

Foreword to Issue 3: Modern

JAMES BLOOM
Muhlenberg College

Foreword to Issue 3, Modern, Wings of Fire, 2024.

Bloom, James. 2024. "Foreword to Issue 3: Modern," *Wings of Fire*. Volume 2, No. 1.

In 1983, U.S. Poet Laureate-to-be W.S. Merwin asked his readers, "[What Is Modern?](#)" (note 1): a question that has remained unanswered but repeatedly raised over the course of the past three centuries. Crossing both genre boundaries and national boundaries, the *Modern CUE* of Fall, 2023 revisited this question by examining writing by both renowned "modernist" writers along with less well-known modern writers. As part of a "culminating" intellectual "experience" required of English majors, our conversations and writing projects also addressed encompassing questions about literary generations and cultural "movements" (modernism, realism, romanticism, New Criticism, etc.).

Merwin's question "What Is Modern?" spotlighted the ambiguities and the elasticity of the adjective "modern." Both in academia and among nonaffiliated culturati the adjective "modern" has become so elastic that historians have felt obliged to subdivide modern between "modern" and "early modern," a period dating to the cusp between Medieval and Renaissance. Philosophers look to the French "cogito ergo sum" sage Rene Descartes and the beginning of the European Enlightenment to mark the launch of modernity, while art historians tend to fast forward to the 1860s when French Impressionists began exhibiting their brushwork in paradigm-shifting landscapes, still lifes, and nudes. A decade or so later, French *Symboliste* poets such as Arthur Rimbaud, Charles Baudelaire, and Paul Verlaine, and English and other European Descendants such as J.K. Huysmans and Oscar Wilde would usher in what academics would – much later – designate "modernism": a flag of convenience under which generations of professors, as well as newspaper and magazine arts writers, have marched into influential careers.

In this CUE, students whose literary studies thrust them into these entrenched ambiguities were afforded numerous opportunities to sort through them. Even if we couldn't resolve, let alone escape them, the seminar alerted senior English majors to recognize the relationship and differences between modern and modernist, modernity and modernism. After reviewing an [overview](#) anthology of this century-and-a-half conversation (note 2), students had the opportunity to articulate their own understandings of the conversation with a close reading exercise focusing on the work of T.S. Eliot, Marianne Moore, Langston Hughes, W.B. Yeats, Wallace Stevens, Thomas Hardy, Countee Cullen, William Carlos Williams, and Robert Frost.

In devoting the rest of the semester to fiction by Richard Wright, Willa Cather, William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, Sherwood Anderson, Virginia Woolf, and Nella Larsen, students worked toward articulating their own original, thoroughly-documented, and thoughtfully-reasoned understandings of relationships between modernity and modernism in a culminating essay in which they revisited Merwin's seminar-framing question. This collection of essays represents a sampling of the work that was produced by the students in that seminar.

Notes

1. Merwin's poem "What Is Modern?" can be found at *The Merwin Conservancy*, linked at:

<https://merwinconservancy.org/2012/01/what-is-modern-by-w-s-merwin/>

2. The 2023 syllabus entitled *Modern Modernist Modernity Modernism* can be found at:

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/176Vp7oCdjvWuKWTPbLm6ZlISIlx1Bexb6PpqG0qgC9M/edit>.