Introduction: European Literature, Conflict, and the Spaces of Modernism

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1. Theorizing Conflict

Conflict is a matter of much anxiety in multiple discourses and institutions. Much time and energy is devoted to preventing and defusing conflicts of various kinds and occurring on different levels of magnitude in and between individuals, societies and nations. The study of European cultures and literatures is not exempt from this tendency: comparisons between literary and other cultural trends, discursive approaches and thematic developments tend to group information according to convergence rather than dissent. In view of an overall consensus to view conflict as a predominantly negative experience that is to be avoided or averted, it may be refreshing to consider an alternative perspective. In an article which challenges the ideal of a cultural unity of Europe, Pascale Casanova proposes resituating conflict as a motor of ongoing change:

> One of the few trans-historical features that constitutes Europe, […] that makes of Europe a coherent whole, is none other than the conflicts and competitions that pitted Europe's national literary spaces against one another in relentless and ongoing rivalry. Starting from this hypothesis, […] the only possible literary history of Europe would be the story of the rivalries, struggles and power relations between these national literatures. As a consequence, […] it would no doubt be better to speak of an ongoing literary unification of Europe, in other words a process that occurs, occurred and is still occurring – paradoxically – through these struggles. This upside-down history would trace the models and counter-models, the powers and dependences, the impositions and the resistances, the linguistic rivalries, the literary devices and genres regarded as weapons in these specific, perpetual and merciless struggles. It would be the history of literary antagonisms, battles and revolts. (Casanova, 2009: 121)

Casanova's blow to what she perceives as a prevailing politics of cultural harmony in European literary history may not completely dislodge critical practices focused on shared values. However, it might open a productive avenue into a new dynamic in approaching conflict and literature that would explore cross-references between the ways in which conflict is represented on the level of plot and the elusive relations between experiential political reality and the various discourses that respond to, meditate on and transform these relations. Applying Casanova's suggestions, conflict might be reconsidered as an aesthetic principle which casts new light, or new shadow, on the proverbial juxtaposition of the sword and the pen.

European literary texts have dealt with conflict, war and revolution in a number of ways, with plots and themes reflecting actual wars as well as pointing to underlying oppositions that marked European art and thought. Given the wide applicability of the term 'conflict', however, one would be hard-pressed to iden-

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tify any plot which can*not* be said to revolve around it in some way or the other. From creation myths such as those collected in the Bible through later plots of seduction, misguided love, vengeance, hubris or adultery, world literature can be regarded as a rich tapestry patterned on conflicts between the genders, between generations and between individual ambition and societal expectation, caught in a never-ending dialectic of provocation and resolution. Books have been made to collude in conflict, both in the shape of propaganda and more extensively in the systematic colonial subjugation of large parts of the world, as summed up by Ania Loomba: "Imperial relations may have been established initially by guns, guile and disease, but they were maintained in their interpellative phase largely by textuality" (Lawson and Tiffin, 1994: 3).[1]

That being said, the 20th century marks a period in European culture and literature in which conflict enters public awareness as an omnipresent condition that is bound up with modernity, collective memory and place. From the collective trauma of the first World War onward, European culture and conflict become near synonyms – inescapably intertwined, they form an interdependent conceptual matrix from which many contemporary conflicts may be seen to arise. The cultural relevance of conflict – especially of the social and historical kind – is all the more evident in contemporary art and literature, characterized by what many have defined as a 'return of the Real' (Foster, 1996; Žižek, 2002; Ferraris, 2015). Postmodernism was largely seen as the age of the 'end of History', in which conflicts were hidden or removed in the name of an ironic 'anything goes' (Fukuyama, 1992; Jameson, 1991); conversely, art and literature from the last two decades seem to engage with conflict in a much more direct way (cf. Rudrum and Stavris, 2015 for an overview). Whether we call this 'Metamodernism', 'Neo-Modernism', 'New Realism' or 'Post-postmodernism', it is clear that the legacy of modernism is particularly crucial in this respect; after all, modernism can be perceived as both a moment and a phase. Modernism invites us to engage with our lasting preoccupation with newness and the continuing search for a productive balance between innovation and confirmation. With this in mind, in the present volume we look back to modernist representations of conflict, while at the same time opening up to new ways of framing conflict in the contemporary world within and beyond Europe.

2. Conflict, Modernism and Space

"The basis of every art is conflict", noted Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein in 1929, and described the aesthetic as a "transformation of the dialectic principle". Apart from characterizing a key aspect of artistic composition, this expression is also paradigmatic for a more fundamental reciprocity in the relation of art to life: the aesthetic can be both a source and an indicator of conflicts. As conflict is inherent to artistic production and aesthetic experience, it is also one of the key topics of modern art – at the sociopolitical as well as at the epistemological and philosophical level.

This volume investigates ways in which literary texts, aesthetics and cultural theory have reflected on and interacted with some of the crucial social, political, epistemological and philosophical conflicts that shaped Europe throughout the 20th century. In doing so, it investigates a range of ways in which conflict can be reconceptualised as an ambivalent phenomenon that plays a key role in progress and innovation. The main chronological focus lies, as indicated above, in the century's first decades, the era of European modernisms – a time in which literature and cultural theory responded in radical ways to the modern condition, producing unprecedented levels of cultural experimentation. In this context, special consideration is given to literary

[1] For further elaborations, see Viswanathan, Gauri (1989), *Masks of Conquest. Literary Study and British Rule in India*, New York: Columbia University Press; Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty (1993), "The Burden of English", Carol A. Breckenridge & Peter van der Veer (ed.), *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament. Perspectives on South Asia*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, pp. 134-158.)

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depictions and cultural analyses of characteristic social and epistemological crises – regarding e.g. industrialisation, alienation, the rise of nationalism, scientific and technical revolutions, but also the so-called "crisis of the ego" (Nietzsche) and of the humanist ideals of rationality and autonomy. This focus is evident in the contributions by van Dyck (on English modernism), Bonierbale (on Rilke's *Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, 1910), Altena (Jünger's *In Stahlgewittern*, 1920), Jager (Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, 1928), and Álvarez Umbarila (Pessoa's *Book of Disquiet*, 1913-1935). Finally, de Feyter highlights the reprisal of modernist features and techniques in post-World War II fiction (Hermans's *The House of Refuge*, 1952).

The relation between modernism and conflict is thus explored in a diachronic and trans-European perspective. In particular, the present volume considers the elusive aesthetic principle of conflict in the context of space and spatial discourses. Conflict is a concomitant of shift, change, transformation and development. In the age of modernism, or modernisms, many art forms and artistic movements reflect an increasing preoccupation with conflict as a dynamic principle of how diverse modern societies manage to achieve a collaborative balance; however, the notion of conflict has long remained largely unexplored within modernist studies, and only rarely has it been the subject of systematic comparative study (Harrison, 1996; Ardis, 2002). On the other hand, modernism has been increasingly reconsidered in relation to the spatial turn and the politics of space (Thacker, 2003; Doyle and Winkiel, 2005). In many ways modernism may be considered as a trailblazer for the heightened interest in space as a significant constituent of 20th century identity as diagnosed in Michel Foucault's critical meditation on heterotopia:

> The great obsession of the nineteenth century was, as we know, history: with its themes of development and of suspension, of crisis, and cycle […]. The present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space. We are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side. (Foucault, 1986: 22)

Significantly, the particular interest in representing simultaneity and the side-by-side is the defining trait of what Joseph Frank discussed as the peculiar "spatial form" of modernist literature (Frank, 1991). Looked at from this perspective, it is not by accident that Virginia Woolf, in 'Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown' (1925), famously framed the characteristic conflictual paradigm shift of modernism in spatial terms:

> On or about December, 1910, human character changed. I am not saying that one went out, as one might, into a garden, and there saw that a rose had flowered, or that a hen had laid an egg. The change was not sudden and definite like that. But a change there was, nevertheless; and, since one must be arbitrary, let us date it about the year 1910. […] All human relations have shifted – those between masters and servants, husbands and wives, parents and children. And when human relations change, there is at the same time a change in religion, conduct, politics and literature. Let us agree to place one of these changes about the year 1910. (Woolf, 1950: 91-92)

The deliberate temporal placement and the seeming solidity of place and space articulated here set off the fundamental changes in consciousness, relationships and manners which gradually transformed society, politics, communication, art and the forms and contents of culture in general, making the very concept of space an unreliable category. A focus on the aesthetic principle of conflict performs a synchronic cross-cut through these structures, which resituates the anxieties underlying modernist work by relating them to both private and public spheres and life-worlds. From this angle, modernism can be a useful source of inspiration in rethinking the spatial conflicts that are defining our present – e.g. the tension between "sense of place" and "sense of planet" in addressing environmental issues (Heise, 2008), or the "disjunctures" between and within the overlapping dimensions of globalization (Appadurai, 1996).

3. A tale of two seminars

The essays assembled in this dossier have been produced over a period of three semesters by graduate students

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who have taken part in two interdisciplinary MA seminars at the University of Groningen, namely "Literature and Conflict" (coordinated by Pablo Valdivia, Vera Alexander and Florian Lippert) and "Modernist Geographies" (coordinated by Vera Alexander and Alberto Godioli). Both courses were characterized by a distinctively cross-European comparative approach, and were driven by three key principles: 1) Interdisciplinary collaboration between colleagues and students, within and beyond the Chair of European Culture and Literature; 2) Combining the close reading of key texts across various media on the one hand, and a solid theoretical framework (with special regard to conflict and space) on the other; 3) Reflecting on the relevance of modernist literature and aesthetics in contemporary culture and society.

Especially in this last respect, these courses were directly connected with our involvement in the organizing committee of the Modernist Studies Association conference 'Modernism Now.' This conference, held in Amsterdam in August 2017, shed light on the complex phenomenon of modernism as a lasting and ongoing project of transformation. Several conference presentations identified intersections between modernism, conflict and space as one of the few under-illuminated areas of research on the ongoing influence of modernism on present-day thought and literary developments. In presenting the open case of modernism to our students, we were struck by the range of ideas as well as new conceptualisations of a conflict-centred continuity triggered by this combination of topics. The present volume presents a digest of essays which examine significant instances of cases where studying conflict, space and modernism together produces innovative perspectives worth further investigation.

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