Modernist Subjectivities Course Description

The continued allure of modernist experimental literature may lie in its depiction of a burgeoning milieu of cosmopolitan artists, a group of people that may be regarded as the progenitors of today’s so-called creative class. Likewise, the formal difficulty of navigating modernist avant-gardism might be seen to reify the continued existence of a clever and inquisitive readership in an increasingly anti-intellectual climate. This modernist survey takes up the question of self-fashioning in literary practice—that is, constructing one’s identity or public persona through literary forms—by examining novels, expository non-fiction, short stories, an epic poem, manifestoes, and a clinical memoir. The texts we will examine often tread uneasily in the genre of semi-autobiography or roman à clef, as they ask what it means to be an aesthetic practitioner negotiating with the modern. These authors question bourgeois ideals of rationality, progress, and self-presence, while also poking fun at the pretensions of self-defined bohemian class. At the same time, they foreground how gender performance, racial or national identity, and sexuality are ciphered through that dynamic. While this course will provide an overview of modernist representation, our readings will focus on how formal experimentation relates to the deployment of aesthetic subjectivity.
Key Terms for Modernist Subjectivities*

**modernism:** a style or movement in the arts from the late 19th and early 20th centuries that aims to break with classical and traditional forms.

**subjectivity:** the condition of being a subject: i.e., the quality of possessing perspectives, experiences, feelings, beliefs, desires, and/or power. Subjectivity is used as an explanation for what influences and informs people's judgments about truth or reality.

**the avant-garde/avant-gardism:** (French for “vanguard”) new and unusual or experimental ideas, especially in the arts, or the people introducing them.

**roman-à-clef:** (French for “novel with a key”) a novel in which real people or events appear with invented names.

**Künstlerroman:** (German for “artist’s novel”) a narrative about an artist’s growth to maturity.

*Open to debate, modification, and contestation as the quarter progresses. All definitions are taken from the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED).*
Stephen Greenblatt
(b. 1943)

New Historicist, Professor of the Humanities at Harvard

The Early Modern Period as the Beginning of Self-Fashioning

- “[T]here is in the early modern period a change in the intellectual, social, psychological, and aesthetic structures that govern the generation of identities” (Greenblatt 1)

- Greenblatt argues that the verb “to fashion” took on a very specific character in the sixteenth century as a way of forming the self. Fashioning came to suggest the development of “a distinctive personality, a characteristic address to the world, a consistent mode of perceiving and behaving” (2).
According to Greenblatt, self-fashioning describes

…the practice of parents and teachers; it is linked to manners or demeanor, particularly that of the elite; it may suggest hypocrisy or deception, an adherence to mere outward ceremony; it suggests representation of one’s nature or intention in speech and actions. And with representation we return to literature, or rather we may grasp that self-fashioning derives its interest precisely from the fact that it functions without regard for a sharp distinction between literature and social life. It invariably crosses the boundaries between the creation of literary characters, the shaping of one’s own identity, the experience of being molded by forces outside one’s control, the attempt to fashion other selves. Such boundaries may, to be sure, be strictly observed in criticism, just as we may distinguish between literary and behavioral styles, but in so doing we pay a high price, for we begin to lose a sense of the complex interactions of meaning in a given culture. We wall off literary symbolism from the symbolic structures operative elsewhere, as if art alone were a human creation, as if humans themselves were not, in Clifford Geertz’s phrase, cultural artifacts. (Greenblatt 3, emphasis mine)
Building the Nineteenth Century Fop: Brummell and Byron

Richard Dighton, *Caricature of Beau Brummell* (1805)

Thomas Philips, *Lord Byron in Albanian Dress* (1813)
Failure of revolutionary hopes after 1848

John Breuilly, *Mass Politics* (1848)

Emile Jean Horace Vernet, *A Barricade on the Rue Soufflot (in view of the Pantheon), Paris* (June 1848)
Modernity and Political Life

• By the mid-nineteenth century, a surge in economic growth, industrial development, and capitalistic values created a growing middle class.

• *bourgeois*: of or characteristic of the middle class, typically with reference to its perceived materialistic values or conventional attitudes (*OED*).

• As Karl Marx saw it, bourgeois society was marked by “passions without truth, truth without passions; heroes without deeds of heroism, history without event; a course of development only driven forward by the calendar, and made wearisome by the constant repetition of the same tension and relaxations . . . If any section of history has been painted grey on grey, it is this.” (*The Eighteenth Brumaire* [1852])
Modernity and Political Life

- Cleavage between what we might call “bourgeois modernity” and “aesthetic modernity.”

- Many artists and cultural critics saw the rise of bourgeois values as synonymous with philistinism and cultural stagnation. One of the most important figures of 19th century cultural life, Charles Baudelaire, described society after 1848 as “wholly worn-out – worse than worn-out – brutalized and greedy, wholly repelled by fiction, adoring only material possessions” (248).
First edition of *Les fleurs du mal* (1857)

**Charles Baudelaire**
(1821-1867)

French poet, art critic, essayist, and translator

Nadar (Gaspard-Félix Tournachon), *Photograph of Baudelaire* (1855)
Baudelaire’s handwritten notes for *Curiosités Esthétiques*

“Le Dandy” (“The Dandy”)

Published posthumously in 1868 in *Curiosités Esthétiques* (Aesthetic Curiosities)

Paul Gavarni,
*Le flâneur* (1842)
These men have no other occupation that of cultivating the idea of beauty in their person, of satisfying their passions, of feeling and thinking. Thus they possess, as much as they wish and to a large degree, time and money, without which one’s whim, reduced to the state of a passing dream, can scarcely be translated into action. It is unfortunately true that, without leisure of money, love can be only a commonplace orgy or the carrying out of conjugal duty. Instead of a passionate imaginative caprice, it becomes a repulsive utility.

If I speak of love in connection with dandyism, it is because love is the natural occupation of the idle. But the dandy does not aim at love as a special goal. If I have spoken of money, it is because money is indispensible to people who make a cult of their passions; but the dandy does not aspire to money as to something essential; a limitless credit would be sufficient for him; and he relinquishes to ordinary mortals the coarse passion. (Baudelaire 193-5)
Excerpts from “Le Dandy”

Dandyism is not even, as many thoughtless people seem to believe, an immoderate taste for fine clothes and material elegance. These things are for the perfect dandy only a symbol of the aristocratic superiority of his mind. In his eyes, therefore, in love with distinction above all else, the perfection of clothes consists in absolute simplicity, which is, in truth, the best way of distinguishing oneself. What then is this passion which, having become a doctrine, has made tyrannical partisans, this unwritten constitution which has formed so noble a caste? Above all else, it is the burning need to create an originality for oneself, a need contained within the exterior limits of convention. It is a kind of cult of oneself which may survive in the search for happiness to be found in someone else, in woman, for example; which may even survive everything that is called illusion. It is the pleasure of astonishing and the proud satisfaction of never being astonished. (Baudelaire 195, emphasis mine)
Excerpts from “Le Dandy”

... [T]hey [dandies] all participate in the same characteristic of opposition and revolt; they are all representative of what is best in human pride, of that need, which is too rare in the men of today, of opposing and demolishing triviality... Dandyism appears especially at period of transition when democracy is not yet all-powerful, and when aristocracy is only partially collapsed and vilified. In the confusion of those periods, a few men who have lost their standing, who are disgruntled and idle, but rich in native strength, may conceive the project of founding a new species of aristocracy, all the more difficult to upset because it will be based on the most precious, the most indestructible of faculties, and on the heavenly gifts which work and money cannot confer. Dandyism is the last flare of heroism in a period of decadence; the type of dandy discovered by the traveler in North America does not in any way invalidate this idea; for nothing prevents us from supposing that the tribes we call savage are the remains of great civilizations which have disappeared. Dandyism is a setting sun; like a diminishing star, it is proud, without warmth and full of melancholy. But, alas! the rising tide of democracy, which invades and levels everything, drowns day by day these last representatives of human pride and pours the water of oblivion over the traces of these prodigious myrmidons. (Baudelaire 197)
The “metaphysical” dandy of Baudelaire vs. popular indictment of fops

19th century caricatures lampooning the dandy
Oscar Wilde
(1854-1900)

Irish playwright, novelist, poet, critic, and consummate aesthete

Cartoon of Wilde in *Punch* (1881)
“The Decay of Lying – An Observation”

Published in 1891 in the collection *Intentions*

Stages a Socratic dialogue between two characters on the topic of Realism versus Romanticism

Detail from the cover of the first edition of Wilde’s *Intentions*
For what is Nature? Nature is no great mother who has borne us. She is our creation. It is in our brain that she quickens to life. Things are because we see them, and what we see, and how we see it, depends on the Arts that have influenced us. To look at a thing is very different from seeing a thing. One does not see anything until one sees its beauty. Then, and only then, does it come into existence. At present, people see fogs, not because there are fogs, but because poets and painters have taught them the mysterious loveliness of such effects. There may have been fogs for centuries in London. I say there were. But no one saw them, and so we did not know anything about them. They did not exist until art invented them. (Wilde 986)
Excerpts from “The Decay of Lying – An Observation”

. . . Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life. This results not merely from Life’s imitative instinct, but from the fact that the self-conscious aim of Life is to find expression, and that Art offers it certain beautiful forms through which it may realize that energy. It is a theory that has never been put forward before, but it is extremely fruitful, an throws an entirely new light upon the history of Art...The final revelation is that Lying, the telling of beautiful untrue things, is the proper aim of Art. (Wilde 992)
Michel Foucault  
(1926-1984)  
French historian and philosopher  
Excerpts from “What Is Enlightenment?”

... I wonder whether we may not envisage modernity rather as an attitude than as a period of history. And by “attitude,” I mean a mode of relating to contemporary reality; a voluntary choice made by certain people; in the end, a way of thinking and feeling; a way, too, of acting and behaving that at one and the same time marks a relation of belonging and presents itself as a task. A bit, no doubt, like what the Greeks called an ethos. (Foucault 39)
Excerpts from “What Is Enlightenment?”

Modernity is often characterized in terms of consciousness of the discontinuity of time: a break with tradition, a feeling of novelty, of vertigo in the face of the passing moment. And this is indeed what Baudelaire seems to be saying when he defines modernity as “the ephemeral, the fleeting, the contingent.” But, for him, being modern does not lie in recognizing and accepting this perpetual movement; on the contrary, it lies in adopting a certain attitude with respect to this movement; and this deliberate, difficult attitude consists in recapturing something eternal that is not beyond the present instant, nor behind it, but within it. Modernity is distinct from fashion, which does no more than call into question the course of time; modernity is the attitude that makes it possible to grasp the “heroic” aspect of the present moment. Modernity is not a phenomenon of sensitivity to the fleeting present; it is the will to “heroize” the present. (Foucault 40)
Excerpts from “What Is Enlightenment?”

This heroization is ironical, needless to say. The attitude of modernity does not try to treat the passing moment as sacred in order to try and maintain or perpetuate it . . . For the attitude of modernity, the high value of the present is indissociable from a desperate eagerness to imagine it, to imagine it otherwise than it is, and to transform it not by destroying it but by grasping it in what it is. Baudelairean modernity is an exercise in which extreme attention to what is real is confronted with the practices of a liberty that simultaneously respects this reality and violates it. . . [I]t is also a mode of relationship that has to be established with oneself. The deliberate attitude of modernity is tied to an indispensable asceticism. To be modern is not to accept oneself as one is in the flux of passing moments; it is to take oneself as a complex and difficult elaboration: what Baudelaire, in the vocabulary of his day, calls dandysme . . . Modern man, for Baudelaire, is not the man who goes off to discover himself, his secrets and his hidden truth; he is the man who tries to invent himself. This modernity does not “liberate man in his own being”; it compels him to face the task of producing himself. (Foucault 40-2)
Excerpts from “What Is Enlightenment?”

Let me add just one final word. This ironic heroization of the present, this transfiguring play of freedom with reality, this ascetic elaboration of the self—Baudelaire does not imagine that these have any place in society itself, or in the body politic. They can only be produce in another, a different place, which Baudelaire calls art. (Foucault 42)
Can we really distinguish between the body politic, “the place of society,” and the space of art?

Is there actually a meaningful distinction between bourgeois values and the values of the bohemian artist? Or is there another type emerging in the early twentieth century, the “bourgeois bohemian”?

Can the artistic subject “self-fashion” a heroic existence outside of the forces of history?