer to whom, more than often, the past is embellished with personal memories and experiences. However, it is not this aspect of their writing that may serve our purpose but rather how their very process of writing fiction was retained by individual and collective memory as registered in anthologies, in histories or surveys of modernist literature, in the last (almost) one hundred years. Such an investigation about their place in the context of Modernist literature is as problematic as defining the concept itself.

With Virginia Woolf, writing occupied *the* place in the literature of the 1920s even before English and European Modernism had *one* in their respective histories. In his seminal contribution to an important investigation about Modernism published in the late 1990s, David Trotter opened new ways of investigation. He discussed the Woolfian past-present boundary—crossing, so acutely experienced by Woolf in her novels and so accurately an issue, presented in her essays. Trotter advocated that any attempt to set the “modernist novel” within its boundaries either by contrast and opposition or by similitude and comparison to its neighboring varieties, such as “the Victorian” and “the Edwardian” would *not* only describe “the trajectory of the genre” and suggested that the novel as traditionally conceived was no longer doing its job because the “worlds” it referred to and the narrative imaginary it exposed was not adapted to the way individuals lived their lives.<sup>19</sup>

This is the premise from which we intend to start the discussion about Virginia Woolf and Elizabeth Bowen’s place in the Modernist canon and how this place was accounted by histories and other forms of anthologizing literature. We reflect on Woolf’s exemplary case for the “making of the modernist canon” in both English and European literature. She had a “view of her own” about the Modernist novel/literature, and most of the studies about her literature focus on this view and on the novelty of her literature, not always and promptly recognized by her contemporaries. We also ponder the placing of Elizabeth Bowen within the dispute about Irish modernism and its rigidly



defined aesthetics, which is quite problematic at many levels. Firstly, because in Irish literature the term modernism—as employed by many literary historians—tends to be a synonym of the Joycean fiction writing, to which Bowen’s work has little resemblance. Secondly, the impact that the Bloomsbury group had on the young Elizabeth Bowen is so obvious that many would consider Bowen as part of their circle. Starting with the early 1930s Woolf frequently mentioned the young Elizabeth Bowen in her diary, most often by relating encounters between them.<sup>20</sup> In fact, Bowen deliberately chose to stay rooted in the English tradition, and this is largely due to the influence that Bloomsbury had on her, and not to adhere to the literary tendencies that dominated Irish cultural life at the time, before and immediately after the declaration of the Free Irish State (1922). What some describe as “Bowen trying to write like Woolf,” including Woolf herself, is certainly the psychological acuteness with which she represents the characters, especially her heroines and it is certainly a matter of style and tactics and they are, we know now, modernist.<sup>21</sup> However, there are some twists of style and brisk disruption of the formal coherence of the novel that do not accidentally interfere with the tendency to achieve harmony on the level of the fictional work as a whole. And, despite fragmentary and disrupted storylines, and characters with their emotions, otherwise typical of modernist writing, the two writers are rather dissimilar. One possible answer is that they come from different backgrounds and they write from different angles. Bowen’s Anglo-Irish origin might account for the incongruities in the style of her writing, just as it accounts for the complexity of her relationship with Ireland. It was England and English language that made her a writer, nonetheless her “affinities to Ireland ran deep.”<sup>22</sup> Given her personal history and background, she did produce the kind of modernist literature possible for someone belonging to the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy at that troubled time. For a change, the early reception and criticism of the works of Elizabeth Bowen focused on her characters’ portrayal, more specifically of the depiction of young, innocent heroines against the background of social reality rather than they focused on her style and narrative. Bowen’s contemporary, Barbara Seward speaks in general terms about the hopeless experience of the Anglo-Irish in Ireland, clearly reflected by Bowen.<sup>23</sup>

In Virginia Woolf’s case, her decision to break with the Victorian and the Edwardian literature and with the literary conventions operational in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century as well as her determination to move away from the traditional novel writing was a successful attempt the Edwardians (Bennett, Wells and Galsworthy) failed to accomplish and the Georgian writers (Forster, Lawrence, Joyce and Eliot) only unsuccessfully strived to do. Her non-fiction, on the other hand may show what she herself *thought* about modern fiction but does not necessarily reveal the *principles* by which her own fiction can be defined. Her concerns were so manifold from the essence of modern fiction and the new novel form to the communication between the writer and reader and to the rather tangled issues of women writing for which she is much appreciated today. She is also praised for disposing of the traditional narrative “tools” of her predecessors reflected in the narrative strategies, and for the “new form” given to the novel: the subversion of perspective, the duplicitous truth of consciousness and psyche beneath the appearances of the social and realist novel. Marking Modernism an age of transition, Virginia Woolf accepted innovation as inevitably resulting from experimental fiction and the writer’s self-

awareness about “the prevailing sound of the Georgian age [being] the sound of breaking and falling, crashing and destruction.”<sup>24</sup>

Publishing in 1919 her essay *The Modern Fiction*, followed by *Mr Bennett*...and her important novels of the 1920s, *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and *Orlando* (1928), Virginia Woolf was perceived by criticism and literary historians in the light of her innovative narrative techniques, which she herself suggested in her essays. Therefore, from the beginning her reception was mainly focused on the *novelty of form*. Starting from the 1940s, when Woolf was absent from literary histories, the novelist constantly gains importance and space in the published editions only in the 1960's. She is included among the best of her contemporaries with *no* specification about “her modernism.” The edition of 1940 by Sir Ifor Evans of the *Short History of English Literature*, hardly presented Virginia Woolf and vaguely did that to her contemporaries, such as T. S. Eliot, G. B. Shaw, Lytton Strachey and J. M. Keynes.<sup>25</sup> Other representatives pertaining to the Bloomsbury Group, to which Woolf herself belonged, are presented but they were selected, as it seems, for the sheer purpose of presenting a “variety” of the decade's writers and critics. There was a change of approach in the 1960s with the *Critical History of English Literature* by the Scottish literary historian David Daiches to whom the “*shift of accent*” on the twentieth-century novel appeared to be essential in the understanding of the very notion of change. He gives significant space to Virginia Woolf whose personality and literary career are meticulously presented and analyzed. She is compared to James Joyce and other outstanding writers of the “British modern novel.” Her novels, *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, are discussed in detail being identified with “two of the finest treatments of the problems of loneliness and love which so haunted her [V. Woolf].”<sup>26</sup> The “critical history” elaborated by Daiches is based on many-layered account of the relation between writers and their time and, being a retrospective of the new trends and tendencies, it contains references to modernist writers and Modernism with its specific characteristics. G. S. Fraser's *The Modern Writer and His World* (1964) presents itself as a view about “the modern,” Fraser was a keen and professional observer of the 1920s literary scene and he saw in the modernist writers of the second decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century “the new way of writing” as an expression of the individual's change of attitude when facing the new “fragmentary” world.<sup>27</sup> What we find amazing for the early 1960's of G. S. Fraser's published book is the accurate perception of the fact that Virginia Woolf was a canon-maker of the 1920's literature with “her feminine sensation of living...from felt moment(s).”<sup>28</sup>

However, it is only in the late 1970s (*The Pelican Guide to English Literature*, Boris Ford ed. ) that Woolf, seen from within the relationship between generations, is clearly understood and accepted for what she is really praised today, for the refinement of style and innovative perspective on the character (“a matter of breaking free from inadequate technique and a limited vision”).<sup>29</sup>

Beginning with the 1990s Woolf's work is clearly identified as modernist as many of her contemporaries are confined to Modernism, not yet and not necessarily in the context of the modernist canon discussion. On the contrary, histories of literature or pertinent chapters of Modernism Studies thoroughly present her as an innovator of a new writing style against an encompassing view on British writers of the modern age.



Nevertheless, such a perspective may have functioned as a possibility to “enlarge” the view, to only use David Damrosch’s term to whom, any expansion of our understanding of literature in general, of the “world literature” in particular is favorable to the contemporary canon debate.<sup>30</sup> Beyond the year 2000, literary histories of English literature started to rate Woolf as one of the greatest modernist writers who “focused on phenomena of personal consciousness.”<sup>31</sup> In the chapter devoted to a close examination of Woolf’s work, Terry Eagleton further extends the perspective on the political aspects of her writing and seemingly appears to be very interested in one “face” of the modernist canon contingent to the ambivalent relation of the writer to the past; this including the past as a source of inspiration to the present. Her ties to the former writers and their representative ideologies are also presented as Woolf is also placed in the vicinity of other women writers such as George Eliot and Jane Austen from a *retroactive perspective*.<sup>32</sup>

Beyond the year 2000, Virginia Woolf is presented as representative for the literary networks which are at the heart of modernist practice bringing various writers, publishers, book reviewers together and presenting the manifold aspects of the writer’s involvement in the renewal of the art of the word as a medium of expression. Such is the thorough presentation we owe to Gary Day’s 2010 critical perspective on Woolf whose writing is associated with that of Joyce and Proust. Her stream of consciousness and narrative chronology is compared to Bergson’s influential work about time and its impact on the English modernist writers. Similarly, Woolf’s inspirational work is related to philosophy and the arts, through Walter Pater and the tradition of English Aestheticism, with the tradition of French Impressionism, influences pertaining to the idea that modernism belongs to a “transnational continuum” that could be seen in terms of “international networks that enabled modernism to come into being.”<sup>33</sup>

The random selection of books of literary history and/or criticism with relevant text samples useful for a broad examination of Woolf’s work of fiction—the writer’s personality and its connection with her non-fiction (diary, biography, essays) and the socio-historical and cultural context she lived in has brought to the fore what is really of value and appears retroactively to us today, namely the “anxiety of influence” by which she returns to the generations before her, whose influence she may have experienced in a shadowy way. She was interested in the Victorian society and determined to change literature for good, she set out to transform the realist mode of writing while being nostalgic for Victorian attitudes and manner. One of her biographers identified in her nostalgia “attention to the past and its values” and also the desire to move away from it:

Virginia Woolf’s celebrated modernity was, in a sense, spurious, an effort to move away from the past to create a contemporary form. But the nineteenth century holds sway in her polite sidelong manner, in her reticence, in the longing for education and liberty, in the attention to the obscure (like Wordsworth and Hardy) and, above all, in her emphasis on moments of sublimity which links her to the Romantic poets.<sup>34</sup>

Meaning that Victorian “literature canon” provided her with firm ground upon which she decided to place layer after layer her own experiments and create another vision upon the world by retroactively constructing the new literature from the ashes of the Victorian. In a similar way, writing from the vantage-point of Modernism, Herbert Read defined the concept and the manifestations of revolution, not exclusively pertaining to modernism but to an “aftermath” of change referring to the “change of sensibility which is reorganized as period.” He advocated well the essence of change bearing on the relationship of crisis it contains and which implies “a turning over, even a turning back, but rather a break up, a devolution, some say a dissolution. Its character is catastrophic.”<sup>35</sup> Virginia Woolf, for example, occupied her place in the modernist canon, slowly and by degrees and, more than often triggered by the new light thrown on her work by the meaning of her non-fictional texts she herself had written about her own literature and the literature of her times as compared to the English literature of the past. From 1976 and the famous history by Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, *Modernism 1890-1930*, the patriarchal preconception (“Mrs Woolf’s can seem in some respects a domesticated Modernism, but it contains shrill undertones of disturbance and terror, dark insights undoubtedly related to her suicide in 1941”)<sup>36</sup> they started to recognize in her literary value is replaced by another instance reflected in the epistemological roots of her new novel in both the themes approached and in the narrative style. The two historians are drawing attention upon her innovative attitude to writing and on the fundamental change “in human relationship and human character,” a revolutionary change triggering the adamant fulfillment of her art, an art which is circumscribed to the powerful intellectual developments and breakthrough that made modernism a pan-European phenomenon:

Hence Virginia Woolf, holding that the modern stylistic revolution came from the historical opportunity for change in human relationships and human character, and that modern art therefore had a social and epistemological cause, nonetheless believed in the aesthetic nature of this opportunity; it set the artist free to be more himself...Now *human consciousness* and especially *artistic consciousness* could become more intuitive, more poetic; art could fulfill itself.<sup>37</sup>

As compared to Woolf, Elizabeth Bowen occupied “the contested position of modernism in Irish culture” to only quote Carol Taaffe’s contribution in chapter 43 of the amazing book—the accomplishment of an academic *tour de force* of more than one thousand pages of analysis and synthesis about English speaking world Modernism(s). The story of this “contested position,” Taaffe says, could be “dramatically” presented to the contemporary reader in “the tale of two Joyces:”

The deracinated modernist...who was considered to have become European and modern to the extent that he transcended his Irishness and the Irish Joyce who has more recently emerged from the confluence of post-colonialism and Irish Studies...his work more intimately bound up with Ireland’s cultural and political revolution(and with the anti-colonial revenge on the English language itself).<sup>38</sup>

Hence, Bowen was often ignored as a modernist writer and left out from the discourse about Irish modernism during a time when the issue of national identity became an increasingly pressing matter and thus a recurrent theme in literature. She appeared on the Irish literary scene at a time when Ireland had freshly gained its independence and when important aspects of Irish political, social and cultural life were in need of redefinition. She became visible on a “rift” between the decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when Irish literature had been understood as part of English literature and the process of “separation” and self-definition started by the Revival. She was, somehow, caught between these two phenomena and her writings resulted in a daring negotiation between the need for Irish self-definition and the new sensibility, later called modernist. Therefore she is truthfully recorded as a modernist writer belonging to Irish literature only in *The Field Day Anthology*, published in the 1990s and the *Cambridge History of Irish Literature*, published in 2006. She belonged to an Ascendancy family, but her Anglo-Irish roots, strangely enough made her the writer who occupied a place in the literary canon that can be traced back to the need of the Irish to define themselves and their literature as distinct from English literature.<sup>39</sup> With concerns and topics very rarely to be met in women’s writing, “distinction and restrictions” in Bowen’s work are also closely connected to the question of Anglo-Irishness, a matter that she attends to without turning her discourse into a political one and by turning her attention to the everyday realities of the Big House and its occupants, providing a more personal insight into the matter. The Big House theme in Elizabeth Bowen’s novel, outsourced from the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and showing the other face of Ireland’s domestic life and relationships, is the expression of the *Irish modernist sensibility* within the new canon framework viewed as a network of alternatives, as modernism appeared to emerge in the first quarter of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The question posed and implicitly answered is bound to be disclosed by the last decade’s turn in criticism and the historical approach which has witnessed a revolution in modernist studies, also reflected in Irish modernist studies. The turn must be understood for *what* it was conceived, conjoint to the broad changes in the place occupied by the “local” and the “regional” in an ever increasing globalizing process and the increased creativity of a new generation of Critics and Historians: a creative adaptation to a the new perspective about modernism’s differences and similarities, the convergent and the divergent forms, actually making prose so explicitly ubiquitous in novels and making the literary field “longer, larger and deeper.”<sup>40</sup>

The histories of literature we have randomly selected in our research to represent the long time span within which two writers raised as modernist and were considered as either innovative and experimental or traditional and hardly part of the new literature, lay testimony and provide evidence for their substantial contribution to the modernist literary canon construction in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.



## Notes

1. Andrzej Gasiorek, *A History of Modernist Literature* (Oxford: Willey-Blackwell, 2015).
2. T. S. Eliot, *The Idea of a Christian Society and Other Writings* [1939] (London: Faber and Faber, 1982), 81, also quoted in A. Gasiorek, *A History*, 451.
3. T. S. Eliot, "Notes Towards a Definition of Culture"[1948] in *Christianity and Culture* (New York and London: Harcourt Brace, 1968), 56 and *The Idea of a Christian Society* (London: Faber and Faber, 1982) 80, also quoted in A. Gasiorek, *A History*, 450: "We are being made aware that the organization of society on the principle of private profit, as well as public destruction, is leading both to the deformation of humanity by unregulated industrialism and to the exhaustion of natural resources, and that a good deal of our material progress is a progress for which succeeding generations may have to pay dearly. I need only mention [...] the results of 'soil erosion'—the exploitation of the earth, on a vast scale for two generations, for commercial profit: immediate benefits leading to dearth and desert."
4. Peter Brooker, Andrzej Gasiorek, Deborah Longworth, Andrew Thacker (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Modernisms* (London and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Andrzej Gasiorek, *A History of Modernism* (Oxford: Willey—Blackwell, 2015); Astradur Eysteinnsson and Vivian Liska (eds.) *Modernism* (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2007).
5. Sanda Berce, "Literature and Science: Systemic Reading in the Field of Literature. Ioana Em. Petrescu and the Convergence of Systems: A Hypothesis," *Studia UBB- Philologia*, LXI, 2, 2016, 23-30, 26.
6. See my analysis on the inter-operability of perspectives in the science of literature and their ties with the impact of science on humanities in *Literature and Science: Systemic Reading in the Field of Literature. Ioana Em. Petrescu and the Convergence of Systems: A Hypothesis*, *Studia UBB-Philologia*, LXI, 2, 2016, 23-30, 28. Geometric perspective: geometry clarifies the basic assumptions and unifies many aspects of variance, progression and regression in literature; Dynamic perspective/ approach recognizes change as constant and claims for targeted and results—oriented solutions in reading and interpreting literary phenomena.
7. Peter Brooker, Andrzej Gasiorek et al., *The Oxford Handbook...*10, 11, also quoting Th. Crow, *Modernism and Mass- Culture in the Visual Arts*, in Buchloch et al, *Modernism and Modernity*, The Vancouver Conference Papers (Halifax: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Arts and Design, 2004, 215-64), 247.
8. See A. Gasiorek, *A History*, 10: adopting Arjun Appadurai's notion of "alternative modernities" (A.Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimension of Globalization*, 1996), Gasiorek traces the concept of "alternative modernity" back to Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernism and the Double Consciousness*, 1993 and to Dilip P. Gaonkar, *On Alternative Modernities*, 2001, and he concluded that "the complex geographical and historical nexus moves us decisively away from simple periodizations and teleological accounts of modernist "efflorescence" which is then followed by its inevitable "decline" and "fall" but it also forces us to acknowledge the transnational dimensions of modernism and modernity."
9. Tim Armstrong, *Modernism: Technology and the Body—A Cultural Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 41.
10. Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and Schools of the Ages* (London and New York: Papermak, 1994), David Damrosch. "World Literature in a Post-Canonical, Hyper-Canonical Age" in *Comparative Literature in the Age of Globalization*, ed. Haun Saussy (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), Mads Rosendhal Thomsen, *Mapping*

*World Literature: International Canonization and Transnational Literatures* (London: Continuum Publishing House, 2010).

11. See Mads Rosendhal Thomsen, *Mapping World Literature*, for the analysis between canon-canonicity and the literary system. The same relationship is analyzed in Sanda Berce, "Canonicity: A Hypothesis. Anticipating the Global, D. H. Lawrence in the Hue of the Century," in eds. Balasz Imre, Ioana Both, Sanda Berce, Petronia Petrar et al., *Mapping Literature*, Part II: *Canon, Modernity and the Institution of Literature*, *Transylvanian Review*, Vol. XXII, Supplement No. 1, 2013, 231-244.
12. Franco Moretti, "Evolution, World-Systems, Weltliteratur," in ed. Lindberg Wanda, *Studying Transcultural Literary History* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2006) quoted in Mads Rosendhal Thomsen, *Mapping World Literature*, 32.
13. Virginia Woolf, "Character in Fiction" in McNellie (ed.) *Essays*, vol.3 (London: Harcourt Brace & Co, 1991), 421-422.
14. Virginia Woolf, "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," in ed. Robert Scholes *Approaches to the Novel. Materials for Poetics* (San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Company, 1961), 230.
15. Hugh Kenner, "The Making of the Modernist Canon," in Robert Von Hallberg, *Canons* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 363.
16. Hugh Kenner, "The Making of the Modernist Canon," 365.
17. Hugh Kenner, "The Making of the Modernist Canon," 367. By common consent, English early Modernism (1910-1920) was the work of small groups of foreign exclusive writers (only writing in English) who shared artistic interests and tastes. The first generation of boundary-crossing writers, today called "early Modernist" included Joseph Conrad, a Pole, Henry James, an American born writer but the first generation to come to maturity in 1920 in awareness of the new scientific discoveries and of their impact on literature, of the French avant-garde were either writers living in London or on the continent as English/Irish expats: "London was the place to come to: the center of the world's sophistication and prosperity, the great inexhaustible settled capital."
18. Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, Vol IV, ed. Anne Olivier Bell (London: Hogarth Press, 1982) 57: "And *what* is writing? The perpetual converse I keep up": the idea of the novel as a form of communication between the writer and the reader is superseded by that of a constant "conversation" between past and present. Fascination for the past and past occurrence in her recollections and memories—the inner functional detail of remembering-forgetting processes, all of them are the subject matter of her famous *Diary*, Vol. I, 102: "It's odd. Considering their triviality, how these little things come up again and again at odd moments: are thought of, re-enacted, and disappear. Odd too how one thinks by help of pictures of surroundings."
19. David Trotter, "The Modernist Novel" in Michael Levanson (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) 70: "To write about the modernist novel, as opposed to the Victorian novel, say, or the Edwardian novel, is to write not only about the possibilities of the genre, but about its perceived impossibility."
20. Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, Vol. IV, Anne Olivier Bell (ed.) (London: Hogarth Press, 1982) 86, 69: [on 18 March] "Miss Bowen, stammering, shy, conventional, to tea... having tea in the heat," 187, 73-74: "Eth Bowen, improving;" "And she says she is reading Eth Bowen who tries to write like me." As Evan Boland noticed in *Irish Writers on Writing* (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 2007) 90: "In some ways Bowen can be seen as a Bloomsbury... Her cool, forensic prose opened those themes of failure, erotic disappointment, and childhood hurt that ultimately fill her novels. It is also to Bloomsbury that she owes



- the acute sense of violated place that allowed her to write with such authority on wartime London.”
21. See also Susan Osborn, “Reconsidering Elizabeth Bowen,” in *Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol. 52, 1, Spring 2006, 187-863.
  22. See also Nicholas Allen, “Modernism and the Big House” in *A History of the Modernist Novel*, Gregory Castle, ed. (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015): “The Anglo-Irish were the first to be excluded from the idea of the new nation to which they could assimilate or leave...This is where the Big House novel becomes significant of something more than the failure of a particular set of cultural and economic concerns”(458); “Making art from nothing can be read as a project of modernist writing. The investment of agency on material objects is one aspect of this ambition, an investment made political by the attachment of empire to capital. The life of things invites the reader to experience the world through perceptions to which the literary text gives historical depth...[Bowen’s] attention to the fulcrum between vision and text is one example of her modernism,” 459.
  23. Barbara Seward, “Elisabeth Bowen’s World of Impoverished Love,” *College English*, Vol. 18, 1, Oct. 1956- May 1957, 30-37.
  24. Virginia Woolf, “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown in *Approaches to the Novel Materials for Poetics* , Robert Scholes (ed.) (San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Company, 1961), 212.
  25. Ifor Evans, *A Short History of English Literature* [1940] (London: Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 4<sup>th</sup> rev. and enl. edition, 1976) 338: “In style the most interesting developments were in drama and fiction, in Shaw and Joyce.”
  26. David Daiches, *A Critical History of English Literature. The Restoration to the Present Day* [1960], (London: Mandarin Paperbacks, 1994), 1159.
  27. G. S. Fraser, *The Modern Writer and His World* (London: Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1964): “One can think of the 1920’s as a decade in which the British people as a whole were recovering from the shock of the First World War and hoping desperately that things would get back to ‘normal’” (113); “[this literature does not show] a broad and comprehensive picture of society but personal consistency of attitude, on the novelist’s part, when faced with a confusing and fragmentary world,” 115.
  28. G. S. Fraser, *The Modern Writer*: “What she does convey is a fine and welcoming feminine ‘sensation of living.’ Of living from felt moment to felt moment, each unit of feeling having its individual complexity of color, texture, shape,” 116.
  29. Frank B. Bradbrook, “Virginia Woolf: The Theory and Practice of Fiction,” in ed. Boris Ford, *The Pelican Guide to English Literature*, Vol. 7, *The Modern Age* (London: Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1978), 275. The author of this study defined “the stream of the modern consciousness”(276) the modern aspect of the new technique and presented Woolf’s fiction as “a re-creation of the complexities of the modern individual experiences,” 278.
  30. See also the two versions of English literary history, published in the early and late 1990’s, *The Oxford History of English Literature* (Andrew Sanders “Modernism and its Alternatives: Literature 1920-1945) (1994) and *The Routledge History of Literature in English*, R. Carter and John Mc Rae eds., (London: 1997). In the chapter entitled “The Twentieth Century: 1900-1945” of the latter, Virginia Woolf is called “an arch-representative of modernism” and her work is compared to James Joyce’s with the “new way of writing and new stylistic technique”(419); “Novelists such as D. H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf and James Joyce felt that demands of the traditional novel with its emphasis on external realism were restricting” and with her rebellious writing style she wanted “to break free from traditional forms and the traditional concerns with external reality,” 420.

31. Michael Alexander, "From Post-War to Post-War: 1920-1955" in *A History of English Literature* (London: 2000, Macmillan), 341.
32. Terry Eagleton, "Virginia Woolf" in *The English Novel: An Introduction*, (London: 2005, Blackwell Publishing): "extraordinarily radical, courageous and innovative [forging] a unique astonishingly original style and form of her own" (308); [With Woolf's writing] "the passivity of the human subject" in the 19<sup>th</sup> century writing "becomes a protest against the dominative will of war, capitalism and imperialism," 317.
33. Gary Day, "The Modernist Novel in England: Saki, Woolf and Lawrence" in *Modernist Literature: 1890 to 1950* (London: 2010, York Press, York Notes Companion). For an extended analysis of this idea see Andrzej Gasiorek, *A History of Modernism* (London: Willey-Blackwell, 2015).
34. Lyndall Gordon, *Virginia Woolf: A Writer's Life* (New York and London: 1984, W.W Norton & Co), 12.
35. Herbert Read, *Art Now: An Introduction to the Modern Painting and Sculpture* [1933] (London: 1948, Faber & Faber) 58-9.
36. Malcolm Bradbury & James McFarlane, *Modernism: A Guide to European Literature 1890-1930* [1976] (London: Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1991), 639.
37. Malcolm Bradbury & James McFarlane, *Modernism*, 70.
38. 8 Carol Tafée, "The Irish Modernism" in ed. Peter Brooder Andrej Gasiorek, *The Oxford Handbook of Modernisms*, 783. See also Elmer Kennedy Andrews, "The Novel and the Northern Troubles" in ed. John Wilson Foster, *The Cambridge Companion to the Irish Novel*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006): "For the Irish novelist, the usual concerns of the English novel personal morality and relationships—have tended to be subordinated to the more pressing issues of race, religion and nationality," 238.
39. See also Norman Vance, "Region, realism and reaction, 1922-1972" in ed. John Wilson Foster, *The Cambridge Companion to the Irish Novel*, Bowen's fiction is described as not of the Free state, "but of another Ireland, part Anglo-Irish, part English, part upper-middle-class expatriate," 160. In "Elizabeth Bowen—The Dandy in Revolt" in *Inventing Ireland—The Literature of the Modern Nation* (London: Vintage, Random House, 1995), Declan Kiberd referred to the 'absence of context' and Bowen's "desperation behind the attempt to built a world on nothing, but an *illusion of style*" as the effect of "the complex fate of the Anglo-Irish *from the outset*" (378, my emphasis). Kiberd also quoted Bowen speaking about the Anglo-Irish: "I think we are curiously self-made creatures, carrying out personal worlds around with us like snails their shells. And at the same time adapting to whatever we are...cagey, recalcitrant, on the run, bristling with reservations and arrogance that one doesn't show" (ibid. 379). See also Declan Kiberd, *The Irish Writer and the World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) 2: "Even as we break through to the true nuances of a relationship. Some of the original stereotypes retain a certain authority ... Much of the same is true [about] Anglo-Irish relations, a relation complicated by endless play-acting on both sides or, as Elizabeth Bowen sighed, 'a mixture of showing off and suspicion.'"
40. Franco Moretti, "The Novel: History and Theory" in *New Left Review*, 52, Jul.-Aug. 2008, 111: [the novel is in the literary field] "historically longer, geographically larger, and morphologically deeper."

### **Abstract**

#### The Retroactive Canon: Constructing a Network of Modernisms

The study is intended to throw what light it can on the retroactive construction and the process of canonization of the literary modernist canon. The inquiry is based on complementarity of perspectives (historical, theoretical, critical) and is addressed to retroaction but also to a mixture of influences either retrospective or prospective. The analysis of modernism canonization history, with similarities and differences is addressed to two writers contemporary to each other, but representative of two different literatures of the English speaking world.

### **Keywords:**

retroactive, creative adaptation, complementarity, modernist sensibility, relationship of crisis, alternative modernism.