INTERVIEWS

JEAN-MICHEL RABATÉ, *Unlocking Modernism. Theory's Fulfilment in the 21st Century*

Jean-Michel Rabaté[*] has been Professor of English and Comparative Literature at the University of Pennsylvania since 1992. He is a leading figure in the field of literary theory, as well as a specialist in international modernist literature and theory. He has authored or edited 50 books on modernism, philosophy, psychoanalysis, and contemporary art. Three primary focal points in his work on modernism include the relationship between literature and history, philosophy, psychoanalysis, as seen in the following publications, to name a few: *Historical Modernisms. Time, History and Modernist Aesthetics* (2022), *Understanding Derrida / Understanding Modernism* (2019), *After Derrida: Literature, Theory and Criticism in the 21st Century* (2018), *Beckett, Lacan and the Voice* (2016), *The Pathos of Distance: Affects of the Moderns* (2016), *1922: Literature, Culture, Politics* (2015), *A Handbook of Modernism Studies* (2015), *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and Psychoanalysis* (2014), *1913: The Cradle of Modernism* (2007), *Given: 1° Art 2° Crime: Modernity, Murder and Mass Culture* (2006), *James Joyce Studies* (2004), *The Cambridge Companion to Lacan* (2003), *James Joyce and the Politics of Egoism* (2001), *The Ghosts of Modernity* (1996).

He is the co-founder and senior curator of the Slought Foundation, a non-profit organization based at the University of Pennsylvania that collaborates with artists, communities, and institutions worldwide, engaging public discussions concerning cultural and sociopolitical changes. Additionally, he holds the position of editor at the *Journal of Modern Literature*, a prominent publication in the field of modernist literature. He has also served as a trustee for the *James Joyce Foundation* and as the president of the *Samuel Beckett Society* from 2009 to 2012. Furthermore, he has been a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences since 2008.

Amalia Cotoi: To initiate this interview smoothly, I would like to begin by discussing your educational background and how, if at all, it has influenced your development as a theoretician of modernism. This question is of particular interest because the concept of modernism, as commonly perceived in the English-speaking world, as a form of literary and cultural periodization, does not have, or did not have, an exact equivalent in French literature and

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culture. If I am correct, the term modernism in French culture used to be associated with the Catholic Church in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Jean-Michel Rabaté: I was educated at the Ecole Normale Supérieure in the late sixties and early seventies, a special institution in France, where specialization is not encouraged. In the ENS, you do either humanities or sciences. I was working as much in philosophy, German literature, English literature, ancient and modern history as French literature. This is the condition for a good grounding in what I tend to like most in the US, Comparative Literature. It is true that modernism has a different history in France and was first limited to the context of Catholic theology (and I have written a lot about that in the Irish context as well). However, the term is now accepted in the same way in France, and many authors are rewritten as modernists… The same happened with Joyce, for instance. When I started writing about Joyce in the seventies, most Joyceans did not like to see him called a "modernist": he was Joyce, that was sufficient. Modernism was felt to be a broad umbrella term for all the more invisible or minor authors of the 1920s and 1930s. But there had been the powerful narrative launched by influential critics like Hugh Kenner, himself a disciple of Wyndham Lewis, Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot. He had excluded Woolf from the concept − today, we tend to see Woolf as one of the most typical modernist authors.

AC: In the introduction to *Historical Modernisms. Time, History and Modernist Aesthetics*,[1] the most recent volume you have edited together with Angeliki Spiropoulou, you state that a certain "historical grounding" is needed when discussing modernist literature, and that it is imperative that we consistently distinguish modernism from modernity. My impression is that, given the interdisciplinary nature of the concept, defining modernity is a challenging, if not impossible, task. I have noticed that there is a tendency in the modernist studies over the last decades to conflate the concept of modernity with that of "a historical process". Is modernity simply a constituent of the ongoing historical process evident in each era and within every work of literature, as articulated by Paul de Man (*Literary History and Literary Modernity*, 1970)? Or, as viewed by a follower of The Frankfurt School, such as Hartmut Rosa (*Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity*[2]), is modernity more of a social phenomenon, and hence the measure of all things starting from the Enlightenment to the present day?

JMR: Given the fact that modernism has always corresponded with a retrospective rearrangement of values, analyses, and labels, one cannot ignore the historical genealogies that underpin its self-definition. That said, I see a huge difference between modernism and modernity, and this was a point well seen both by Adorno and Benjamin. Modernism at times

[1] Jean-Michel Rabaté, Angeliki Spiropoulou, *Historical Modernisms. Time, History and Modernist Aesthetics* (London: Bloomsbury, 2022).

[2] Hartmut Rosa, *Social Acceleration. A New Theory of Modernity*, transl. by Jonathan Trejo-Mathys (Columbia University Press, 2013).

appears as opposed to radical modernity, given its insistence on myth, archaism, cyclical returns and the like. Modernism often rejects the values of the enlightenment, see Eliot's consistent rejection, or Pound's decision to use enlightenment values but filtered by Chinese wisdom condensed in Confucius. Benjamin is adamant that his work will destroy the belief in progress upon which a certain enlightenment is founded. The most a systematic debunking was offered by Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of the Enlightenment.* The point is not that one would be social, and the other artistic, for these levels have to be linked at all times, but rather to understand what it means to fulfil a Kantian program: one can attempt to do this naively, as Habermas does, or perversely, as Lacan and Adorno would suggest, by seeing in Marquis de Sade the exact reverse of Kant: a darker enlightenment to be sure.

AC: Preparing the questions for this interview, I was curious to see how many of your books are available for consultation at the Lucian Blaga Central University Library in Cluj-Napoca, the very location where I am now. It seems like there are three: *Language, Sexuality, and Ideology in Ezra Pound's Cantos*,[3] the introduction to *Structuralism* by John Sturrock,[4] and the volume you edited on Lacan, *The Cambridge Companion to Lacan*.[5] One of your books I wished I could find and read, but did not have the chance yet, is *The Ghosts of Modernity* (1996). Could you provide some insights into it?

JMR: This is indeed an old book for me, and it translated an even older book called *La pénultième est morte: spectrographie de la modernité.* It was published in 1993, and discussed ghosts a lot, via Schopenhauer and Spinoza, had chapters on Roland Barthes, André Breton and Samuel Beckett, that the leading image was a prose poem by Mallarmé, in order to suggest that modernism was simply the haunting of modernity, or as Derrida had quipped, its absent ontology, because rewritten as Hauntology. I included a discussion of Max Stirner in dialogue with Karl Marx on the possibility of reducing the Hegelian myth of absolute knowledge to a proliferation of ghosts. My last four books have been in French, and they deal with the issue of laughter and affects in Lacan, Marx, Kafka, Joyce and Freud.

AC: Since I have mentioned your work, *Understanding Derrida, Understanding Modernism*, which, if I am not mistaken, is your most recent contribution at the intersection of philosophy and modernism, I am curious about the extent to which this connection is a personal one. Put differently, how has your own relationship with figures like Barthes, Derrida, Foucault, who are often embroiled in ongoing debates about structuralism, post-structuralism, and postmodernism, influenced your perception of the philosophical aspects of modernist literature? Could you delve into how you first became acquainted with these philosophers

[3] Jean-Michel Rabaté, *Language, Sexuality, and Ideology in Ezra Pound's Cantos* (State Univerisity of New York Press, 1986).
[4] Jean-Michel Rabaté, "Introduction," in John Sturrock, *Structuralism* (Willey-Blackwell, 2003).
[5] *The Cambridge Companion to Lacan*, Jean-Michel Rabaté (ed.) (Cambridge Univeristy Press, 2003).

or/and their work, as well as the process through which you used to select your writing topics in the early stages of your career? While this question may not strictly adhere to academic standards, I think it does touch upon the influence of post-theory in the contemporary scholarly landscape and its ability to resurface the affective attachment of a scholar to the subject of study.

JMR: I was lucky enough to work directly with Jacques Derrida when I came to the Ecole Normale Supérieure. He guided me in my discovery of *Finnegans Wake*, a text he had worked on while being at Harvard. Then I decided to write an MA thesis on parody in *Finnegans Wake* with Hélène Cixous, a good friend of Derrida. At the same time, I was discovering Lacan thanks to his weekly seminar at the same ENS. I managed to thread lines around the three. I remained outside the Barthes network, and found that he was changing the direction of his thinking too often — now, I like him much more, and am sorry I did not take the time to go to his later seminars, that I find fascinating and often teach. However, by the middle seventies, many clashes had taken place, one could not be both a Derridean and a Lacanian, as I was, one had to choose between Foucault and Derrida, etc. As I chose the three authors on whom I wrote my "state thesis," which, at the time, entailed that one had to write more than one thousand pages, Hermann Broch, Ezra Pound and the later James Joyce, I was able to use a combination of approaches—also with the help of Christine Brooke-Rose, who became a close friend, whose work on Pound offered a perfect guidance, with a combination of structuralist formalism and of feminist irony. The issue of the feminine or feminine writing also interested me a lot then, as when I wrote on bisexuality in Freud and in *Finnegans Wake.*

AC: It is widely acknowledged that we live in an era where let's say "the craving" for theory can lead both students and scholars away from the practice of close reading in literature. You've mentioned that this has not been a significant concern for American students focusing on modernism, stating that "since from the very constitution of modernism as a literary field – say, since the end of WWII – the interpenetration of theory and texts has been its dominant feature."[6] However, what is theory supposed to mean today?

JMR: My sense today is that theory has withered so much that it makes more sense to start, quite simply, by working between philosophy and literature. This means that we should keep on doing close readings of literary texts, but also gain the skills needed for the close reading of philosophical texts. Theory has fulfilled its aim, I would venture, in the constitution of modernism as a strong and autonomous field. I would write a very different book today if I were to rewrite *The Future of Theory* that was published more than twenty years ago.

[6] Rabaté, "Introduction" in *A handbook of modernism studies*, ed. Jean-Michel Rabaté (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons Inc., 2013), 1.

AC: In the introduction to *Historical Modernisms. Time, History and Modernist Aesthetics* (2022), you and Angeliki Spiropoulou encourage the reader to continue the process of historicizing modernism. We are aware of its beginning, and we can reach a consensus on its starting point, which could either be at the end of the 19th century or the beginning of the 20th century. You consider 1913 as "the cradle of modernism", while for Malcom Bradbury and James McFarlane, it all begins in the somewhat arbitrary year 1890. However, we remain uncertain about its endpoint. What are your thoughts regarding the growing preoccupation with the idea of new modernism(s) in the 21st century literature? Can we identify specific authors and classify them as modernists? If so, how can we mitigate the risk of omitting certain authors from this classification? For instance, why would one categorize Rachel Cusk as a modernist, but not Elena Ferrante or others?

JMR: I believe that modernism has not finished yet, so it makes sense to call Rachel Cusk as a modernist, if she agrees to the term. Here was my discovery when I came to teach at U Penn in 1992; a number of important poets like Susan Howe. Lydia Davis, Marjorie Welish, were coming regularly to read their work, and they would all say: "As for me, I am a modernist." They meant that they saw themselves as the continuators of Joyce, Stein, Wittgenstein, Kafka, Freud, etc. I am right now at the Modernist Studies Association conference in Brooklyn, and the variety of the authors studied is extreme, but that does seem to bother anyone. The main ten names recur (Conrad, Joyce, Eliot, Pound, Woolf, Lewis, Kafka, Toomer, Langston Hughes) but so many can be added… I'll send you the program so that you can verify.

AC: Building upon the preceding inquiry, do you believe that a new notion of modernity is necessary to sustain the ongoing process of historicizing modernism in today's context?

JMR: For me, both Ali Smith and J. M. Coetzee are typical of a what I would call 21st century modernism: they work as re-readers of the main modernist writers, Smith on Eliot, Coetzee on James, Pound, and several others, both elaborating a complex body of creative work that keeps posing questions to modernity: do we have the right to kill animals? Why do we tolerate apartheid societies? How do we take care of the homeless refugees proliferating in so many parts of the world? Can the work of art keep its relative autonomy in times of political unrest and ecological catastrophe? Is a rational and ideal democracy possible? Why is the political milieu in so many parts of the world returning to a totalitarian perspective on nation building? These are not modernist questions but ethical, aesthetic and political questions posed to modernity.

AC: It appears that despite the extensive interdisciplinary nature of modernist studies, modernism remains a concept primarily confined to the academic sphere. Nonetheless, it seems like nowadays, the term is occasionally used with a sense of being trendy, as exemplified in Andrew Marr's title in *New Statesman:* "Ali Smith, our thoroughly modern modernist" (2022). Do you believe that modernist literature and modernism could find a place

beyond the confines of academia? What do you envision modernist studies looking like in the next two decades? What are your thoughts on how academia and the world beyond it will look in, let's say, 2050?

JMR: Yes, I like that title, and suggested already that both Smith and Coetzee can be experimental and playful when they want, but are not doing the same thing all the time, thus attempting to renew themselves all the time. However, I tend to be pessimistic about the future of humanities in today's academia, at least in the US, because academia is defined by institutions that are under a lot of pressure from rich donors who want to dictate their own values. If modernism has a future, it will be in so far as it can escape from the confines of academia, as Doctor Barnes did in Philadelphia with his Barnes Foundation, a wonderful place to learn about art, life, beauty and race, and be taught about what it means to "be alive" today. This will only happen if it keeps a relevance to todays' world. Pound has defined it so well: "make it new" and "news that stays news." The bad news is: even if I can hope to be around in 2050, there might not be a liveable world to share then.

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