

Periodization, Comparative Literature, and Italian Modernism

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**Abstract:** In her article "Periodization, Comparative Literature, and Italian Modernism" Donata Meneghelli discusses why periodization is one of the most problematic issues in literary studies. Following a discussion of literary history and comparative literature, Meneghelli focuses on the notion of Italian modernism which has recently begun to circulate in literary studies referring to Italian literature of the beginning of the twentieth century. Meneghelli argues that Italian modernism is a paradoxical and contradictory notion which calls into question the relationships between literary history, geography (literary, cultural, political), and comparative literature while at the same time challenging the new framework of world literature(s) and the blending of local/global dichotomies.

**Donata MENEGHELLI**

### **Periodization, Comparative Literature, and Italian Modernism**

Periodization has always been one of the most problematic issues in the study of literature. We can agree with Marshall Brown — "Periods are entities we love to hate. Yet we cannot do without them" (309) — unless we regard the entire field of literature (and of culture) as an endless series of individual and mutually incommensurable occurrences. But why is this such a controversial issue? Periodization in literary studies raises questions common to every historiographical enterprise, namely those related to the reconstruction of the past and the apprehension of time. On the one hand, the past in itself is unattainable, we have not experienced it, we were not there: it only comes to us by means of "traces" (Bloch), often fleeting, incomplete, ambiguous, and liable to multiple construals. One does not need to endorse Hayden White's rhetorical standpoint (history as a story, truth as a linguistic artefact) to acknowledge that any historical account is made up of selection, choices, matters left out, interpretations, and "configuration" (Ricoeur). When we talk about the Industrial Revolution, for instance, we subsume a series of scattered, heterogeneous events under a name which is an arbitrary synthesis. Those events occurred — there is no doubt that the Spinning Jenny was actually invented in 1764 — but it is the historian who groups them under that name and gives them a unified meaning, a place in a wider context from the vantage point of the present. In a sense, therefore, periods and historical categories are (also) abstractions imposing what we may call an imaginary unity upon certain segments of the past which can always be questioned and which can be at odds with the calendar.

On the other hand — as William James and Henri Bergson understood — we live through and experience time as an intertwined flux of events, impressions, visions, memories, thoughts so that it is almost impossible to disentangle the end of something from the beginning of something else. Human life in time is itself a dynamic, mobile, fluid phenomenon which defies classification: "It is virtually impossible to divide periods according to dates for, as Lotman points out, human culture is a dynamic system. Attempts to locate stages of cultural development within strict temporal boundaries contradict that dynamism" (Bassnett 41). To periodize means to "freeze" such dynamics and to cut this fluidity into pieces endowed with temporal borders (dates) and some stability (characterizing features). It means breaking up the motion of human life into discrete units which "are comprehensible because each in itself is not subject to major historical change" (Reiss 433). This is to say that periodization "is not a frame of lived experience ... It is one aspect of one's culture frame of historical understanding" (Reiss 451). It is a strategy to master or discipline time, to make the past seizable, a strategy much more sophisticated than simple chronology. The notion of a "period" or historical categories such as the Renaissance imply positing some events or phenomena as more or less contemporary, therefore integrating the synchronic within the diachronic. However, the very positing of something as contemporary to something else might be questioned in its turn: "In what sense can *Ulysses* be said to be part of the events which took place in 1922?" (Jameson, *Marxism* 313). As soon as we move from historiography in general to literary (or cultural) history, we come across other difficulties, not to say aporias, which perhaps explain why David Perkins is so sceptical about the possibility of writing literary history (11). Let me recall a few of these difficulties. I have no claim to be exhaustive and am conscious that they are strictly interrelated and may be isolated for expositional purposes only.

First, historical categories raise questions connected with temporal divisions, timelines, beginnings, and ends and these become even more problematic if we remember that literature, rather than being an isolated phenomenon, always interacts with other media and languages and with social life in its broadest sense. How do we come to terms with what Alistair Fowler called the "dischrony of the arts" (489)? Usually we try and adjust things by appealing to notions such as "anticipation" and "delay," which are shortcuts at best. The dyschrony Fowler talks about is indeed a challenge to periodization, that is, to the isomorphism which it presupposes or takes for granted. The question goes far beyond the arts. As Brown put it, "A period is always a period of something, never a period of everything. Romanticism is not a relevant concept — and hence not a problem — for geology" (314). Any time span is always made up of multiple and different temporalities (the temporalities of different spheres of experience), which are not always easy to bring back to a single measurement unit.

Second, many historical categories we use — such as realism, symbolism, the baroque, etc. — also have a trans-historical meaning in that they refer to constant features or modes of literary texts, let alone other media and forms of expression, giving way to productive, but also baffling, ambiguities and superimpositions. We might even allege that such a trans-historical meaning and/or use has been one of the main strategies of the enterprise of comparative literature. Take, for instance, Gustav R. Hocke's *Manierisms in der Literatur*, where the notion of "mannerism" is stretched backward and forward from ancient Greece to Joyce and Wittgenstein. The most significant example along these lines, however, is Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis*, in which he traced the idea and practice of realism (*dargestellte Wirklichkeit*) from Homer and the Bible to Virginia Woolf surveying its manifold manifestations through several centuries and thereby making Realism (in the historical sense of the term) an episode, although a paramount one, of a much longer chain.

Third, any period or historical category in literary history at once presupposes and constitutes a corpus of texts considered as more or less representative (a canon), and the dialectics between these two poles, period and canon, are complex and manifold. Perkins describes these dialectics in terms of a "hermeneutic circle": from the period (or the concept of the period) to the canon of works subsumed under the name, and vice versa (73). The process, however, is perhaps more conflicting, even if the image of the hermeneutic circle is evocative. Perkins stresses the role of tradition, particularly highlighting its inertia and conservative force: "The validity of the classification confirms itself every time the texts are read, for the classification signals what to look for and therefore predetermines, to some degree, what will be observed ... literary histories are made out of literary histories" (72-73). Part, at least, of the debate on the canon which has inflamed literary studies for the last few decades is aimed at unblocking, not to say overturning, such automatisms of cultural transmission. Periodizing is always an act of criticism, which gives a context to a text, groups it with other texts, puts it in relation with other phenomena thus orienting expectations and interpretation. For instance, historical categories and periodization generally — although often implicitly — are developed starting from what we define as "high literature" and therefore never describe the entire field of cultural or literary production. More generally, narratives of literary history and periodicity "tend to naturalize parameters of comparison that exclude certain kinds of cultural production from the realm of 'art,' or assign the term art only to certain kinds of objects" (Apter 57). How does the concept of a period change if the reference corpus changes? And, conversely, are we prompted to ascribe new texts to a given period if our way of defining it changes? Here, clearly, a complex network of negotiations comes into play.

Finally, the intertwining of historical categories and national traditions is often intricate and reveals dissimilarities. In whatever terms we define a period, we cannot skip questions as to the geography of history, as to that which we may call "chronotope": "the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships" (Bakhtin 84). To look at one instance, we know that the modern novel did not come into existence simultaneously in France, England, Germany, Italy, Spain, Portugal (not to mention non-European countries), nor can it be considered the same thing in each of these countries. How can we "take together" Novalis's *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* and Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* although they were both written in the last years of the eighteenth century? It is this complexity that calls for a comparative approach while at the same time challenging that very approach. Nowadays, the "mapping" of literary history onto space and geography is one of the major issues at stake. The transnational perspective has been one of the main horizons, one of the constant axes of reflection in the whole project of comparative literature as a discipline. But more recently, owing to political, economical, cultural processes such as postcolonialism and globalization, Goethe's notion of *Weltliteratur* has become a revived approach, the very boundaries of national literatures have been questioned, and the world dimension has come to the foreground in a way and with a previously unthinkable range beyond the traditional Eurocentrism of comparative literature (see, e.g., Damrosch; D'haen; D'haen, Damrosch, Kadir; Tötösy de Zepetnek and Mukherjee). This may either mean the end of comparative literature as a discipline as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak seems to suggest or, conversely, as Emily Apter posits, "the rush to globalize the literary canon in recent years may be viewed as the 'comp-lit-ization' of national literatures throughout the humanities" ("Global" 77). However that may be, one thing is certain, namely that new paradigms and perspective displacements are needed, as Christopher Prendergast has rightly claimed: "Time inflected by space ... yields a geography that is fluid rather than fixed. As borders blur, nation-states implode and the 'world' both

speeds up and contracts, 'migration' has become the new buzzword. Rewriting the map of literary history against this turbulent background perforce calls for special ways of thinking and seeing, whose own borders are themselves necessarily blurred, not least because, whatever the world-wide view might productively be, it cannot — other than in the paradoxical form of the deeply ethnocentric — be the view from nowhere" ("The World" 1). Arguably, all this bears important consequences for the issue of periodization. Let me mention at least two of them.

The world literature dimension raises the question of what Prendergast, following Arjun Appadurai, calls "Eurochronology," that is, the "ethnocentrism of literary-historical periodizations" ("The World" 6). According to Apter "This is a problem arising from the fact that critical traditions and disciplines founded in the Western academy contain inbuilt typologies — 'epic,' 'classicism,' 'Renaissance,' 'genre,' 'world history' — adduced from Western literary examples" (*Against* 57). Or to put it another way, even when the purview is world literature, Occidental categories "invariably function as program settings" (Apter, *Against* 59). Pascale Casanova goes even further viewing the world as a space of conflict where the most powerful nations (and national literatures) fight for cultural, linguistic, and commercial hegemony and where the winners dictate what she calls the Greenwich Mean Time of literary history ("le méridien de Greenwich littéraire" 135). Nevertheless, discrepant temporal orders and power relations exist within the Western and/or European literary space too. To return to my previous example, what we currently refer to as "the modern novel" is (or has long been) a theoretical model mainly fashioned upon the British and French traditions and "their" Greenwich Mean Time with the "exception," perhaps, of *Don Quixote*.

Another issue of periodization has to do with the supposed translatability of historical categories from one cultural-geographical space to another, from one literary tradition to another, and from one language to another. In fact, such categories always originate somewhere and not everywhere, both when they are "invented by posterity" or introduced "by the very artists whom they are supposed to characterize" (Aarseth 232). By what means, through what ways, and with what consequences do such categories migrate? Conversely, how do national literatures and traditions enter or exit from historical categories and periodizations? The problem is not only the extent to which they are translatable: it is also at what "price" in terms of erasure of cultural differences and whether such translation is productive. The answers would seem obvious, insofar as "the game of going global" is "increasingly played out not only in literature but also in literary criticism" (Prendergast, "The World" 1). However, Apter invokes "untranslatability as a deflationary gesture toward the expansionism and gargantuan scale of world-literary endeavor" stressing "the interest of an approach to literary comparatism that recognizes the importance of non translation, mistranslation, incomparability and untranslatability" (*Against* 3-4). Her suggestions, I believe, should not be too hastily dismissed.

The historical category of "modernism" is one of the most debated in literary criticism having undergone relentless revisions since it first appeared in English-language critical discourse in the late 1920s (Riding and Graves) to then start spreading in the early 1960s and gradually but steadily overstepping the boundaries of English-language scholarship. As Michael Levenson argues, modernism is an "unstable name," ("Introduction" 1). Granted there never was a "movement" which named itself modernism or modernist, that it is a sort of umbrella-term under which we subsume a cluster of movements such as post-impressionism, constructivism, imagism, vorticism, futurism, etc. and/or even individual artist, critical discourse has for a long time oscillated between two conceptions of modernism which overlap, but are not exactly the same: as a period (strictly speaking, the first three or four decades of the twentieth century) or as a set of artistic practices and aesthetic/philosophical doctrines. The latter idea is with focus on the artistic and literary dimensions, presupposes a little more homogeneity, and is looser from a temporal point of view. The former conception — period — allows for heterogeneous phenomena, cultural practices, socio-economical conditions, technological changes, but it is time-bound as the tendency to identify fetish-dates, such as the start of the World War I, the opening of the London exhibition *Cézanne and the Post-Impressionists*, the publication of *Ulysses* and *The Waste Land*, or the first version of Albert Einstein's theory of relativity, testifies.

Although already in one of the first uses of the term in Laura Riding's and Robert Graves's 1927 *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* there is an attempt "to de-periodize modernism," to make it "not an historical period, but a possibility perpetually renewed" (Armstrong 37), on the whole, period-conceptions have won: as the first of Jameson's Four Maxims of Modernity goes, "We cannot not

periodize" (*A Singular* 29). Nevertheless, modernism's temporal boundaries have always remained flexible. Jameson's strangely phrased statement points to one of the crucial aporias of modernism as a historical category (for a critique of Jameson's work, see, e.g., Habjan <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol15/iss5/13>>). Nearly all scholars who have spoken about it have put emphasis on the figure of the break, "the pivotal notion of a rupture, often of allegedly world-historical dimension" (Prendergast, "Codeword" 101). Following Frank Kermode's notion, modernism's temporal regime seems to be the *kairos*, not the *kronos*. Mario Lavagetto, after drawing up a list of assorted events or phenomena — from Freud's 1899 *Interpretation of Dreams* and Husserl's 1900 *Logical Investigations* to Picasso's 1907 *Les demoiselles d'Avignon*, Kafka's 1912 *Metamorphosis*, World War I, and the Russian Revolution — comments that "The 'list' has no claim to be exhaustive and is deliberately messy. But in its crudeness it aims at representing, by means of a series of single events, a 'meta-event': the birth of a century, which, in different fields of human experience and intellectual endeavour, paradoxically begins in different moments. It took place in any case in the form of a violent trauma, marking a radical break after which 'nothing will ever again be as it was,' and the limits of both the possible and the impossible will appear drastically modified" ("Svevo" 251; unless indicated otherwise, all translations are mine). However, the notion of a break raises several questions as to when this rupture took place and what it was like — and of course a break is not in itself a period, but a crisis, a (violent) change from one period to another.

First, modernism's relations with notions such as "modern," "modernization," and "modernity" are anything but undisputed and have caused endless debate not to mention the problem of defining and identifying the beginning of modernity itself, for which Jameson proposes at least fourteen candidates (*A Singular* 31-32). As Prendergast puts it, the usual way of construing these relations is to "posit modernity as the new historical situation, modernization as the process whereby we get there, and modernism as the reaction to that situation and that process alike" ("Codeword" 103). But he himself recognizes that such a master narrative is unsatisfactory. The links, as well as the frontiers (temporal or other) between modernity and modernism are shifting structurally and will remain so given the multiple temporalities Lavagetto emphasizes. Hence the everlasting modernity of Raymond Williams's question: "When was Modernism?" Second, we have another set of controversial relations or perhaps in this case oppositions: those between "modernism" and "postmodernism," and/or "modernity" and "postmodernity": "there is also the question of whether [the postmodern period] constitutes a unique historical moment, one distinguishable from what precedes it. I call this the continuation problem — viz., is postmodernism essentially distinct from modernism or is it merely a continuation of themes or processes already evident in modernism?" (Carroll 155). To refer again to Jameson's maxims: "No 'theory' of modernity makes sense today unless it is able to come to terms with the hypothesis of a postmodern break with the modern" (*A Singular* 94). The problem of periodizing crops up again: when did postmodernity begin, even supposing that it did begin?

The notion of a "postmodern break" has important consequences for how we conceive modernism, since the multiplication of twentieth-century breaks ends by downscaling or putting in perspective the would-be violent trauma of the beginning of the century. Of course there can be as many ruptures as one likes, but a rupture followed by another rupture becomes less of a rupture somehow. Remo Ceserani — following Jameson's positing of a "postmodern break" — dispenses with the beginning-of-the-twentieth-century rupture altogether (*Raccontare* 22-24) and as a result re-periodizes Western cultural and literary history of the last three centuries. This means, among other things, to anticipate the previous pivotal break, in a move that we could define as "dissolving modernism": "According to this general shift in historical interpretation, two great transformations radically altered the social and cultural life of Europe: one at the turn of the eighteenth century, the other in the 1950s and 1960s. While their impact and timing varied slightly from country to country, these epochal changes altered both European cultural life and literary production. Many smaller changes and transformations have, of course, also occurred, including the beginning of industrialization in France during the 1830s and the subsequent industrialization of Germany and Italy; the two world wars and other significant, even symbolic, periods of political turmoil" (Ceserani, "Italy" 35).

One might question the definition of the two world wars as "smaller changes." However, my third point — which is connected to my second point — suggests that a period-oriented approach cannot avoid the question as to which stylistic features, literary practices, aesthetic doctrines, ideological

attitudes, and "artistic relations of productions" characterized modernism (Williams 51). And this is in a double sense: what it was like (in literary texts, essays, statements, manifestoes by its protagonists) and how has it been conceptualized and attributed values by its interpreters from the second half of the twentieth century to the first decade of the twentieth-first. Susan Stanford Friedman analyzes the multilayered oppositions, overlappings, and antagonistic constructions of modernism ("Definitional"). Does it mean revolution, change, and rebellion against tradition or is it synonymous of establishment, high culture, and elitism? Was it the celebration of fragmentation and chaos or the — maybe desperate — effort to oppose an order on such chaos? Was it the disruption of narrative coherence, sequencing, causality, the revolt against every codified form(s) or the triumph of rigorous formal values? Does it continue the rational and progressive project of the Enlightenment or does it lay bare the definitive wreck of that project? Is it the last word about realism or did it promote a self-conscious aesthetic, that is, literature as pure artifice? Was it really the end of the so-called Cartesian subject or one of its most spectacular disguises? If we take Ihab Hassan's list of schematic differences between modernism and postmodernism (91-92) we see that almost any of the supposed postmodernist characterizing tenets or features could be as easily attributed to modernism or to some of the multiple versions of modernism which have been proposed over time.

Let us shift from time to space. "Modernism" is an "unstable name" as Levenson affirms, but it is also a remarkably sturdy one. At once paraphrasing and reversing Williams's question, we might ask: Where was modernism? The "modernism" most literary scholars talk about is a category born in an English-language context and has never freed itself from that original trademark. We often imperceptibly overlap English-language modernism and modernism without any geographical and cultural specifications or we shift from one to the other as we group Woolf, Joyce, and Faulkner together as major representatives of the modernist novel, although Armstrong reminds us that "Early modernism takes a rather different trajectory in England and America, involving different sets of key issues" (27). The imprint from English-language scholarship and focus on the English-language canon, however, seems to cohabit comfortably with the nowadays almost universally recognized international character of modernism.

If a period or an historical category has been conceptualized as constitutively transnational and cosmopolitan, that is indeed modernism: the experiences of exile, (im)migration, and displacement are at its roots, even from a simply biographical or historical point of view. Hugh Kenner goes so far as to deem writers such as Faulkner and Woolf "provincial" owing to the fact that they stayed at home instead of moving to Paris. At the same time, the series of single events Lavagetto refers to are temporally concomitant and linked by multiple analogies or "family resemblances" even if (when) they are spatially scattered. Both phenomena trace an intricate network of relations through Europe and the West, constituting what is defined conventionally as "international modernism," which can possibly propagate (or be exported) beyond Western borders, as well as attracting non-Western artists toward its centres (Paris, London, New York). This view has recently been challenged by scholars advocating a (re)conceptualization of modernist internationalism, that is, a spatialization of modernism which also implies reconsidering its periodization from a geo-political, postcolonial standpoint and taking into account that imperialism and colonialism were consubstantial with modernity and modernism. According to Stanford Friedman, the conventional "international" interpretation is biased by "a center/periphery model" and what she calls "the ideology of European diffusionism" ("Periodizing" 428-29). She proposes to jettison both "the ahistorical designation of modernism as a collection of identifiable aesthetic styles" and "the notion of modernism as an aesthetic period whose singular temporal beginning and endpoints are determinable" ("Periodizing" 432). For Stanford Friedman modernity is "a major rupture from what came before" ("Periodizing" 426) and modernism "the expressive dimension of modernity" no matter where and when: "Multiple modernisms emergent in the context of modernities located across a global landscape has a profound effect on historical periodization. Instead of looking for the single period of modernism, with its (always debatable) beginning and endpoints, we need to locate the plural periods of modernisms, some of which overlap with each other and others of which have a different time period altogether" ("Periodizing" 432).

Stanford Friedman suggests to untie the knot which often links in current critical discourse the postcolonial and postmodernism, an interesting critical move in many respects. Nonetheless, one might argue that her definition, stimulating as it is, tends to dilute modernism to the point of depriving

it of any distinctive feature and making it little more than a reaction to (or an elaboration of) the modern condition conceived in turn as a (any?) major break from the past. Further, a postcolonial focus should not obscure the fact that complexities and imbalances cross European identity itself. At the end of his career Henry James — who knew something about displacement and crossing cultures — started writing "Europe" within inverted commas both in his fiction and his private writings. "Europe" is, indeed, a problematic cultural construct which covers (or opens up) a rich network of differences, as well as similarities, a multifaceted internal history of cultural encounters, violence, multiple national identities, and power relationships. Negotiations between modernity and modernism are a different issue altogether in France, England, Germany, Spain, Italy, Russia, Scandinavia, or Central and East Europe because of the different national traditions, different levels of modernization, and different geo-political situations. This explains why each single narrative of (European, Western) modernism begins and ends at different points: it depends on the map each scholar traces within and through debatable European borders (see Thomsen 37-38). Such maps are manifold and change incessantly and are traced over and over according to the different questions the present asks the past.

Recent critical debates about Italian modernism is a good case in point. Italian literary scholars mostly used *modernismo* to designate literature in English from the turn of the nineteenth century to the 1940s: from James, Conrad and Ford Madox Ford to Eliot, Pound, Joyce, Woolf up to Lowry usually defined as a "late modernist" (see, e.g., Cianci). To this cluster, US-American modernists might be added: Faulkner, Dos Passos, Stein. Modernism was not frequently used in a transnational or international sense to group together writers such as Musil, Kafka, Mann, Rilke, Proust (and Joyce, Woolf, Eliot etc.): they were grouped together, but without resorting to the category in question as a way of periodizing and classifying. Nor was the category used to designate Italian authors from Pascoli and D'Annunzio to Pirandello, Svevo, Tozzi, and Ungaretti. As far as I know, Giacomo Debenedetti and Lavagetto — the two most important Italian scholars of European/Western modernism — never used the word in their work with reference to Italian literature, although they both have written on Proust, Svevo, Joyce, Tozzi, and the beginning of the twentieth-century rupture. In the last few years, things have suddenly changed and the notion of "Italian modernism" has begun to circulate as a substitute for more traditional period terms (or internal sub-categories) namely "decadentism," "avant-garde," or more neutrally "literature-of-the-beginning-of-the-twentieth-century."

We might ask: why bother? It is true that "a classification brings with it a context of other works. If we change the context, we activate a different system of expectations, of hermeneutic fore meanings" (Perkins 62). But in this particular case the context does not really seem to change that much. After all, Debenedetti's ground-breaking essays on Svevo's analogies with and differences from Proust and Joyce, physics and the modern novel, psychoanalysis or the stream of consciousness date back to the 1960s. It appears to me that the notion of Italian modernism aims at a more solid canonization of Italian authors and texts of the first half of the twentieth century and that this proposal has triggered an internal re-periodization (and hence re-interpretation) of first-half-of-the-twentieth-century Italian literature. As stressed by Paolo Valesio, "to acclimatize [the category of modernism] in the landscape of contemporary critical discourse on modern Italian literature" means "making this territory more accessible and comparable with the general panorama of other European (as well as non-European) literatures" (ix). It means, in other words, to de-provincialize Italian literature and to project it in a transnational and world literature dimension.

Of course, it is debatable whether a mere designation can have power to "canonize", and there are also the cultural and geo-political questions raised by the hegemony of a notion which originated in the English-language scholarship: one should not forget Apter's plea for untranslatability and her reflections on the power relations underpinning any act of translation or transfer. In any case, if — and I underline if — world literature is the new disciplinary paradigm replacing comparative literature and if, as Franco Moretti claims this new paradigm asks for a new method that recognizes the impossibility to handle such a wide field, hence shifting to "distant reading" as a "condition of knowledge" where the literary text is no longer the direct object of inquiry (57), then literary histories, historical categories, classifications, and general concepts are given an unprecedented role. In this framework, "names" do acquire cultural capital and hence power. However, it is also debatable whether the notion of Italian modernism always and necessarily arises from the global turn in literary



studies. On a closer look, the notion seems to be a product of local circumstances, something deeply rooted in (and stemming from) the Italian critical environment, that is, a (re)invention of the tradition for contemporary use. In this regard, it should be stressed that the emergence of the category of Italian modernism is concomitant to the development in Italy of a broad debate on "the end of postmodernism" and the so-called "new realism" (see, e.g., De Caro and Ferraris; Ferraris). In most cases, the proponents of the notion of Italian modernism are the same ones who are not only proclaiming the end of postmodernism, but fostering or endorsing it, for example Romano Luperini and the group of scholars who gather around his journal *Allegoria*. Raffaele Donnarumma posits explicitly the link: "modernism becomes the name of the twentieth-century canon up until the Second World War, before postmodernism, and perhaps it is a reaction or response to the latter" ("Tracciato" 13). In this framework, modernism's and post-modernism's construals imply one another in a circularity which makes it difficult to identify a starting point. We seem to be locked in Hassan's list-like model, although the system of values is overturned: "The general though not unchallenged decline of postmodernist poetics dates back to the middle of the 1990s. It coincides above all with the obsolescence of such watchwords as the textualization of the world, the labyrinth, autoreflexivity, intertextuality and rewriting, mannerism, parody, and it concurs with a reconsideration both of the realist tradition and the modernist legacy" (Donnarumma, "Ipermodernità" 16).

On the one hand, the above quoted version of postmodernism and its supposed end sounds a little too much like "back to work, folks, the party is over" raising the question whether postmodernism ever was such a party (the least we can say is that Jameson was not invited to it). On the other hand, if we ask with Valentino Baldi "what is Italian modernism for?" (66), the answer is clear: it is for discarding postmodernism. In order to better perform the task, it is construed along specific lines, and, for this reason it is a frame of reference which does activate a different interpretation of authors and texts. I highlight two of these lines in particular as two sides of the same coin: Italian modernism is a schizophrenic version of modernism (notably of the modernist novel). It aims at bringing the epochal rupture back to the beginning of the twentieth century thus downscaling the historical importance of the supposed 1950s postmodernist break (see, e.g., Luperini), while at the same time emphasizing modernism's continuity with the previous tradition, in particular naturalism. In his 2011 *Teoria del romanzo*, Guido Mazzoni — while underlining the dialectics between rupture and continuity at the turn of the twentieth century — emphasizes the latter over the former. Baldi goes further writing that "modernist writers did not pursue a scorched earth policy. They did not want to nullify what their predecessors had done but only to modify it" (86). It is a claim strangely at odds with Virginia Woolf's most famous essay, written against Bennett and Galsworthy, where Woolf characterizes the first decades of the twentieth century as follows: "And so the smashing and the crashing began. Thus it is that we hear all round us, in poems and novels and biographies, even in newspaper articles and essays, the sound of breaking and falling, crashing and destruction. It is the prevailing sound of the Georgian age" (20).

Surely, as Prendergast argues "the epistemology of the break is held within the ideology of modernity itself, in its repeated association with the New, its casting as pure break — mythically attractive in spinning the various making-it-new scenarios of modernism" ("Codeword" 102). However, I am not sure that an epistemology of continuity is the best move for deconstructing the making-it-new ideology and in any case this is not what the proponents of Italian modernism aim at. In close connection with the emphasis on continuity, Italian modernism is essentially and almost exclusively (re)conceptualized as a form of realism: "Realismo modernista" (modernist realism) is the title of a recent article by Riccardo Castellana whose opening lines read: "In the following pages I will work on two main hypotheses: first, that for Italian literature, too, it may be possible (and above all critically advantageous) to adopt the category of modernism ... second, that the characterizing feature of Italian modernism (at least within the limits of a specific genre, the novel, and a very strict historical period, from the mid-1910s to the mid-1920s) is realism" (23). Thus, consistent with such theoretical assumptions, Svevo's *Zeno's Conscience* becomes "an accurate representation of the bourgeoisie in late nineteenth-century Trieste, while "the modernist writer's main concern is how to stage the relationship between thought and action in his/her hero" (Tortora 88).

One might be justified in asking why, in order to clear the field from postmodernism, modernism needs to be diluted into realism (the relationships between modernism and realism are in fact a

complicated issue, which asks for distinctions, see, e.g., Bertoni), why Svevo must be transformed into a late-coming Balzac, and why Zeno's deceiving pseudo-memoirs must be construed as a sort of *Bildungsroman*. I posit that it has to do with the "end of the party" and the "back to work" attitude, whereby realism is conceived as ideologically more accountable although it needs to be "made new" by the adjective "modernist." The entire conceptualization, however, betrays a dubious notion of what modernism was like, of its manifold contradictions, its historical legacy, and its critical meaning let alone the multiple revisions it has undergone. The result is paradoxical. Once again, in Italian critical discourse modernism ends up being dissolved, sandwiched between a commonsensical version of postmodernism and a one-sided idea of realism (be it "old" or "new"). As the well-known maxim attributed to Mao Zedong goes, "There is a great disorder under heaven." But I would not say that the situation is excellent.

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