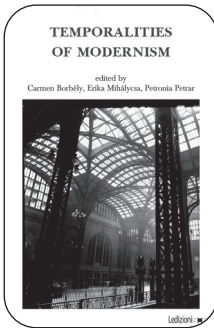


NARRATING THE INFINITE: MODERNISM'S RESISTANCE TO TEMPORAL CLOSURE

Carmen Borbély, Erika Mihálycsa,
Petronia Petrar (eds.), *Temporalities
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The anthology *Temporalities of Modernism*, edited by Carmen Borbély, Erika Mihálycsa, and Petronia Petrar, emerges as a pivotal contribution to the intricate mosaic of European Modernism Studies. Engaging with a multifaceted exploration of the temporal experiences that modernist texts engender, the book underscores the epoch's struggle with the concept of time – its perception, representation, and philosophical underpinnings. Being the result of the homonymous conference held in Cluj-Napoca in May 2018, this collection of essays seeks to unpack the movement's intricate layers, examining how it dialogues with the hyperspecialized fields of knowledge that modernism research encompasses.

At the heart of the anthology lies the concept of “discontinuous continuity,”¹ a phrase that succinctly embodies the essence of modernist concepts of time. The editors, through an insightful analysis of Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts*, shed light on the temporal paradoxes experienced by Woolf's characters, who navigate the complexities of time amidst personal and historical upheavals. They propose that Woolf's narrative offers an ethical framework for interconnectedness, even as it navigates the fractured nature of time. This idea of continuity finds a reflection in the novel's village pageant, serving both as a pause in the narrative and as a medium to engage with historical brutality. Next, the editors propose a response to Thomas Allen's exploration of time as a foundational element in human relationships and

PAUL MIHAI PARASCHIV

Babes-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania
paul.mihai97@gmail.com

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experiences, as well as its role in shaping narrative and meaning. Further on, it is suggested that engaging with Schleifer's idea that time, rather than being an empty container as previously theorized, is integral to explanation and experience, which resonates with the broader modernist movement's break from traditional temporality. Moreover, the introduction delves into Martin Hägglund's notion of "chronolibidinal condition"² prevalent in modernist literature, which reflects a deep-seated desire to fully inhabit time, valuing the richness of temporal existence over the longing for immortality. This creates a dynamic tension between the appreciation of time and the apprehension of its inevitable loss. The editors argue that the relative, novel, and fragmented temporalities of modernism remain pertinent, shedding light on current issues and providing a framework to decipher the tumultuous confluence of past, present, and future that challenges our very being. Modernism's preoccupation with time retains its significance, resonating with modernity's conflicting and "antinomic"³ perceptions of time that span the infinitesimal to the infinite, the bodily to the geometric.

Divided into five parts, the structure of the volume reflects a progression from theoretical considerations to specific case studies, concluding with reflections on the legacy and continued relevance of modernism in contemporary literature and culture. Starting with Jean-Michel Rabaté's essay, the chapter titled "Modernism Terminable and Interminable" investigates the enigma of modernism's incompleteness, juxtaposing the finished literary giants of Joyce and Proust against Kafka and von Hofmannsthal's incomplete endeavours. It ponders

whether modernism, with its hazy boundaries, can ever be considered complete, or if its essence is inherently perpetual, rendering the concept of an ending moot. Rabaté draws on Freud's notion of "Nachträglichkeit," a retrospective interpretation of events, to explain modernism's retrospective labelling. Unlike self-proclaimed movements like Dadaism or Surrealism, modernism was identified after the fact, shaping its understanding through a lens of past events. Rabaté further explores incompleteness in art, contrasting Schubert's famous *Unfinished Symphony* with Schoenberg's *Moses und Aron*. Schubert's piece, while incomplete, is celebrated, reflecting a Romantic acceptance of the unfinished, while Schoenberg's opera, on the other hand, represents a modernist conflict between the quest for absolute representation and the reality of incompleteness. Delving into literary examples, Rabaté examines Hofmannsthal's *Andreas or the Reunited Ones* and Kafka's *The Castle* as studies in modernism's unfinished nature, claiming that such texts exemplify the challenge of conveying a coherent experience in the face of modernism's linguistic and ethical crises. The discussion extends to Beckett's *From an Abandoned Work*, where autobiographical strands weave through themes of Oedipal conflict and the dichotomy of movement versus stasis. Beckett's narrative showcases modernism's tendency towards endless incompleteness, where autonomous thoughts and actions continue independently of a central narrator. Rabaté concludes with a contemplation on the nature of modernism itself—whether it is a singular concept or a spectrum of unfinished expressions, suggesting that deeper theoretical exploration is needed to

grasp the various approaches to modernist incompleteness.

The essay "Somehow Successive and Continuous: Bergson and the Modernist Moment Reconsidered" by Randall Stevenson contemplates Henri Bergson's philosophy's impact on modernist literature, focusing on time and consciousness, using Virginia Woolf's works as a case study. It particularly scrutinizes the dichotomy of temporal experience and identity disruption, employing Virginia Woolf's narratives as a key exemplar. Woolf's insights, drawn from personal encounters with the era's novel technologies like automobiles and trains, epitomize the modernist conflict with ephemeral time and the quest for a unified identity amidst the onslaught of disjointed experiences. Woolf's articulation of this tension is traced in her literary works, notably *Orlando* and *To the Lighthouse*, which vividly portray the fragmented reality of the time. Stevenson also probes into Bergson's denunciation of life's reduction to distinct units, paralleling the modernists' literary pursuit to depict a seamless stream of consciousness against the backdrop of an increasingly mechanized society. Bergson's concept of "durée,"⁴ which asserts the inseparability of time and inner experience, is mirrored in the modernist penchant for exploring characters' interiority and spontaneous thoughts. His philosophy criticizes the segmentation of life and experience into discrete units, a critique that resonates with modernist writers' efforts to capture a continuous flow of consciousness. Despite Woolf's claim to have never read Bergson, the essay suggests modernist literature, including Woolf's, can be viewed as "Bergsonian" in a comparative sense. It resonates with

Bergson's ideas on time and memory and reflects responses to the modern age's new forms of perception and technology. The essay concludes that while modernist literature often reflects experiences "chopped into small sections,"⁵ it strives to integrate these fragments into a unified whole, an endeavor epitomized by Woolf's assertion that "we have got to collect ourselves; we have got to be one self"⁶.

Moving on, Mimmo Cangiano's essay "Modernism and the Disruption of History: The Italian Example" delves into the evolution of modernist thought in Italy and its implications for history, culture, and epistemology. It examines how Italian intellectuals, influenced by figures like Giovanni Amendola, engaged with modernism as a reaction against universalistic thought, embracing Nietzschean philosophy, and promoting a "philosophy of contingency."⁷ This approach rejected absolute values and solid truths, favoring subjective experience and the particular over the universal, which aligned with nationalist and right-wing political movements. Aldo Palazzeschi's *Perelà's Code* is spotlighted as an emblematic work of the period, with its smoke-constituted protagonist reflecting the prevailing crisis of identity and the questioning of objective reality. The chapter argues that modernism, through its critique of historical materialism, adopted an epistemological position that rejected the concept of linear historical progress, instead positing a constant state of change and transient values. Set against the backdrop of disillusionment after the "failed Risorgimento,"⁸ modernism in Italy is portrayed as a response to the political and ethical turmoil of the time, which led to a cultural rift and the promotion of

modernist ideology. Luigi Pirandello's *The Old and the Young* is exemplified as a work that encapsulates modernist views by portraying history as a disorderly fusion of personal psychological impulses, diverging from a unified, collective narrative. The chapter reflects on Pirandello's use of humorism to challenge static notions of life and art, advocating a dynamic reality in line with Bergson's philosophy. It concludes by positing that modernism's focus on the specific and personal, as opposed to the general and collective, essentially paused the progressive potential of history, relegating it to individual caprices and subjective perceptions, thus signifying an end to historical continuity.

The chapter "Rotation Rerotation Suprarotation: The Politics of Prague Dada" reevaluates the influence of the Dada movement in Prague post-WWI, countering the common belief that Dada had a minimal impact on the city. It reveals an active "underground" Dada presence, supported by evidence such as the publications *Ruch* and *Bulletin of the Červená Sedma* and Dada soirées promoted by Dragan Aleksić. The chapter sheds light on Melchior Vischer's *Sekunde durch Hirn*, the supposed first Dada novel, and explores Walter Serner's pivotal, yet controversial, contribution to Dada, including his early manifesto and his withdrawal from the Dadaglobe project. It also recognizes the contributions of Jaroslav Hašek, Erwin Schulhoff, and Ladislav Klíma, and the Dadaist influences in the work of Prague artists like František Halas and E. F. Burian. Ultimately, the chapter establishes Prague Dada as a significant force in the city's avant-garde culture, impacting art history and political dialogue. Concluding

the second part of the volume, the following chapter examines Bruno Jasiński's fusion of Marxism with the avant-garde, particularly in his novel *I Burn Paris*, which critiques both bourgeois society and Marxist ideology through a dystopian Paris. Jasiński, a futurist and socialist, disrupts traditional narratives of progress by setting his novel amidst historical events like the Paris Commune, drawing parallels to the chaos within his plague-stricken Paris. The protagonist's actions reflect a deep-seated proletariat contempt for capitalism, hinting at destructive elements in both capitalist and communist frameworks. Jasiński layers the historical with the contemporary, revealing the complex nature of modernity and critiquing industrialism's dehumanizing impact. His own life and death mirror the ironies within his work, underscoring the interpretive challenges of Modernism. The chapter suggests Jasiński's narrative serves as a cautionary tale against all forms of extremism, with a conclusion that implies the victory of any radical belief system could result in further tyranny, not freedom.

In "The Flux of Becoming and the Dream of Permanence in a Reflection by Virginia Woolf," Woolf's short story *The Lady in the Looking-glass: A Reflection* is analyzed for its metaphysical examination of being and self-perception. The story uses a mirror as a metaphor to explore identity's fluidity and the false sense of an unchanging self. It narrates the futile effort to understand Isabella Tyson by observing her mirror image, which paradoxically reveals a profound void. Woolf employs the ambiguous "one" to blur the lines between personal and universal experience, adding to the narrative's elusive quality. Natali's

research unveils fresh perspectives by delving into the mirror's role as a complex emblem within Woolf's narratives, encapsulating the conflict between identity's inherent mutability and the quest for a static self. It posits that through the motif of the mirror, Woolf probes the trustworthiness of sensory perception and the elusive quest for self-knowledge and understanding of others. Additionally, the analysis suggests that the characters in Woolf's works, and their mirrored images, embody the transient nature of reality and the ephemeral quality of personal identity, echoing the larger modernist discourse on change and the transient essence of existence. Moving further, the chapter on "Modernist Plath" examines Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* as a modernist text, noting its release under a pseudonym as part of an ongoing modernist dialogue. Plath's depiction of Esther Greenwood's psyche and the use of an unreliable narrator reflect modernist influences, merging acute realism with subjective experience. This study brings a nuanced understanding of Plath's work by highlighting her life-long intellectual conversation with Woolf, her challenge to traditional narratives, and her aspirations to transcend the limitations of genre and gender. Plath's novel is seen as a hybrid text, a "poet's novel,"⁹ which articulates multiple narrative voices and explores the psychological dimension in a modernist tradition. The research underlines Plath's desire for a synthesis between prose and poetry, ultimately aiming to transfigure reality and understand its essence through her artistic expression. In terms of innovation, the research contributes to the field by dissecting the ways in which Plath's work both aligns with and diverges from traditional

modernist narratives, providing a fresh perspective on Plath as a modernist author and unpacking the gender dynamics in her writing, continuously addressing how she navigates her literary voice amidst the male-dominated landscape of modernism.

Corin Braga's "Inner Temporalities in the Romanian Modernist Novel" examines the transformation of Romanian literature against the backdrop of the country's late 19th and early 20th-century modernization. It details the Romanian modernists' break from the traditional concept of "God's time" to a "human time"¹⁰ dictated by industrial progress, echoing the Western modernist movement's departure from classical storytelling and the embrace of non-linear time influenced by thinkers like Proust, Bergson, and Husserl. Highlighting the adoption of subjective time and consciousness in Romanian modernism, the chapter explains how authors incorporated Einstein's relativity and the psychological theories of Bergson and James, moving away from fixed time and segmented consciousness. The narrative shift in Romanian literature from an external to an internal focus is discussed, with a special mention of Max Blecher's work, which exemplifies this change through characters experiencing psychological time. The chapter acknowledges the initial resistance among Romanian critics to psychological fiction, yet notes a growing appreciation for the introspective and explorative nature of this approach, as seen in the critical evolution of figures like Ibrăileanu. War themes are also explored, emphasizing the modernist approach's capacity to depict the psychological impacts of World War I with greater intimacy than a traditional historical narrative could. Conclusively, the

chapter remarks on the interwar period's psychological pivot in Romanian literature, indicating a definitive shift from depicting the external world to probing the depths of the human psyche, using narrative techniques that foreground subjectivity and internal experience.

The penultimate part of the volume begins with Angelika Reichmann's essay examining David Jones's epic *In Parenthesis*, which reflects on World War I's turmoil through a blend of medieval influences and the "mythic method."¹¹ Jones's own war experiences and his post-war conversion to Catholicism color his artistic expression, which uses both literary and visual elements to depict the war's chaotic reality. Jones reimagines the war's brutality by intertwining soldiers' experiences with medieval and Arthurian allusions, suggesting a quest for meaning amid devastation. Unlike Eliot, Jones opts for a visual, rather than purely textual, mythic method, aiming to encapsulate the historical horror in a timeless tableau. *In Parenthesis* is presented as a genre-defying epic that merges prose and verse to recount the Battle of the Somme, deliberately ending without a victor's solace to underscore war's senselessness. Jones's approach subtly weaves mythical references into the fabric of his modernist narrative, indicating that understanding the present requires an embodied memory of the past. The poem's fragmented structure, varied linguistic styles, and Jones's own cryptic notes convey the elusiveness of memory and the chaos of war. Ultimately, the work stands as a testament to lost lives and a fractured culture, rejecting traditional heroism in favor of revealing the deep scars left on humanity's consciousness, and affirming art's role in grappling with a

disjointed reality. Next, Chloé Thomas analyzes Stein's shift from positivism to incorporating esoteric elements in her World War II writings in the essay "Prophecy and Modernist Modes of Narration: The War Writings of Gertrude Stein". It describes this not as a simple change of belief, but a nuanced narrative technique responding to wartime pressures. Stein's later works, like *Paris France*, *The Winner Loses*, and *Wars I Have Seen*, mark a departure from her avant-garde experiments towards a narrative immersed in the ordinariness of daily life, yet interspersed with astrological, religious, and superstitious elements. These, the chapter argues, are less about forecasting the future and more about creating comfort and finding a pattern in history. Moreover, it is suggested that Stein abstracts war into a literary motif, perceiving it as an inevitable historical cycle, and personifies centuries to illustrate their developmental "awkward ages."¹² Her writing stylizes history's repetition and reimagines traditional prophetic sources, casting the future as a recurrence of the past. In summary, Stein's wartime prose uses prophecy as a literary device to impose order on the chaos of war, giving her a sense of mastery over history. Her narrative method prioritizes the soothing function of signs over their divinatory power, reflecting her modernist quest for a storytelling mode that captures history's cyclicity and her place within Modernism. Sanda Cordoş completes this part of the volume with her essay "Revolution as Fractured Time in the Modernist Romanian Novel," in which she analyzes how Romanian modernism, intertwined with national identity post-WWI, assimilated Western influences to express modernity, as advocated by Eugen Lovinescu. It

examines revolution as a theme in Romanian fiction, especially in Liviu Rebreanu's works, where it's portrayed as a sacred force for rapid modernization. With the advent of Communist rule, modernism was suppressed, re-emerging later as "neomodernism"¹³ with a bureaucratic slant in the socialist realist era. Works like Marin Preda's *Moromeții* critique the revolutionary ideal, revealing its complex and often negative impact. The chapter concludes that despite the decline of modernism as a movement, Romania's drive towards modernity continues to evolve, shaping its social and artistic narrative.

Finally, the last part of the volume debuts with Gábor Schein's article about Imre Kertész's novels. These narratives intertwine themes of human freedom, identity, and the act of writing itself. They extend totalitarianism into an aesthetic realm with significant linguistic effects, often featuring protagonists who are writers reflecting on their craft amid repressive systems. Rooted in modernist influences like Thomas Mann and Kafka, Kertész's work forms an intertextual web that addresses the Holocaust's lingering trauma and its impact on Hungarian identity and public memory, often challenging traditional narrative forms. Schein posits that Post-Holocaust, Kertész strives to weave together life, ethics, and literature, with his work reflecting the indivisibility of writing from existence, particularly in the context of Auschwitz. His writing grapples with depicting the Holocaust, survival ethics, and the redefinition of culture post-atrocity. In Hungary, Kertész's reception is complex, indicating a broader need to engage with his literature's reflections on identity and collective memory. The author calls for

a recognition of the Holocaust's universal lessons, suggesting that understanding Kertész's work demands a deep dive into his narratives and their place within Hungarian literary tradition. In the last chapter of the book, Aura Poenar examines the complex role of images in modern visual culture, particularly those depicting trauma. Her essay explores the ethical considerations of how images represent suffering and argues against the aestheticization of pain that can mislead viewers. Images are described as active elements that, through their composition and presentation, can either expose or obscure the reality they depict. Using case studies, the chapter critiques images that sensationalise suffering, contrasting them with more ethical representations. For instance, it commends Harun Farocki's *Inextinguishable Fire* for its honest portrayal of war's brutality, while condemning the Save Roșia Montană campaign's manipulative dramatization. Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* is highlighted as an exemplar for ethically documenting the Holocaust through survivors' accounts, avoiding re-enactment and sensationalism. The chapter also addresses the responsibilities of image presentation and the role of archives in shaping historical understanding, cautioning against manipulations like colorization that can alter perceptions of truth. Poenar advocates for a discerning approach to image-making and interpretation, emphasizing the need to understand images as dynamic agents of discourse that can shape narratives of history and trauma.

Each part of the book, delineated by thematic focus, seems designed to offer a comprehensive understanding of the multifarious ways in which modernist literature grapples with the concept of time – be

it through narrative structure, historical context, or philosophical underpinnings. The structure reflects a progression from theoretical considerations to specific case studies, concluding with reflections on the legacy and continued relevance of modernism in contemporary literature and culture. The entire volume confronts established narratives, suggests modernism's continuous relevance, and opens up lines of inquiry into the limits and possibilities

of modernist research. The *Temporalities of Modernism* anthology provides a rich investigation into the temporal intricacies of modernist literature, aligning with the research interests of those in the field of modernism studies, particularly regarding the perception and representation of time. It contributes to the existing body of research by introducing new conceptual tools and by reevaluating existing approaches in the context of literary modernism.

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NOTES

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8. *Ibidem*, p. 100.
9. Annalisa Volpone, "Modernist Plath", in *Temporalities of Modernism*, edited by Carmen Borbély, Erika Mihálycsa, and Petronia Petrar, Milan, Ledizioni, 2022, p. 216.
10. Corin Braga, "Inner Temporalities in the Romanian Modernist Novel", in *Temporalities of Modernism*, edited by Carmen Borbély, Erika Mihálycsa, and Petronia Petrar, Milan, Ledizioni, 2022, p. 221.
11. Angelika Reichmann, "A 'Panorama of Futility and Anarchy' Reimagined in David Jones's 'In Parenthesis'", in *Temporalities of Modernism*, edited by Carmen Borbély, Erika Mihálycsa, and Petronia Petrar, Milan, Ledizioni, 2022, p. 243.

12. Chloé Thomas, "Prophecy and Modernist Modes of Narration: The War Writings of Gertrude Stein", in *Temporalities of Modernism*, edited by Carmen Borbély, Erika Mihálycsa, and Petronia Petrar, Milan, Ledizioni, 2022, p. 273.
13. Sanda Cordoș, "Revolution as Fractured Time in the Modernist Romanian Novel", in *Temporalities of Modernism*, edited by Carmen Borbély, Erika Mihálycsa, and Petronia Petrar, Milan, Ledizioni, 2022, p. 280.