MODERNIST LITERATURES

SARAH DAVISON

READERS' GUIDES TO ESSENTIAL CRITICISM

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CONSULTANT EDITOR: NICOLAS TREDELL

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Modernist Literatures

A Reader's Guide to Essential Criticism

SARAH DAVISON

Consultant Editor: NICOLAS TREDELL

palgrave

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Introduction

If there is one essential critical insight that comprehends the diverse literatures we consider to be modernist it is Ezra Pound's exhortation 'Make It New'.[1] Simple and memorable, Pound's maxim is the clearest, most widely applicable and readily quotable formulation of modernist aesthetics. 'Make It New' is a call to modernise, to remake or break with the past, in order to respond to, and indeed sculpt, the experience of living in a palpably modern world. And it is telling, therefore, that the slogan was not Pound's own invention: he translated it from the inscription on an ancient Chinese emperor's bathtub.

Many ages have been conscious of their modernity. 'Modern' is, after all, a term that is constantly updated, and so 'modernity' makes itself felt when the turnover is rapid and the displacement is violent. Ezra Pound (1885–1972) was writing in a time of pervasive cultural and scientific upheaval and 'Make It New' encapsulates what the age demanded from art. 'Modernism' is the name that critics use to designate the dramatic shifts in artistic life that accompanied the technological, social and political revolutions that culminated in the early decades of the twentieth century. The term is one of the most complex and intimidating critical categories that readers will encounter. Not only are many modernist works self-consciously difficult, but there is no consensus as to how modernism might be theorised.

The nature of the relationship between modernism and the material conditions of modernity has been the focus of intense critical debate in recent years. These discussions are ongoing and they are revolutionising the discipline. The foundation of the Modernist Studies Association (1999) marks the formal ordination of this new revisionary phase in criticism. The 'New Modernist Studies' is principally concerned with investigating the cultural, aesthetic, political, national and linguistic boundaries that modernity traverses and has superintended a radical expansion of the concept 'modernist'.[2] Accordingly, most critics now use the term 'modernisms' to comprehend the many different literatures that might fruitfully be described as 'modernist', after Peter Nicholls' *Modernisms: A Literary Guide* (1995, second revised edition 2009), one of the finest surveys of the topic produced to date.[3] The popularity of the term 'modernisms' indicates the scale of the challenges facing readers today.

This Guide is unique. It responds to new directions in modernist studies by providing a fresh, accessible, stimulating overview of essential

criticism, attending to poetry, fiction and drama. It aims to impart a lively sense of the diverse literatures that participate in modernism, examining more familiar texts that readers are most likely to encounter in their studies as well as materials that have been more recently recovered and theorised, towards a redefinition of what now constitutes essential criticism in the field.

For ease of reference the Guide is organised in two parts. Part I explores how major currents in modernist thinking developed and the contemporary reception of the literatures that they shaped, introducing the theories, movements, 'isms', schisms, critical terms, traditions and individual talents that no reader can afford to ignore. Part II provides a historical and thematic overview of scholarship on literatures of modernism. It introduces the critical ideas that are now essential for readers to master, from the classic, canon-defining accounts of modernist writing by New Critics right up to the cutting-edge methodologies, discoveries and concerns that are reshaping the field today. It presents classic interpretations of familiar texts alongside fresh approaches to more recently recovered materials, investigating modernist responses to new thinking on gender, sexuality, race, civil rights, the rise of the masses, psychology and psychoanalysis, the body, technology, international politics, the First World War, mass media, marketing, popular culture and cinema, furnishing readers with the knowledge and insight to evaluate different viewpoints and make their own interventions in critical debates.

As the Guide addresses an Anglophone audience, its primary focus is modernist literatures in English. While the Guide concentrates on British, Irish and American modernisms, it recognises that modernism thrived on transcultural exchange, not least because the foreign is one category that reliably delivers the shock of the new. The Guide therefore takes particular note of key European developments in literature and art that influenced Anglophone writers in order to enable readers to make productive connections between the different modernisms of authors across the globe.

The Name of Modernism

'Surely no literary term has raised more controversy and misunderstanding than the modest little word *modernism*', wrote Marjorie Perloff in her 1992 account of the discipline.[4] Perry Anderson is one of several critics to argue that the label 'modernism' is void:

■ Modernism as a notion is the emptiest of all cultural categories. [...] In fact, [...] what is concealed beneath the label is a wide variety of

> very diverse – indeed incompatible – aesthetic practices: symbolism, constructivism, expressionism, surrealism. These, which do spell out specific programmes, were unified post hoc in a portmanteau concept whose only referent is the blank passage of time itself.[5] □

Anderson objects to the name 'modernism' on the basis that it was coined after the fact and it elides importance differences between many schools and movements.

The term 'modernism' does in fact have historical pedigree. In the early years of the twentieth century, 'modernism' and 'modernist' were widely used to describe the progressive, relativist movement within the Roman Catholic Church, which was condemned in two papal encyclicals: 'On the Doctrine of the Modernists' (1907) and 'The Oath Against Modernism' (1910). It was less common for the terms 'modernism' and 'modernist' to appear in literary writing. More often, contemporary critics spoke of 'the modern movement'.[6] However, significant literary usages of 'modernism' and 'modernist' do appear from the first decade of the twentieth century onwards, for instance T.E. Hulme (1883–1971) made a declaration of 'extreme modernism' in his 'Lecture on Modern Poetry' (1908).[7] Modernism is not therefore entirely a retrospective critical construction. Its origins as an artistic category can ultimately be traced to writers working at the time.

The Nature of Modernism

From an English-speaking perspective, T.S. Eliot (1888–1965), Ezra Pound and James Joyce (1882–1941) were among the first to be canonised for their daring, formal experimentation. They are celebrated as the architects of 'high modernism', the technically imposing, ambitiously symbolic literature produced in the years directly before, during and after the First World War. Notably all three men left the country of their birth. Americans Eliot and Pound both felt the pull of European culture, while Joyce left his native Dublin to live in Trieste, Zürich and Paris. Among British writers, Virginia Woolf (1882–1941) and the Bloomsbury Group are particularly fêted. Celebrated American writers include Gertrude Stein (1874–1946), Marianne Moore (1887–1972), William Carlos Williams (1883–1963), Wallace Stevens (1879–1955), Ernest Hemingway (1899–1961) and William Faulkner (1897–1962).

The institutionalisation of modernism as a defined field of study forms an important line of enquiry in this Guide. The Guide aims to account for and expose what Raymond Williams calls 'the machinery of selective tradition', whereby a 'highly selected version of the modern', inhering

in the ideals of a set of elite artists who chose to exile themselves from bourgeois society and its values, achieved 'comfortable integration' to the extent that men like Pound, Joyce and Eliot came to stand in 'for the whole of modernity'.[8] A particular focus is therefore the criticism of recent decades that successfully contests predominantly white, male canons and brings to the fore the achievements of figures such as Djuna Barnes (1892–1982), Langston Hughes (1902–67), Zora Neale Hurston (1891–1960), Mina Loy (1882–1966) and Claude McKay (1889–1948), to name but a few.

Although the word 'modernism' is in wide use, it is telling that critics often avoid defining the term, relying instead on a notional common understanding of its meaning. As Michael Levenson notes:

> ■ Vague terms still signify. Such is the case with 'modernism': it is at once vague and unavoidable. Anything more precise would exclude too much too soon; anything more general would be folly. […] As a rough way of locating our attention, 'modernism' will do.[9] □

In 1992, Marjorie Perloff compiled an indicative list of the formal characteristics that were seen to define modernism as it was codified from the mid-1960s onwards, balancing the general and the precise:

> ■ (1) the replacement of representation of the external world by the imaginative construction of the poet's inner world via the mysterious symbol; (2) the superiority of art to nature; (3) the concept of the artist as a hero; (4) the autonomy of art and its divorce from truth or morality; (5) the depersonalization and 'objectivity' of art, or what Joseph Frank called 'spatial form'; (6) alogical structure […]; (7) the concrete as opposed to the abstract, the particular as opposed to the general, the perceptual as opposed to the conceptual; (8) verbal ambiguity and complexity: 'good' writing as inherently arcane; (9) the fluidity of consciousness […]; (10) the increasing importance attached to the Freudian unconscious and to the dream work; (11) the use of myth as organizing structure […]; (12) the emphasis on the divided self […]; (13) the malaise of the individual in the 'lonely crowd', the alienated self in the urban world […]; and finally, (14) the *internationalism* of modernism…[10] □

The fifth point refers to Joseph Frank's influential essay 'Spatial Form in Modern Literature' (1945), in which he argued that modernists characteristically aimed to replace temporal forms with spatial forms by undermining 'the inherent consecutiveness of language, frustrating the reader's normal expectation of a sequence and forcing him to perceive the elements of the poem as juxtaposed in space rather than unrolling in time'.[11] Perloff's retrospective inventory imparts a lively sense of

the qualities that one might expect to see in canonical modernist texts, but also renders the revolutionary literatures of modernism formulaic and uniform. Readers will find it interesting to return to the list as they progress through the Guide and to consider which points might be supplemented or modified in the light of recent scholarship.

Attempts to identify exemplary formal or stylistic qualities only are reductive by definition. As Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane note in *Modernism: A Guide to European Literature 1890–1930* (1972) – a superbly wide-ranging essay collection that remains useful today – 'few ages have been more multiple, more promiscuous in artistic style; to distil from the multiplicity an overall style or mannerism is a difficult, perhaps even an impossible, task'.[12] Bradbury and McFarlane therefore tread very carefully, discerning in modernism 'a certain loose but distinguishable group of assumptions, founded on a broadly symbolist aesthetic', marked by 'high aesthetic self-consciousness and non-representationalism, in which art turns from realism and humanistic representation towards style, technique, and spatial form in pursuit of a deeper penetration of life'.[13]

The Age of Modernism

Not only do critics struggle to define modernism succinctly, they also find it hard to agree on its most active years. Raymond Williams's question 'When was modernism?' is deceptively difficult to answer.[14] Bradbury and McFarlane suggest 1890–1930 in their survey of European modernism, whereas Christopher Wilks associates modernism with the period between the two world wars in *Modernism: Designing a New World 1914–1939* (2006), the catalogue produced to accompany a recent international exhibition of American and European visual arts.[15] Other critics focus on different periods. For instance, Jane Goldman's book *Modernism 1910–1945: Image to Apocalypse* (2004) takes in developments from the beginnings of Imagism to the end of the Second World War.

As a global, multidisciplinary phenomenon, modernism spread surely but unevenly, touching poetry, prose, drama, dance, painting, sculpture, music, design and architecture at different times and in different ways. For instance, the vibrant culture of independent theatre companies provided the right conditions for drama to take a starring role in the rise of European modernism, while legal constraints dampened the development of that tradition in America. In Britain and America, modernism in poetry and fiction was kindled by the revolutions in European visual arts. As Peter Nicholls appreciates, there was no singular moment of rupture: 'The beginnings of modernism, like its endings, are largely

indeterminate, a matter of traces rather than of clearly defined historical moments'.[16] While there is a broad consensus that the 1910s and 1920s are crucial to British, Irish and American modernisms, not everything produced in these decades was formally innovative. There is, after all, a strong realist tradition in twentieth-century literature that has little to do with the experimental impulses of modernism.

For clarity, this Guide uses 'modernism' to refer to the epochal shift that art underwent in the abstract and also as a way of designating works by groups of writers with a common identity, for instance 'lesbian modernism'. It retains the adjective 'modernist' as a descriptor of stylistic or thematic daring. It uses 'modernisms' to refer to the recent theoretical expansion of the field to include the many different schools and practices that modernity summoned forth and 'modernist literatures' to identify the diverse works which partake of modernism. The Guide also looks forward to postmodernism: the cultural formation that comes after, reacts to, goes beyond and is yet contiguous with modernism.

The term 'avant-garde' is used in the sense defined by Peter Bürger in *The Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1974, English translation 1984) to describe progressive art movements such as Dada or Surrealism that seek to repoliticise the bourgeois institution of art. The avant-garde aggressively reintegrates life and art with a view to making art practical once again and thus seeks to address as wide an audience as possible. Good examples include the use of mass-produced items such as *Fountain* (1917), the porcelain urinal that Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968) bought from a plumbing supply shop and signed R. Mutt, and the Futurist performances where audiences were encouraged to throw vegetables and to riot. The Guide treats modernism and the avant-garde not as antithetical categories but overlapping developments. Complex interchanges between the avant-garde and modernism are explored in the chapters that follow.

Modernism and Modernity

This Guide concentrates purposely on literatures produced between 1890 and 1939 (the outbreak of the Second World War), as this time-frame corresponds to most critics' sense of modernism's most active years. However, it sets essential critical statements on modernist literatures in the context of the intellectual and material conditions of modernity, and the technological, social and historical ferment from which they emerged.

The era of modernity was marked by profound and rapid transition. From the late eighteenth century onwards, huge technological advances

were made in the fields of agriculture, mining and manufacturing. The Industrial Revolution spread from European cities to North America, and then further afield, accelerated by late nineteenth-century developments in telecommunication and transport. It brought profound socio-economic and cultural changes, as the old agrarian order gave way to mass production, increased urbanisation, new labour markets and the rise of masses.

An early and enduring analysis of the material conditions of modernity is the *Communist Manifesto* (1848, English translation 1888) by Karl Marx (1818–83) and Friedrich Engels (1820–95), which outlines how changes in the mode of production effect changes in the whole relations of society. They noted that the capitalists in charge of the means of production reaped the benefit of more efficient, profitable industrial systems while the labouring classes endured greater misery and impoverishment, with the result that 'Society as a whole is more and more splitting up into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other: Bourgeoisie and Proletariat'.[17] They perceived that as industrial development takes hold, 'the proletariat not only increases in number; it becomes concentrated in greater masses, its strength grows, and it feels that strength more' and rises against the bourgeois social order.[18]

The fear that the rise of the masses engendered in the ruling class is recorded in *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (1895, English translation 1896) by Gustave Le Bon (1841–1931):

> ■ The entry of the popular classes into political life [...] is one of the most striking characteristics of our epoch of transition. [...] The masses are founding syndicates before which the authorities capitulate one after the other; they are also founding labour unions [...]. To-day the claims of the masses are becoming more and more sharply defined, and amount to nothing less than a determination to utterly destroy society as it now exists [...].[19] □

The transference of political power was further consolidated by the campaigns for universal suffrage that were gathering momentum in the world's democracies during the nineteenth century and issuing successive challenges to the restriction of voting rights to property-owning white adult men.

Contemplating the social and political ferment set in motion by industrialisation and the rise of the masses led Marx and Engels to an exhilarating vision of modernity:

> ■ Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish

> the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.[20] □

Progress brings crisis and transition, precipitating a revolutionary questioning of class structures as well as sexual and racial hierarchies that compels humanity to conceive the conditions of life anew in thought and art.

Meanwhile, advances in science and philosophy destroyed old certainties and transformed conceptions of human nature and physical reality itself. New technologies of transport and communication changed the experience of distance, while notions of matter, space and time were revolutionised by particle- and astro-physics, relativity and quantum theory, unsettling people's perceptions of the solidity of the material world. Scientific discoveries impelled intense questioning of man's place in the world. Charles Darwin's proposal that animals evolved from simple to complex forms positioned humankind within an evolutionary progression, a view that challenged divine accounts of creation. Philosophers, sociologists and psychiatrists sought to account for human behaviour in terms of anthropology and the unconscious, challenging the assumption that humanity is inherently rational and moral by nature.

These epochal shifts in thinking were accompanied by massive political upheaval and widespread conflict. The most significant for the purposes of this Guide is the First World War (1914–18). In June 1914, a Yugoslav nationalist assassinated the heir to the throne of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, leading Austria-Hungary to declare war on Serbia. The affair quickly escalated into full-scale war between the Central Powers – Germany, the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the Ottoman Empire – and the Allied powers – Britain (with assistance from her Empire), France, Russia (until 1917, the year of the Russian Revolution), and the United States (after 1917). Italy switched allegiance and joined the Allies in 1915. The development of devastating new technologies of warfare, including poison gases, fighter aircraft, tanks and precision artillery brought destruction on a hitherto unimaginable scale.

Overview

Part I of the Guide provides an overview of key critical statements by modernist writers and contemporary commentators in the years before

English literature was institutionalised as an academic discipline. It surveys the criticism written by the most innovative novelists, poets, playwrights and directors, who busily issued manifestos and aesthetic pronouncements, composed essays, book-length studies, letters, prefaces, introductions and reviews, compiled anthologies, staged live performances and held debates in magazines and national newspapers, with a view to readjusting literary taste and creating informed, appreciative audiences for difficult or daring works. It also investigates how their artistic experiments were received by other modernist contemporaries and broader audiences, in journalistic reviews, feature articles, critical analyses in literary quarterlies and periodicals, and even courts of law. It acknowledges that criticism can be directed at specific authors or texts or at literary culture itself.

Part II of the Guide provides a critical survey of modernist studies as an academic discipline. Chapter 4 concerns the construction of modernist reputations and the canonisation of particular strains of modernist writing in the period 1930–80. It examines the critical traditions that modernism hatched, paying particular attention to the ways in which later critics develop lines of thinking already evident in modernist writers' conceptualisation of their own work. The remaining chapters open the discussion out to examine modernisms in their variety, inviting readers to further rethink the highly restrictive, exclusionary modernist canon and overturn old orthodoxies. They set select, thought-provoking critical studies of modernism from recent decades in their intellectual context to produce a lively and informative overview of key issues at stake for modernist studies today. Chapter 5 examines modernist explorations of gender and sexuality. Chapter 6 explores new geographies of modernism, investigating themes of space, place and race. Chapter 7 explores how key developments in cultural studies have impacted on the critical construction of literary modernisms in recent decades, from its relations with mass culture and the marketplace to popular forms such as jazz, music hall and cinema. The Conclusion summarises the Guide.

Of course, there are many ways to tell the story of modernist criticism. Indeed, because New Modernist Studies fruitfully decentres modernism in its institutionalised form, the concept *essential criticism* is not unproblematic. The Guide responds to this challenge by providing multiple, overlapping narratives and emphasising differences of opinion. The two-part structure integrates formalist and historicist approaches. It investigates how aesthetic and technical innovations arise out of culture, while acknowledging that writers took an active role in understanding and shaping their historical moment and also contemplating the institutional factors that have shaped how the movement has been

understood and canonised. The Guide is designed to enable readers to: compare and contrast the literary theories of different regional and national artists, schools and movements; find out about the contemporary reception of landmark works; appreciate the ways in which the modernists' own critical writings have guided the course of scholarly enquiry; and make informed judgments about appropriate critical and conceptual frameworks.

PART I

Critical Declarations and Contemporary Responses

CHAPTER ONE

Modernist Beginnings

Charles Baudelaire

'Modernity is the transient, the fleeting, the contingent' declared the French poet Charles Baudelaire (1821–67) in 'The Painter of Modern Life' (1863), an essay often cited as a foundational modernist document.[1] The crowded city is the environment where the flux that characterises modernity is at its most intense. Baudelaire's painter of modern life is 'a singular man' who is by nature 'a great traveller and very cosmopolitan'.[2] He is a *flâneur* who strolls the city streets at his leisure:

> ■ [He] moves into the crowd as though into an enormous reservoir of electricity. He [...] may also be compared to a mirror as vast as this crowd; to a kaleidoscope endowed with consciousness, which with every one of its movements presents a pattern of life, in all its multiplicity, and the flowing grace of all the elements that go to compose life. It is an ego athirst for the non-ego, and reflecting it at every moment in energies more vivid than life itself, always inconstant and fleeting.[3] □

Baudelaire's painter is ambulant and ambivalent. He is the archetypal artist of modernism in its institutionalised form: he observes life and serves as a conductor for the energies that surround him, intensifying what he sees, mindful of himself and his distance from the masses, recording impersonally a multiplicity of fleeting perspectives, from which (as the kaleidoscope metaphor implies) his consciousness constructs a pattern, imposing form on the formless.

According to Baudelaire, immersion in a hyper-stimulating metropolitan environment summons innovative, irregular and discontinuous forms into being, opening up literature to multiple, fragmented perspectives and chronologies:

> ■ Who among us has not dreamed, in his ambitious moments, of the miracle of a poetic prose, musical, yet without rhythm and without rhyme,

supple and resistant enough to adapt to the sudden lyrical stirrings of the soul, the undulations of reverie, and all the sudden leaps of consciousness? This obsessive ideal is born, above all, from the experience of giant cities, from the intersecting of their myriad relations.[4] □

Baudelaire's insights accord with the influential theories set out by the German sociologist Georg Simmel (1858–1918) in 'The Metropolis and Modern Life' (1903), where he considers the psychology of the individual in the crowd. Simmel reasoned that rural existence, with its slow, familiar, rhythms and cohesive community, consumed less mental energy than the metropolis:

■ The psychological foundation, upon which metropolitan individuality is erected, is the intensification of emotional life due to the swift and continuous shift of external and internal stimuli.[5] □

Simmel proposed that the overstimulated metropolitan subject reacts rationally rather than emotionally, cultivating indifference to the people that surround him, treating them as an indistinguishable mass or crowd. The populous cities of modernity are thus paradoxical spaces: they engender mass activity and also feelings of alienation and resistance, which manifest themselves in the intensification of individual subjectivity at the expense of communality.

Baudelaire's most influential volume of poetry, *Les Fleurs du Mal* (*The Flowers of Evil*, 1857), contained wry, lyrical ruminations on urban life and vice; the feelings of anonymity and estrangement engendered by modern Paris; the unsung beggars, prostitutes and gamblers who roam the streets; the scope for erotic encounters; and meditations on sexuality, ennui and death. The first edition was seized by the public prosecutor on grounds of indecency and a suit was issued against Baudelaire and his publisher, resulting in a fine and an order banning the publication of the six poems judged most obscene.

As Victor Hugo (1802–85) immediately perceived, Baudelaire's poems had introduced 'un frisson nouveau' ['a new shudder'] into literature.[6] The early literatures of modernism registered this seismic shift. They defiantly resolved to treat the actuality of modern life, however sordid, and evolved new forms to comprehend and communicate the experience of modernity, breaking with polite conventions of representation and often running into legal difficulties as a consequence. Baudelaire's example would prove hugely influential. As T.S. Eliot stated in 1930: 'It is not merely in the use of imagery of the sordid life of a great metropolis, but in the elevation of such imagery to the *first intensity* […] that Baudelaire has created a mode of release and expression for other men'.[7]

The following sections explore the beginnings of modernism by examining the foundational critical statements that informed the literary

experiments of key proto-modernist figures and movements as they grappled with new subjects and originated new expressive forms.

Walt Whitman

Although Walt Whitman (1819–92) believed nature to be the art of a divine imagination, his poetry accorded with the revolutionary impulses of modernism. As he explained to his publisher, *Leaves of Grass* (1855) was written in 'a new style, […] necessitated by new theories, new themes — or say the treatment of themes, forced upon us for American purposes'.[8] The aim was to 'give something to our literature which will be our own; with neither foreign spirit, nor imagery nor form, but adapted to our case, grown out of our associations, […] strengthening and intensifying the national soul, and finding the entire fountains of its birth and growth in our own country'.[9] For this reason, Whitman wrote in idiomatic free verse (unrhymed lines of unequal length without regular metre), a style then unknown to American poetry. He justified this innovation in terms of simplicity and directness: 'I will not have in my writing any elegance or effect or originality to hang in the way between me and the rest, like curtains. What I tell, I tell for precisely what it is'.[10]

Contemporary reviewers were scandalised by the form and content of *Leaves of Grass*. Charles Eliot Norton (1827–1908) complained:

> ■ The poems, twelve in number, are neither in rhyme nor blank verse, but in a sort of excited prose broken into lines without any attempt at measure or regularity, and […] without any idea of sense or reason. The writer's scorn for the wonted usages of good writing extends to the vocabulary he adopts; words usually banished from polite society are here employed without reserve.[11] □

Other press notices were less favourable still, rebuking Whitman for his treatment of sexual themes. Rufus Griswold (1815–57) described the volume as 'a gathering of muck' and accused Whitman (in Latin) of 'That horrible sin not to be mentioned among Christians' (by which he meant homosexuality), while the *Boston Intelligencer* denounced the poems as 'a heterogeneous mass of bombast, egotism, vulgarity and nonsense', and recommended that Whitman receive 'the lash for such a violation of decency'.[12]

Whitman conceived of himself as a great national poet, a messianic figure whose sheer force of individuality and vision equipped him to be 'the equalizer of his age and land', whose writing could unify and heal an ethnically diverse nation riven by social inequality, racial tension and slavery.[13] His unabashed Americanism and humanist credo

would exert a profound influence on the nation's poets. For instance, Whitman occupied a special place in Langston Hughes's heart because his 'all-embracing words lock arms with workers and farmers, Negroes and whites, Asiatics and Europeans, serfs, and free men, beaming democracy to all'.[14] William Carlos Williams was inspired to seek a 'language modified by our environment, the American environment', and strove to continue the programme Whitman started by forming a specifically American localist branch of modernism.[15]

Decadence and Degeneracy

The preface that Théophile Gautier (1811–72) wrote to accompany the 1868 posthumous edition of *Les Fleurs du Mal* praised Charles Baudelaire's painterly palette of 'the morbidly rich tints of decomposition, [...] the roses of consumption, the pallor of chlorosis, the hateful bilious yellows, the leaden grey of pestilential fogs [...], the bitumens baked and browned in the depths of hell; [...] correspondent to [...] the last hours of civilization'.[16] It firmly associated Baudelaire with Decadence, a literary and artistic movement that emerged in France in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Convinced of man's fallen nature and the omnipresence of evil, the Decadent imagination disdained prevailing bourgeois values and instead consciously revelled in the perverse, debauched, grotesque and unhealthy aspects of metropolitan life. Decadent writers did not seek to cure the sickness afflicting society, but were connoisseurs of corruption who sought to shock and outrage by wringing a certain sensual beauty from decline through exquisite stylisation and artifice. The Decadent movement in literature reached its artistic peak in English in the 1890s. The trend was famously described by Arthur Symons (1865–1945) as 'a new and beautiful and interesting disease'.[17]

Concerns over the perceived sudden deterioration in spiritual and moral standards in European cities intensified in the 1890s with the publication of *Degeneration* (1892, first translated into English 1895), a notorious and intemperate tirade by the physician and writer Max Nordau (1849–1923) on the decadent aspects of the social phenomena modernity had generated. Nordau interpreted supposed increases in criminal activity, anarchism, 'unfeminine' behaviour in women, prostitution, homosexuality, sexual perversion, disease, hysteria, ego-mania, insanity and fatigue as evidence that – far from embodying Darwin's ideas about evolution and the progress of species – modern civilisation was in fact retrogressing.

■ One epoch of our history is unmistakably in its decline, and another is announcing its approach. There is a sound of rendering in every tradition,