

# H-Net Reviews

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Vassiliki Kolocotroni Taxidou, Jane Goldman, eds. Olga. *Modernism: An Anthology of Sources and Documents*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998. xx + 632 pp. \$40.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-226-45074-2; \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-45073-5.

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## What's in a Name?

The number of books and articles trying to explain or define what the term “modernism” or the seemingly simpler adjective “modern” stands for are legion. “Modernism,” and “modern,” have meant different things to different people for the last three hundred years. Adding to the confusion, “modernity,” has been rather ambiguous for the last hundred years. As far as modernism is concerned, this difficulty of definition applies to the general phenomenon just as much as to literary modernism, the focus of the publication under review. It would seem, then, that a new publication on the subject of modernism, let alone a collection of texts or rather extracts, written by persons who have tried to elucidate the idea behind it, if not the term itself, is hardly necessary.

And yet, this anthology of sources and documents on the concept of modernism offers its readers (it is intended for teachers and researchers alike) something valuable, such as assistance or guidance in a multi-faceted form; indeed, one is tempted to say, it provides an astonishingly comprehensive way of approaching the phenomenon and the way it can be described. There is no doubt that this compilation most effectively demonstrates modernism's heterogeneous nature. To those who have already dealt extensively with modernism and its ramifications, the book may not offer new insights, especially as it *only* assembles extracts without offering an interpretation or hints at controversial aspects. However, as a sourcebook to those who aim at an understanding of the way the phenomenon of modernism came into being, at its discursive formation rather than at a set definition

of the term, this anthology is most helpful not only to students and teachers.

Originally, the editors – members of the Department of English at Dundee, Edinburgh and Glasgow University, respectively – set out to collect an extensive range of texts illustrating the formation and development of *literary* modernism. As its formation was part of a much broader contemporary discourse with the visual arts, with changes in philosophy, in social and political theory that effected a new comprehension of what was modern, the need to widen the range of documents soon became evident. The result is a presentation of “as wide-ranging and diverse a selection of texts as possible” (p. xxi). The editors not only want the reader to rethink what modernism may stand for, but to stimulate and amplify the debate, so that their book will be a “storehouse for continuing engagements with the modern” (p. xviii).

Generally made up of extracts of generally three to five pages in length, and each introduced by a short note on the author and the importance of a text within the modernist discourse, the compilation groups its material into three sections, which in turn are subdivided again into two categories. They are (1) The Emergence of Man–A: The modern in cultural, political and scientific thought; B: Modern aesthetics; (2) The Avant-Garde–A: Formulations and declarations; B: Manifestos; and (3) Modernists on the Modern–A: The 1910s and 1920s: The making of Modernist traditions; B: The 1930s: Modernist regroupings.

The chronological range of about a hundred years between 1840 and 1940 points at a fairly unusual contextualization of modernism, although one not that uncommon since, for example, Karl Marx, Charles Darwin or Henry Adams, Edgar Allan Poe, Charles Baudelaire or Joseph Conrad have been analyzed before in the light of precursors of modernism or modernity [1], and since the time span covered has been extended well into the twentieth century by recent studies and anthologies to include “High Modernism” as well as “Post-modernism” [2]. To have left out Post-modernism certainly raises the compendium’s level of theoretical clarity. As it is, readers will find it a challenge—in the positive sense of the word—to work their way through the sources. Neither does it come as a surprise that most of the texts have been written by British, French, German, and American participants in the development of modernism. It should be noted though, that, to some extent, the selection does go beyond the mainstream of modernist literature as it incorporates extracts from Austrian, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Swedish, Hungarian, Romanian and Russian contemporaries too—most of whom lived in Britain, France, Germany or Austria at the time of writing. Moreover, there are texts of contributors to modernism who are less well known or rarely included in compilations on modernism as a more general phenomenon. Marianne Moore, Andrei Zhdanov, Dziga Vertov, John Cornford,

Robert Delaunay are only a few such examples. It is in its commendable diversity, in its *tour d’horizon*, that this anthology is at its best, in particular, when it takes readers to different approaches, different individual and national backgrounds, different conceptions and reactions to a cultural phenomenon. Whoever follows the path laid out by the editors through the discourse on the evolution of the *modern* in literature and the visual arts will be rewarded in their search for an answer to the question of what can actually be found in a name as well as by a host of new questions.

#### Notes

[1]. For Marx cf. Marshall Berman, *All That is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982. Berman opens with a quotation from the *Communist Manifesto* published in February, 1848.

[2]. Victor E. Taylor, Charles E. Winquist, Eds. *Post-modernism: Critical Concepts*, 4 vols., London: Routledge, 1998, is one of the most recent anthologies reflecting the postmodern discourse.

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