

Peter Howarth



The Cambridge **Introduction** to

Modernist Poetry

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*The Cambridge Introduction to
Modernist Poetry*

Modernist poems are some of the twentieth century's major cultural achievements, but they are also hard work to read. This wide-ranging introduction takes readers through modernism's most famous poems and some of its forgotten highlights to show why modernists thought difficulty and disorientation essential for poetry in the modern world. In-depth chapters on Pound, Eliot, Yeats and the American modernists outline how formal experiments take on the new world of mass media, democracies, total war and changing religious belief. Chapters on the avant-gardes and later modernism examine how their styles shift as they try to re-make the community of readers. Howarth explains in a clear and enjoyable way how to approach the forms, politics and cultural strategies of modernist poetry in English.

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The Cambridge Introduction to Modernist Poetry

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For Lizzie and Isaac

Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>page</i> x
Chapter 1 Why write like this?	1
Why write like this?	1
Oppositions and unities	5
Fragments/Unity	6
Inner-driven/Outer-driven	7
Individual/Collective	8
Present/Past	8
Ends/Means	9
Modernist style and modern society	10
The individual <i>and</i> the collective	16
War	18
Séances	19
City	21
Adverts and newspapers	22
Technology and recording	23
Modernism and enchantment	26
Conclusion	31
Chapter 2 Ezra Pound	33
Poetry and politics	33
The anthologist as selector	36
The anthologist as compiler	41
The anthologist as teacher	45
<i>The Cantos</i>	50
Where did it all go wrong?	54

Chapter 3 T. S. Eliot	57
The paradoxes of self and world	57
Eliot's early criticism	62
<i>The Waste Land</i>	68
Eliot's later criticism	73
Eliot's Christianity	77
Chapter 4 W. B. Yeats	82
Love and conflict	82
The occult poet	85
The dynamic union of opposites	87
Poets remake mankind	91
Yeats's times	95
Chapter 5 Modernist America: Williams, Stevens, Moore	104
Modernism and America: Whitman and Crane	104
William Carlos Williams	110
Marianne Moore	121
Wallace Stevens	129
Chapter 6 Avant-gardisms: Mina Loy, Gertrude Stein, H. D.	141
The culture of the avant-gardes	141
The minority, the masses and the manifesto	142
Mina Loy and Futurism	147
Gertrude Stein	153
H. D.	158
Chapter 7 Why is it so difficult?	166
Modernism and difficulty	166
... because ordinary life is wrong	170
... because difficulty does art's job	171
... because it's good for you	173
... because it's a way into the elite	176

Adorno's argument	180
Difficulty and diversity	183
Chapter 8 Inside and outside modernism	185
The changing cast of modernism	185
Inside and outside modernism	188
When modernism is impossible	191
Harlem Renaissance	191
War poetry	195
Modernism and the left	197
Documentary modernism	199
Zukofsky and the Objectivists	202
Marginalised modernism: Bunting and Niedecker	209
When did modernism end?	214
<i>Notes</i>	223
<i>Index</i>	247

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Chapter 1

Why write like this?

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Oppositions and unities	5
Modernist style and modern society	10
The individual <i>and</i> the collective	16
Modernism and enchantment	26
Conclusion	31

Why write like this?

Imagine yourself, three or four generations younger, walking along Devonshire Street in London on a warm July evening in 1920, and passing Harold Monro's Poetry Bookshop. You were trying to find a shortcut to King's Cross station, perhaps, but you fear you may have gone the wrong way: the street is narrow and rather dirty, with shrieks from small, poor Italian children running a hoop on the pavement. Ahead, an ex-soldier with a missing leg is limping towards you. You realise he is going to ask, shamefacedly, for money, like so many in London now; to avoid refusing him, you turn abruptly into the bookshop itself. Inside, it is quieter, and smells of beeswax from the carved wooden shelves and seats, relics of that brief pre-war fashion for peasant arts in which the shop began, and now looking heavy and a bit tired. On display are various recent publications, including one of the bookshop's in-house anthologies, *Georgian Poetry 1918–19*. You flip through and your eye is caught by some poems by a Siegfried Sassoon, whose name you vaguely remember in connection with some fuss caused by his letter to *The Times* a few years back denouncing the war as an exercise in arms profiteering. Well, perhaps he was right, you think, hearing the soldier shuffle past the bookshop window. Sassoon's poems include some brisk little satires in pretty up-to-date language, and you wonder whether to buy them; you are no philistine, after all, and the anthology seems a good-value way to catch up with what's been happening to modern poetry, as well as to atone for not giving to the soldier. As you move to the counter, however,

your eye is caught by a small pamphlet covered in what looks like Christmas wrapping paper. You open it. *Paris: A Poem* by Hope Mirrlees, published by the Hogarth Press not far away in Mecklenburgh Square. But *Paris* does not appear to be a poem at all. It is more like the page of a notebook; scraps of phrases, a shopping list, memos in some private language, Métro stations:

I want a holophrase

NORD-SUD
 ZIG-ZAG
 LION NOIR
 CACAO BLOOKER

Black-figured vases in Etruscan tombs

RUE DU BAC (DUBONNET)
 SOLFERINO (DUBONNET)
 CHAMBRE DES DEPUTES

Brekekekek coax coax we are passing under the Seine

DUBONNET

The Scarlet Woman shouting BYRRH and deafening
 St John at Patmos.¹

What kind of poem is it? It doesn't rhyme. It's not in regular metre. It doesn't seem to be a poet speaking noble ideas. It's not telling you *about* anything, particularly. The 'St' has been inserted in ink: evidently the poem's crazy typography baffled Hogarth's own proof-reader, never mind its ordinary readers. It's in two, no *three* languages, as your grammar-school education dimly recalls the chorus 'Brekekekek' from Aristophanes' ancient comedy, *The Frogs*. But what are Aristophanes and Etruscan vases doing alongside Blooker's cocoa, or Lion Noir shoe-polish, or French liqueurs, or St John deafened by the Whore of Babylon, who is now reduced to selling another liqueur? It doesn't move you in any way, or lead you to any deeper thought. It all seems rather precious compared to Sassoon. You flip through. There are street signs in capitals; copies of plaques on famous people's houses, some bars of music and one section where the lines are only one letter wide. Jottings about the Virgin Mary, carnivals and spring. It must be some continental art-as-nonsense clique, probably, like those 'Futurists' and their music-hall stunts before the war. You pay for your *Georgian Poetry* and, picking your way past the invalids in Queen Square, come with relief upon Russell Square tube station. As you wait on the platform down below, though, a thought strikes you. *Undergrounds*. The Paris Métro's

Nord–Sud line. Etruscan tombs. The shopping list is the adverts you see in motion as the underground train rattles on. Blackness in the dark, or in ‘Lion Noir’ shoe polish. And the Frogs . . . didn’t they sing their song in the underworld, where Dionysos the god went to bring the poet Euripides back, so he could write new poems and stop Athens from continuing a crazy war? Maybe *Paris* wasn’t all nonsense. But if Hope Mirrlees wanted to write poems to stop wars, she was going about it in an odd way. Why not just say it straight, like Sassoon? Why on earth would anyone want to write like this?

This chapter, and this book, are about that question. Not just about Hope Mirrlees, of course, but the modernist poetry *Paris: A Poem* now seems to stand for: the cut-up phrases, the lack of syntax, the unclear references, the zipping between an ancient past and modern present, the difficulty and the tiny sales. What was it about this way of making poems which struck so many English-language poets as artistically necessary? Obviously, the answers will vary from poet to poet, for modernism was not a single collective movement with an artistic manifesto and a membership subscription. Little cells like the Futurists or the Vorticists tried to make it that way, but they continually fell out with each other, and their manifestos notoriously differ from the actual art. Nor does every modernist poem contain a tick-list of approved stylistic features, for one of modernism’s fundamentals was that the poet’s style should come from the nature of what it explores: ‘a man’s rhythm must be interpretative’, wrote Ezra Pound in 1912, for only then will it be ‘his own, uncounterfeiting, uncounterfeitable.’² But that desire for a unique rhythm is a very modernist one, one of the habits of thinking which are visible across a number of modernist poets, movements and groups, no matter how much they disagreed with one another or insisted on their freedoms.

Using the word ‘modernist’ to describe this emerging cluster of habits, styles, attitudes and beliefs, however, means that this book will not be calling every poet who wrote between 1900 and 1945 a modernist. Applying ‘modernist’ as a period term like ‘Victorian’ has become popular recently, because it gives a claim to equal treatment for many writers pushed off the poetic map by a mid-century belief that Eliot or Pound’s sort of poetry was the only sort adequate to modernity, a belief Eliot and Pound had done a good deal to encourage. Calling everyone in a set period a modernist, however, can’t register the acute stylistic controversy that Mirrlees’s type of poem meant in the 1920s and 1930s, and how it set one group of poets against many other rivals.³ Nor can it explain why there is a good deal more continuity between *Paris* and, say, the techniques of Roy Fisher’s poem *A Furnace* about Birmingham in the 1980s than between Mirrlees and many of her contemporaries. Making a distinction between a ‘modernist’ like Mirrlees and ‘modern’ poets like Sassoon, on the other hand,

has the advantage of recognising how much Eliot's or Pound's poetics were only partly possible or interesting for other poets who had to face the same modernity as they did. My final chapter will ask why so many good poets didn't follow their experiments.

Even used as a stylistic term, however, 'modernism' has its own difficulties. It's a label first given to the poets by American and English critics in the 1920s rather than a term the poets themselves devised, and it has to cover a very wide range of poetic forms, from the avant-garde sound-poetry of a Kurt Schwitters to the frigid hymn-forms of 'Mr Eliot's Sunday Morning Service'. It has even been suggested we should talk about modernisms in the plural, because the modernist groups from Moscow or Berlin or New York have such varying priorities.⁴ But they are all still kinds of modernism, so perhaps the best analogy is to see modernism as an umbrella term like jazz: a recognisable genre of music which emerged among various artists who found themselves part of a growing 'movement', rather than being invented singlehandedly at one time or place. Like jazz, it has different but related sub-genres within it (Futurism, Imagism, Objectivism, Surrealism and many others), some intense internal rivalries (William Carlos Williams vs. Eliot, say, or Futurism vs. Pound) and much creative fusion with other art forms, which in turn generate lots of controversy between different keepers of the flame about what's really jazz, or modernism, and what isn't. As with jazz, too, many years of academic study makes some of its features clearer than they would have been at the time; the similarities between artists who were only dimly aware of each others' work, for example, or the gradual formation of ideas and allegiances which promoted poets such as Eliot and Pound, and sidelined others, such as Mina Loy or H. D. That overview, in fact, is what restores *Paris: A Poem* to us, for it dropped off every cultural radar screen shortly after its appearance, and was for a long time afterwards suppressed for its blasphemy by Mirrlees herself after her conversion to Roman Catholicism. Only with the benefit of scholarship and ninety years' hindsight does its significance emerge, in ways Mirrlees could not have suspected when she wrote it. It is a rare example of a direct connection between English-language poetry and the Parisian avant-garde of Guillaume Apollinaire, Blaise Cendrars and others. It is a female precursor to much more famous poems such as *The Waste Land* by T. S. Eliot, or Ezra Pound's *Cantos*, with their experimental collage of underworlds, wars, empire, modern urban life and ancient religion. And in being forgotten, it also embodies much of the cultural history of modernist poets who disappeared because they were unable to professionalise themselves as writers and critics, in the way that Eliot and Pound could. If you *had* bought Mirrlees's slim booklet, in other words, you would have been buying a fair slice of what was going to be modernism.

Oppositions and unities

In terms of style, though, perhaps the most essential feature of *Paris: A Poem* is that it resists the kind of synoptic, detached overview you probably bought this book for. An ‘overview’ implies that poems are like objects, spread out before us for contrast and comparison. But the experience of actually reading a lot of modernist poetry is more like an immersion, where there is no longer a clear distance between what you are seeing and the position you are invited to see it from. Things are being said, but it’s not clear who is saying them, or why they matter. Grammatically, it is often uncertain who is the subject and what is the object, or what is a main clause and what a subclause, and without knowing these things your mind cannot place or frame the scene, and has to keep a number of phrases in suspension without knowing which will be the central one. Since your working memory can only keep a few unattached lines in play at once, reading is tiring and makes you uncomfortably aware that meanings are always shooting past or being buried. Being unable to find a narrative framework or a sense of scale, you are also unable to predict what is going to come next, and what is going to be important. On the first page of *Paris*, for instance, is the term ‘Zig-Zag’, which was an advert for a type of cigarette paper. At first, the term seems to be a poster which an imaginary traveller is seeing, a remnant of a sentence that once went ‘As I sit on the Nord–Sud Métro line, a poster slides before my eyes, which says, “Zig-Zag”.’ After a few pages more of *Paris*, though, it becomes clearer that ‘Zig-Zag’ is also what the poem’s narrative is doing, telling you about a zig-zag journey across Paris, and switching rapidly from open perception to reflection to memory. Without that framing sentence, ‘Zig-Zag’ is freed to be an object seen and a metaphor for the subjective process of how it’s being seen; at once a noun, a command and an adjective.

The phrase ‘Nord–Sud’ on the first page of *Paris: A Poem* suggests a useful visual parallel for these rapid changes of perspective opened up by the absence of normal syntax. It’s the name of the Métro line on which the stations occur, but it’s also the name of a painting by Mirrlees’s acquaintance in Paris, the Futurist Gino Severini (on the cover of this book). What modernist poems do for syntax, modernist painting does for perspective. Normal ‘realist’ perspective has a vanishing point, a centre on which all the sightlines of the painting converge. It coordinates foreground and background and helps distinguish any figures from the backdrop they stand against. By arranging the elements within the picture along these sightlines, perspective also designates a place for the viewer outside the picture. In Severini’s picture, though, there is no single vanishing point, and the figures in the foreground are not clearly separated

from the signs and posters around them. The passengers, the words and the stations they are moving through seem to overlap and penetrate one another, and, as it moves between them, the eye finds itself in the *middle* of a number of incompatible possibilities of perspective. This sense of immersion is central to Futurism; Severini's aim, in fact, was to 'put the spectator in the centre of the picture'.⁵ By losing the perspectival grid on which each item is placed and swirling between signs, figures and lights, Severini also gains an intense effect of simultaneity, the stylisation of speed which Futurist art thought the source of all vitality. Certainly, this is an effective way to simulate the disorienting experience of modern rapid transit, but there was more to it than that, as Severini told readers of London's *Daily Express*:

A picture will no longer be the faithful reproduction of a scene, enclosed in a window frame, but the realization of a complex view of life or of things that live in space. What I call the perception of an object in space is the result of the memory of the object itself, of the experience of our mind of that object in its different aspects.⁶

The speed of the Métro has worked its way into the mental processing of the artist himself, so that what we see is his layers of memory and emotions about the subway, a memory whose inmost processes seem charged with the city's dynamism. Without a 'frame', what is being seen, and the way it is being seen, are parts of one reality; inside and outside, subject and object, have become continuous. Or as the *Express* headline writer put it, 'Get Inside the Picture'.

But though Mirrlees's poem and Severini's picture are both trying to immerse their reader in the artwork, this is also what most readers find difficult and off-putting, and it is because our ordinary sense of life and language relies on the distinctions between 'I' and 'you', 'here' and 'there' that these artworks are troubling. If we probe that experience of bewilderment a little further, there are several other oppositions we normally make which turn out no longer to be opposites in this poem.

Fragments/Unity

On the one hand, the collapse of syntax or perspective means both poem and picture are composed of disorganised fragments. Mirrlees's word 'holophrase' means a single organising word that denotes a longer phrase or complex of ideas, and the poem starts by both desiring and lacking this kind of instant connective power. Without syntax to restrict the fragments' meaning to their immediate context, on the other hand, they can now connect to each other in multiple and unexpected ways: not only through the theme of undergrounds and underworlds in Mirrlees's opening page, for instance, but in the covert links

of empire that bind lions, cocoa, the Algerian soldier whose face advertised Zig-Zag, and the tyrannical empire St John saw personified in the Scarlet Woman. Although the poem is full of separate elements, its power to suggest connections is increased, because the usual distinctions between important and unimportant or centre and margin cease to matter, just as culturally Mirrlees happily mixes sacred texts and street signs. Since the fragments are not absorbed as a subcomponent of any narrative masterplot, a detail at one point of the poem finds its counterpart with another far distant, and draws their different situations together. As you go through *Paris*, for instance, the Algerian head of the poster for 'Zig-Zag' links to the 'algerian tobacco' smell of the boulevards (198), then to an evening in the 'Algerian desert' where the Koran is being chanted while Parisians read their evening papers (395) and the 'algerian tobacco' smoked by poet Paul Verlaine on his all-night café jags (434). Connecting Paris and Algeria together, Mirrlees discreetly makes her own North–South line between a colonial outpost and the heart of the nation's artistic and cultural fabric, so that peripherals turn out to be at the centre. The fragment's power to express isolation *and* to dissolve centre/margin distinctions would come to matter for modernist poets exiled or excluded by gender, race or nationality.

Inner-driven/Outer-driven

The formal organisation of poems like this owe little to conventions of genre, metre or rhyme. The new writers of free verse insisted that the lines' lengths and sounds must come from within the nature of the content, not from any pre-set formal arrangement. At the same time, *Paris* is an amazingly outward-facing poem, as if that lack of formal verse-frames opens the poem to the non-poetic life around it. Mirrlees anticipates much of the cut-and-paste techniques of modernist poetry by layering in real adverts and fragments of conversation, as if her poem were recording and replaying the latent poetry of the city itself. As the title of *Paris: A Poem* suggests, it is a poem about Paris and a poem which finds Paris to be a poem, and itself only a part of it – part of the inside/outside reversal also visible in Severini's picture. Consequently, the casual and ephemeral encountered in the process of her journey become carriers of intense meaning while retaining some of their haphazard and unpoetic quality. At lines 149 and 157, for instance, a series of adverts and café scenes are interrupted by the phrase '*Messieursetdames*'. It's not clear why, until line 190 when the poem shifts into continuous prose:

And petites bourgeois with tight lips and strident voices are counting out the change and saying *Messieursetdames* and their hearts are the ruined province of Picardie . . .

It's as if the poet's ears have previously been simply taking in the sound without actually processing the war widows shaking their collecting tins. Like a recording or a photograph, everything in the field has been picked up without discrimination, unlike the constant work of selection and framing that goes on in portrait-painting or ordinary narrative. But by being now held in the context of the whole poem about Paris in the spring, the widows' whiny 'ladiesandgentlemen' gets a new resonance from the other moments of fertility in the poem: the 'golden chrysalids' of the poplar buds (128), the Peace Carnival taking place as the Treaty of Versailles was being worked out (210) and the festivals of of Easter and May Day (235), as Persephone or Christ come up from underground after the endless dying of the war. Spring is the undercurrent which galvanises the myriad separate happenings of the city, and the poem's organisation has the peculiar power of making a unique order visible by exposing itself to the disordered.

Individual/Collective

For related reasons, modernist artists often paint themselves as vehement individualists *and* conduits for a new form of group life, having what Pound called 'mediumistic properties'.⁷ They may make intensely original poems by assembling quotations from other people (like Marianne Moore, Pound, Eliot or Muriel Rukeyser), by adapting traditional forms (like Yeats), or by blurring the distinction between artist and audience (like the Dadaists or, in another way, Wallace Stevens). Mirrlees's poem is both the record of an individual journey through Paris, and a trance-like absorption by the collective life of the city; she is shaper and shaped, active and passive. The poem is dedicated to 'Notre Dame de Paris', and her idea of making the multifarious life of the city into a kind of goddess may stem from her acquaintance with Jules Romains, the poet who founded a community and a poetic based on *Unanimisme*, the belief that collective entities, like cities and streets, have souls. Modern poets, to Romains, must 'dig deep enough in our being, emptying it of individual reveries, dig enough little canals so that the souls of the groups will flow of necessity into us'. To Jane Harrison, Mirrlees's companion and muse, *Unanimisme* cultivated 'the stream of life in ceaseless change, yet uninterrupted unity . . . the oneness of life lived together in groups . . . the value of each individual manifestation of life, and the strange new joy and even ecstasy that comes of human sympathy'.⁸

Present/Past

Avoiding syntax through paratactic piling up of clauses, or simply writing enormously long works like *The Cantos*, modernist style frequently creates

a feeling of continuous, simultaneous time. Its unpredictable forms, non-syntactic sentences and constant new thought prevent you from predicting what will happen next, or from easily sorting out what you have read into your memory, so that reading it becomes a continuous experience of the now, or what Gertrude Stein would call the ‘continuous present’.⁹ Modernism is often vaguely thought about as a movement trying to ‘make it new’, the title of one of Ezra Pound’s books. But what Pound meant was making the past ever-new, rather than leaving it behind, for he thought ‘all ages are contemporaneous’ in poetry.¹⁰ As Severini’s picture made his own memory part of the picture’s simultaneity, so Mirrlees’s poem also mingles different times into a continual present happening. When she mentions the ‘Champs Elysées’, for example, the street becomes the original Elysian fields where classical myth believed the blessed dead live:

Paradise cannot hold for long the famous dead of Paris . . .
There are les Champs Elysées!

Sainte-Beuve, a tight bouquet in his hand for Madame Victor-Hugo,
Passes on the Pont-Neuf the duc de la Rochefoucauld

With a superbly leisurely gait
Making for the *salon d’automne*
Of Madame de Lafayette;

They cannot see each other. (ll. 367–74)

But in our modernist present, we can see them all, and Mirrlees’s sense of living among simultaneous times would be central to Eliot’s *The Waste Land* and Pound’s method in the *Cantos*. Even Futurism, which took its name from rejecting enslavement to the art of the past, claimed that its ‘absolute dynamism’ of the pure present was to be attained ‘THROUGH THE INTERPENETRATION OF DIFFERENT ATMOSPHERES AND TIMES’.¹¹

Ends/Means

Without an obvious genre or formal pattern, no element in the work is there as just a means – either to fulfil someone’s expectations, as a genre does, or to fulfil the requirements of a metrical pattern decided before the poem came into being, like a sonnet. And lacking an obvious, easily definable ‘meaning’, no element is there to serve some pre-decided concept, or illustrate a recognised moral truth. Instead, the fragments signify in many different directions and on many levels of discourse at once (as with ‘Zig-Zag’), and what the poem means is made much more obviously dependent on its peculiarly simultaneous combinations of words and sounds. By being unsummarisable,

in other words, the poem's means *are* its ends. Indeed, modernism's interest in the unconscious, in found materials, or, later on, process-based devices of composition (like Louis Zukofsky and Moore) are all ways for the artist to be *surprised* by their art coming into being, to keep the poem from being merely the means or passive vehicle for the artist's design. We might also describe this as a different relation of mind and body: this is not a poem that starts with a disembodied concept which Mirrlees then illustrates with concrete examples, or decorates with rhyme and metre. As free verse, its sense and its timing are as one; as a zig-zag poem, the mind which decides on ideas, ends and goals is not allowed to direct the body's progress through the city, nor to pre-filter the sights and sounds that will be picked up en route.

Modernist poems can be about many things, in other words, but they typically create an imaginary space where certain basic oppositions that structure normal life are not in place. Why did so many modernist poets feel that poetry had to be written this way?

Modernist style and modern society

The broadest answer is that many felt there was something badly unbalanced about 'normal' life itself, if by normal we mean industrialised, Western modernity, with its timetables, empires, machines, bureaucracies and banks. Despite the 'modern' in 'modernism', a good number of its artists felt contemporary civilisation was a recipe for personal and social disintegration, which is why the new art had to upset the status quo. Advanced industrial economies had minutely specialised people's jobs and rewarded only rational calculation; the result, to William Carlos Williams, was a world of lonely, repressed souls:

There are no men – but only pity, a desperate, dejected, defeated crowd – sometimes of almost saints . . . Science. Philosophy. Hundreds of years building to keep life from its impacts. Jealousy. Hatred of each other. Defeat. To hedge life. To hold it in bounds. Guard your wife. Guard your money. Learn, but do not touch . . . a gross bar between [us and] life, such as a Greek slave had – we supposed.¹²

With the divorce of mind and body in a rationalised culture ('learn, but do not touch') come individuals self-protective to the core, unable to know what they feel, or to feel for anyone else: the anonymous crowd and the petty

individual are both aspects of the same problem. To the second-generation modernist David Jones, it was a society where ends dominated means:

The technocracy in which we live is of its nature concerned with the purely utile, with what functions. This of necessity demands a preoccupation with the analytical, with formulae that have as their end the furthering of devices that serve a definable purpose and are in no sense made of signa as something other than themselves.¹³

Jones felt this left the arts with no place. For Yeats, modernity meant ‘externality in life and thought and Art’, where a society obsessed with material success wanted an art of only the correct and the obvious, and failed to engage the inner imagination.¹⁴ Many modernists feared the growth of bureaucracy as a symptom of this divorce of the inner from outer. Soldiering, the empire or ever-larger systems of education, health and welfare had created systems indifferent to individual differences, sometimes all too successfully. ‘The majority of men are first of all government officials, or pillars of the church, or trade unionists, or poets, or unemployed’, complains Eliot’s character ‘Eeldrop’, and ‘this cataloguing is not only satisfactory to others for practical purposes, it is sufficient to themselves for their “life of the spirit.” Many are not quite real at any moment.’¹⁵ Pound joined the Italian Fascist movement because he was convinced that his heroes Jefferson and Mussolini both ‘hate machinery or at any rate the idea of cooping up men and making ’em all into UNITS, unit production, denting in the individual man, reducing him to a mere amalgam’.¹⁶ The political consequence of a homogenising culture driven by exterior ends, thought Mina Loy, was ‘that travesty of man; the *Dummy Public* originated by the Press, financed by the Capitalist’.¹⁷ Finance, business and the media had ceased to be servants of the common good, by turning newly enfranchised citizens into customers through the clichés of advertising, mass-market literature or journalism; ‘the ideal of all modern prose’, thought the Imagist T. E. Hulme, is ‘to pass to conclusions without thinking’.¹⁸ Newspapers sold passing fantasies or the propaganda of the status quo. Art and literature, on the other hand, could say nothing because they were kept locked in the past by nervous publishers. Eliot summed up a lot of modernist irritation when he complained that ‘England puts her Great Writers away securely in a Safe Deposit Vault, and curls to sleep like Fafner’, the dragon in Wagner’s *Ring* cycle; turning poets into national treasures was, after all, what you might expect from a nation run by its banks.¹⁹ For all the differences in their political responses, many modernist poets agreed that contemporary civilisation was a culture of emotional repression, social atomisation and one-size-fits-all thinking in business, government and the arts. The task for modernist poetry was to re-harmonise minds and

bodies or means and ends, and reawaken in its readers a sense of what freedom and wholeness would feel like.

This hasty sketch does not imply, however, that the modernist poets observed their society neutrally and were moved to write poetry as a response. Their analysis of the damage caused by modern civilisation and the healing role of art belongs to a tradition, a tradition that comes as much from within the theory of art as sociology, and which began long before the modernists. When we speak of the origins of modernist poetry, it is usual to mention T. E. Hulme's Poet's Club and Secession Club, two small circles meeting in London in 1908 and 1909 to experiment with very short poems in free forms, in reaction to the pompous, imperial stuffiness of Edwardian verse. They formed the nucleus of what became the Imagists, whose anthology *Des Imagistes* was launched on an unsuspecting public by Ezra Pound in 1912. But as Hulme's 'A Lecture on Modern Poetry' (1911) illustrates, they were updating and adapting the free verse and disjunctive syntax of the nineteenth-century French Symbolists such as Stéphane Mallarmé, Paul Verlaine and Arthur Rimbaud, whose evocative, opaque technique was originally a search for mystical spiritual unity in reaction to the materialist, stratified culture fostered by French royalty after the traumatic Franco-Prussian war and the Paris Commune.²⁰ Yeats's search for a mystical Irish nationalism in opposition to English finance culture was directly fostered by his Symbolist reading. Others look back further to the defensive ironies of Charles Baudelaire's elegant poems about the crowds of Paris in the 1850s – a tremendous influence on T. S. Eliot – or to Edgar Allan Poe's idea that poetry had to be as compressed as possible if it was to hold the modern reader's attention in the world of newspapers.²¹ All these are important moments. But the call for artistic form to create an undivided experience in the fragmented modern world was first expressed by the German poet and critic Friedrich Schiller, in his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* of 1795, and the stakes for modernist poetry are so clearly outlined there that it bears a little quotation.

Schiller argued that that modern civilisation produced people who could never live freely together, because they were damaged by industrial modernity:

A mechanical kind of collective life ensued. State and Church, laws and customs, were now torn asunder: enjoyment was torn from labour, the means from the end, effort from reward. Everlastingly chained to a single little fragment of the Whole, man develops into nothing but a fragment . . . he never develops the harmony of his being, and instead of putting the stamp of humanity upon his own nature, he becomes nothing more than the imprint of his occupation or of his specialized knowledge.²²

Art's job is then to bring our individual and social natures back into harmony, a harmony which rests on Schiller's belief that the integration of our sensing bodies and our free mind / spirit as we read poetry will help us imagine the reharmonisation of the means with the end, the part with the whole, and the people with the government:

Taste alone brings harmony into society, because it fosters harmony in the individual. All other forms of perception divide man, because they are founded exclusively either upon the sensuous or the spiritual part of his being; only the aesthetic mode of perception makes of him a whole, because both his natures must be in harmony if he is to achieve it . . . only the aesthetic mode of communication unites society, because it relates to that which is common to all.²³

In search of social unity, Schiller here makes a manoeuvre which would be vital for modernism. Art is about achieving a perfect balance of forces (mind / body, active / passive, change / permanence, form / content, emotion / reason), in distinction from a world which is all out of balance. But that inner balance is dependent on art including 'that which is common to all'. For poetry to be an experience of perfect wholeness and balance, in other words, it cannot maintain permanently imbalanced relations with the society in which it operates. Art 'does not reside in the exclusion of certain realities, but in the absolute inclusion of all realities', declares Schiller, pointedly; it 'has no limits because it embraces all reality'.²⁴ So art's job is ultimately to bring the world into its balance too, although it is a balance which is never definitively accomplished, one which we have to keep on re-experiencing. Schiller's word for this moment of always-open possibility in our experience of art is 'play', and by play alone we are made whole:

Every other way of exercising its functions endows the psyche with some special aptitude – but only at the cost of some special limitation; the aesthetic alone leads to the absence of all limitation.²⁵

Such play also corresponds to the ideal political arrangement:

No privilege, no autocracy of any kind, is tolerated where taste rules, and the realm of aesthetic semblance extends its sway . . . In the Aesthetic State, everything – even the tool which serves – is a free citizen, having equal rights with the noblest.²⁶

Schiller's connection between art and social unity became a foundational element in the German tradition of aesthetics which reappears, despite severe criticism, in the modernist 'Frankfurt School' critics Walter Benjamin and

Theodor Adorno. But his idea that the 'living form' of art is a means to the reconciliation of the private individual and the forms of the state became far more widespread than that, through its adaptations by Coleridge and Arnold in Britain, Emerson in the United States and Flaubert in France, although Schiller's name was often forgotten in the English-language world.²⁷ It is behind the development of public museums, state funding for the arts, and English literature degrees in the nineteenth century, as well as the pedagogy of the first teachers of modernist poetry in England, I. A. Richards and F. R. Leavis.²⁸ While Schiller's implication that art should influence the social conditions of its production was picked up by the Arts and Crafts movement and the Bauhaus, a rather strangled version of his ideas also lies behind the abstract, medieval and spiritualised vocabulary of much late nineteenth-century poetry, making art's wholeness a retreat from the world rather than the inspiration to change it which Schiller had hoped for. Through the writings of Herbert Marcuse and others, however, Schiller's call for an organic communal life that would harmonise intellectual and manual labour would again be an inspiration for the counter-cultures of the 1960s and the revolutionaries of May 1968.²⁹ And it was modernist art which would first reinvent this nexus of art and life for the twentieth century, because their experimental forms enact the kind of experience Schiller wanted people to have from art in a dynamic new way.

Most obviously, poems without an organising hierarchy dispense with 'privilege' and 'autocracy of any kind', for their fragments are connected without being used as tools to fulfil a prearranged order, or as means to any end. The Dadaists took this to one extreme by creating poems spontaneously in collaboration with the audience or using games of chance. But the same goal is at work in all opaque modernist poems where the meaning itself is kept in constant, unfinished play. Another 'autocracy' is that of the author's own 'I', and Marianne Moore's or T. S. Eliot's poems made from quotations try to merge the author's intentions and other people's voices. For Yeats, too, poetry required liberation from the artist's conscious will through meditation on symbols, while for Surrealist inheritors of those occult techniques, poetry began with 'psychic automatism', the imagination liberated from the repressions of the Ego in dreams or automatic writing.³⁰ Writing one of the first summaries of what was new about modernism, Robert Graves concluded that bad poetry is 'the science of poem-coercion rather than the art of poem-appreciation' and that modernist 'authorship is not a matter of the right use of the will but of an enlightened withdrawal of the will to make room for a new one'.³¹

Modernist style is also meant to harmonise the mind and the body, for its free rhythms are necessarily moving with their mental content, just as avant-garde experiments with visual layout such as Mirrlees's *Paris* or Cendrars's

Prose du Transibérien re-integrate ear and eye. Refusing to write to a theme – like Marianne Moore in poems whose titles are actually only parts of their opening sentence – is another aspect of the same unity, because the poem isn't being structured by any purely mental idea or moral lesson; what it means and the way that meaning unfolds in the sounds and the spacing are the same thing. Poetry, said Pound, can never merely be 'the vehicle . . . the ox-cart and post-chaise for transmitting thoughts poetic or otherwise'.³²

But Schiller's influence perhaps showed through most deeply in the way modernists were convinced that these unique, independent and non-coercive forms were *at the same time* manifestations of a more complete social unity; that their art was involving the society around it. Many of the modernist techniques to diminish the poet's ego or write without concepts had initially been developed by the French Symbolists Mallarmé and Rimbaud as a way to wrest poetry away from the compromises and clichés of the everyday, in the hope of finding a mystical future community. But the modernists adopted these techniques to fuse the poem with its present social context; by incorporating fragments of conversation or junk mail (like Eliot and Moore), by discovering poetry latently at work in the documents and account-books of entire cultures (Pound and Charles Olson), or by writing to a metaphysics in which the poet's imagination is part of the substance of real life (Yeats or Stevens). Rather than just representing the outside world, modernist form sought to make poetic language a new conduit for it, searching for a 'union of the collective and the individual at the point of the immediate conscience', as Eugene Jolas, the editor of the modernist little magazine *transition* put it in a summary of the previous fifteen years of avant-gardist experiment.³³ 'How, in this dreary day, shall a poet attain universality?' Pound had asked early in life, and his paradoxical answer was by being an expert in particulars, for 'the truth is the individual' – but universality was still the aim.³⁴ The Vorticist magazine *Blast* dedicated itself 'TO THE INDIVIDUAL', and claimed it had nothing to do with 'the People', but, on the same page, that it would 'appeal to the fundamental and popular instincts in every class and description of people'.³⁵ 'LET the Universe flow into your consciousness, there is no limit to its capacity, nothing that it shall not re-create', Mina Loy advised the Futurist artist, and the ambiguity about whether 'it' means your consciousness or the Universe was her point.³⁶ Through Surrealism, the 'hidden world' of the unconscious, claimed Hugh Sykes Davies, 'will become part of our common life as human beings, the anti-social will be made social, synthesised with the rest of our existence'.³⁷ William Carlos Williams thought 'the local is the only thing that is universal', and made his own delight in scruffy particulars a claim for poetry's social effect:

The artist, an individual, a worker, the type of person who is creative, who has something to give to society must admit all classes of subject to his attention – even though he hang for it. This is his *work*. Nothing poetic in the feudal, aristocratic sense but a breaking down, rather of those imposed tyrannies over his verse forms. Technical matters, certainly, but most important to an understanding of the poet as a social regenerator.³⁸

That had been Schiller's whole aim in the *Aesthetic Education*, too: unlike all the other forms of life which divide us, art is that which 'consummates the will of the whole through the nature of the individual', and so becomes a training in democratic feeling.³⁹ Notoriously, Pound and Yeats came to feel that this fusion of the individual with the whole could better happen in politics through authoritarian leadership rather than democracy, a paradox Chapters 2 and 4 will explore. But it was exactly because this unity mattered so much to them in poetry that their politics went so badly wrong.

The individual *and* the collective

I have been labouring the point about the immediate unity of individual and collective because it contradicts two commonsensical answers to the question why anyone would write like a modernist. The first one explains the fragmentedness of modernist form as a direct *reflection* of the sense of cultural crisis many intellectuals experienced in the early years of the century. A poem without an obvious order is symptomatic of the madness of the war, the capitalist chaos of the modern city, or the collapse of the dignified idealistic restraint that had held Edwardian society together. Modernist style, on this account, is a seismograph of the violent collapse of civilisation, not an art of true integrity. The second view, by contrast, starts from the basic feeling that most first-time readers get from a poem like *Paris*; that it is difficult, and this difficulty is designed to put off the average reader. Ally this to the modernists' many statements about the difference of poetry from the homogenising of commercial mass culture, their publication in little magazines for a coterie audience and the authoritarian politics of a Pound or a Yeats, and another story seems complete: modernism was the style of a self-appointed elite, and its form is a symbol of their cultural superiority.⁴⁰ On this view, modernist form is seen as a *defence* against modern society, or a compensation for it, and its pretensions to social boundary-breaking are just the self-congratulation of an in-crowd.

Both of these views have some truth to them, but not all of it. As we have seen, the fragmentation of a modernist poem can connect as much as it separates: in Mirrlees, as in Eliot or Pound, each fragment connects to many others across great distances of the poem, and becomes a nodal point between the transient moment and the grandest stories of war or religion. The original theorist of the fragment, the poet-critic Friedrich Schlegel, thought fragments the best way to realise Schiller's idea that aesthetic experience should be limitless, because a chain of separate perceptions would all balance and ironise each other's partial perspectives in 'an endless succession of mirrors'.⁴¹ Making a poem from a collection of heterogeneous fragments rather than a single thought or a situation actually ensures that none of them can be extraneous, because there is no detachable inner core, no 'real meaning' apart from all the elements.

On the other hand, as often as you find modernists longing for more individualism or scorning a faceless *mass* culture, you find the same modernists cultivating what they think will be a more direct relation between the individual and the everybody, and immersing themselves in *popular* culture to do it. Yeats and Pound loved folk-song, Futurists emulated circuses, Dadaists cabaret, and Eliot the music hall because they all thought these arts broke down the protected bourgeois ego for something more genuinely common. Nor did it have to be a culture of art. Poetry must be 'the direct response of the poet's mind to the modern world of varieties in which he finds himself', remarked Mina Loy, for it has to live in the same world as its audience:

You may think it is impossible to conjure up the relationship of expression between the high browest modern poets and an adolescent Slav who has speculated in a wholesale job-lot of mandarines and is trying to sell them in a retail market on First Avenue. But it lies simply in this: both have had to become adapted to a country where the mind has to put on its verbal clothes at terrific speed if it would speak in time; where no one will listen if you attack him twice with the same missile of argument.⁴²

It's not simply that the modernists had to engage in the same marketing techniques as the orange-seller, but that the conditions of the market, its demand for speed and adaptibility, have already affected the style of the poetry itself. As the Dadaist Manifesto of 1918 cheekily put it, 'publicity and business are also poetic elements'.⁴³

Modernist style is not, then, just a symptom of social breakdown or a self-enclosed retreat into difficulty. Rather, we might say its distinctive character,

and some of its political problems, come from trying to be individual and all-embracing *at once*. For this is the paradoxical effect of the modernists' experiments with poetry which adopts no recognisable genres, forms or approved artistic vocabulary. Such freedom allowed the poet to shape the poem according to the nature of her material, and made poems more individual, and often harder to understand. But without the border between art and life which recognised genres create, the style of modernist poetry also became more continuous with social experience than any art before it. 'The windows of my poetry are wide open to the boulevards', as Cendrars put it in 'Contraste'.⁴⁴ 'Syntax', boomed the Futurist leader Marinetti, is an 'intermediary [which] must be suppressed, in order that literature may enter directly into the universe and become one body with it.'⁴⁵ And turning back to Mirrlees's poem, we can see how such modern experiences *pervade* the very style which at first looks so abstract and remote, in ways which the poet's own self-justifications don't always recognise.

War

Mirrlees's poem is written against the backdrop of the 1919 Peace Conference at Versailles, in a city full of returned and demobilised soldiers. Nothing is said about the war itself, and the peace conference is only transiently alluded to. But the war is *the* unavoidable event of the early twentieth century, and its 'perceptual habits' are manifest in the mergers of subject and object, minds and bodies or foreground and background in modernist art.⁴⁶ The 'all-filling screaming' bombardment, 'a consummation of all burstings-out; all sudden up-rendings and rivings-through – all taking out of vents – all barrier-breaking – all unmaking', as David Jones's *In Parenthesis* put it, shattered the soldiers in body and mind.⁴⁷ Jones's verbs have no nouns to them because all distinction between thought and body, people and mud disappears in the welter of bursting walls, skins and eardrums. Such mergers between interior and exterior have their literal counterpart in the soldiers' wounds, where the body is turned inside out. War surgery also left many ex-soldiers with parts missing, or faces distorted by abrupt joins around a missing patch of skin, or an eye, faces not unlike the modernist patchwork of fragments. The surreal trench landscape is another analogue for the boundaryless modernist picture: flat and treeless, both foreground and background blurred into what Santanu Das calls a 'slimescape', where the living would find themselves sucked and dissolving into mud and what had been human beings.⁴⁸ After three years of salients and counter-attacks, the fact that those bodies could belong to either side reinforced the soldiers' feeling of being in a landscape without cultural

borders. Jones's continuous present also catches the way the war disoriented the relations of present, past and future far beyond the trenches, for although they talked of plans and dreams, soldiers and their families were emotionally having to live in a continual now, where every act or relationship might end suddenly, every trivial act might be one's last, and nothing could be counted on. Gertrude Stein risked a comparison:

Really the composition of this war, 1914–1918, was not the composition of all previous wars, the composition was not a composition in which there was one man in the centre surrounded by a lot of other men but a composition that had neither a beginning nor an end . . . in fact the composition of cubism.⁴⁹

To compare the war with any kind of artistic 'composition' was perhaps in poor taste, but her point is that character, visual perspective and narrative time were all dislocated in the experience of war *and* her kind of art. This sense of living unheroically 'without beginning or end' was also the fate of the mentally traumatised, endlessly repeating the horror of 1916 into the present of 1924 or 1930. The uncertain, stuttering sentences and the gaps on Mirrlees's pages resonate with a city full of those unable to speak, haunted by all that is missing.

Séances

Unable to bury their missing sons and husbands, many grieving relatives were drawn to mediums who promised to make contact with the dead. Mediums could speak with altered voices, through gramophone and radio-like machines, or they could receive written messages through automatic writing and spelling techniques like ouija-boards. Whatever the means, spirits were believed to be channelled through the unconscious mental energy of all those present at the seance, and when those minds had good deal of education between them, the interrupted, jerky and quotation-filled traces of the automatic writing look like a modernist poem:

Regina respertruo cruore omnes tentavit vias nusquam invenit
They kept the even tenor of their way
Drops was to be written
pearly drops,
like liquid pearls dissolves in sparkling cup
By the swarthy queen of Egypt
I am dying, Egypt, dying.
And so take up the tale –⁵⁰

To the proponents of spiritualism, these fragments were evidence of the survival after death which materialistic science denied. Though modernist poets varied in their scepticism about such metaphysics, they were drawn by a style where separate minds flowed together, and made the individual's unconscious depths a direct connection to wider spiritual unity. Yeats thought that the abrupt shifts of tone and 'perpetual change of consciousness' in automatic writing was evidence that 'the selective powers of the body' had been removed, freeing writing from the limits of an individual mind in time, and allowing the 'marginal thoughts' normally excluded from communication into play.⁵¹ As spiritualists believed that the ordinary world of material 'form' restricted our awareness of the group-soul of which we are part, the apparently formless became the realm where 'we are individuals and members of one whole', as the spirit of the late F. W. H. Myers apparently put it to the medium Geraldine Cummins, a realm with obvious attractions for female poets and mediums trapped by the social limits imposed on their sex.⁵² Artists, Myers went on, 'harvest all the tendencies in those vanished lives' to acquire 'the amazing unconscious knowledge that is the property of genius', a statement not far from T. S. Eliot's idea that the poem is a kind of 'medium' which makes the whole past speak anew.⁵³ As well as a trance-form where individual and collective or part and whole become exchangeable ('I am a kingdom and yet a unit in that kingdom', declared Myers gnomically), automatic script also represented a feeling of time without sequence.⁵⁴ Student experiments with it in the Harvard Psychological Laboratory encouraged Gertrude Stein to develop her unique, hypnotic style of the continuous present, while H. D.'s *Helen in Egypt* and *Trilogy* try to capture the circles of time in which she felt the spirits moved us.

If the world of the spirits makes one correspondence with modernist poetry, the realm of the unconscious, with which it is deeply connected, makes another. The most famous of Freud's hysterical patients, Anna O., acts like a modernist poem when she leaps between different consciousnesses, speaks multiple languages, hears voices, acts as if she were in two places at once, and sees objects in two perspectives simultaneously.⁵⁵ And if hysteria is really a disease of the doctor-patient relationship, then we could also see modernist style acting out the struggles of the mind when a culture's definitions of 'normality' and 'health' are actually a form of public captivity.⁵⁶ In Mirrlees's poem, 'Freud has dredged the river and, grinning horribly / waves his garbage in a glare of electricity' (line 285); his claim to bring our submerged desires out in the open is given literal form in Paris's gaudy nightclubs and prostitutes, as if the city were a kind of dream. One attraction of the unconscious for modernist poets, in fact, was that Freud thought the people, events and words narrated by

dreams all to be transformations of a basic knot of anxieties, so that nothing that takes place is insignificant. When the modernists borrow dream-logic for their sudden transitions and condensed metaphors, they are suggesting how apparently separate things – high culture and low desires, the curves of bodies and the shapes of places – are all forms and disguises of each other.

City

Mirrlees's own style is thoroughly invigorated by modern city life. It begins with an underground journey whose rapid transitions from point to point enact the sudden jumps from point to point in the poem. When it emerges at street level, the cacophony of sounds, signs and words seems to overwhelm any reflective consciousness and gives the poem its sense of being carried along by the crowd. In the modern city of uprooted people, most lives can only be encountered in passing, like fragments without beginnings or endings, motives or results. There is no stable, all-encompassing narrative perspective which will sort them in order, no vantage-point from which everything could be surveyed, and no single language sufficient for the *mêlée* where city-dwellers, peasants from France's regions, colonial soldiers from Algeria and Senegal, Italians, gypsies and Americans all merge and cross. Like the crowd, the poem seems to have no personality to steer it, and to be moving in a perpetual, simultaneous present. Its succession of intense but uncoordinated images is characteristic of the crowd-mind identified by the authoritarian psychologist of Paris, Gustave Le Bon, in 1890:

Crowds are to some extent in the position of the sleeper whose reason, suspended for the time being, allows the arousing in his mind of images of extreme intensity which would quickly be dissipated could they be submitted to the action of reflection. Crowds, being incapable both of reflection and of reasoning, are devoid of the notion of improbability; and it is to be noted that in a general way it is the most improbable things that are the most striking.⁵⁷

The very profusion of images, on the other hand, tends to flatten out their variety, for without the order of syntax or narrative none is to be preferred to any other. This, too, is an urban experience. In what is still one of the best books about the feeling of city life, the sociologist Georg Simmel noticed how the city is constantly assaulting the mind with a 'rapid crowding of changing images, the sharp discontinuity in the grasp of a single glance, and the unexpectedness of onrushing impressions'.⁵⁸ To this the natural reaction is self-protection, an

intensification of the emotionally buffered and intellectually detached persona known by us today as the urbane (or cool), and by Simmel as the blasé:

Objects . . . appear to the blasé person in an evenly flat and gray tone; no one subject deserves preference over any other. This mood is the faithful subjective reflection of the completely internalized money economy. By being the equivalent to all the manifold things in one and the same way, money becomes the most frightful leveler.⁵⁹

Accepting everything on an equal plane, modernist style registers both the city's variety *and* the individualisation and buffered detachment created by the urbanite's inability to withstand any more surprises. Mirrlees writes as an urban *flâneuse*, the descendant of Baudelaire's *flâneur* wandering the *grands boulevards* of Paris in the 1850s, whose absorption in the flow of the crowd and its desires is intimately linked to her own isolation from it.⁶⁰

Adverts and newspapers

Paris: A Poem is full of capital letters, the shouts of street signs and adverts warning, instructing and pleading in the urban arms race between perpetual stimulation and the commuter's self-protective indifference. It was common among late nineteenth-century moral commentators to claim that this battle was responsible for the city dweller's lack of self-control. While it's amusing to read one George Beard ascribe the urbanite's nervous weakness to 'steam power, the period press, the telegraph, sciences, and the mental activity of women', many also felt some blame should rest on the new popular and middlebrow newspapers for those women, in which 'headlines, scareheads, "snappy pars" and "stunts" took the place of literature, serious news, and discussion'.⁶¹ Modernist little magazines like *The Egoist* or the *Little Review* were, by contrast, small-circulation publications which aimed to create an alternative or oppositional 'counterpublic sphere' for the minority of readers with a serious interest in modern art.⁶² 'A comprehensible work is the product of a journalist', says the 1918 Dadaist manifesto scornfully.⁶³

But the avant-garde form and typography of Mirrlees's poem is also wholly continuous with the shock and newness that was the currency of popular journalism and advertising. Apollinaire compared adverts to the avant-garde simultaneist poem, because the design hits the viewer's retina all at once, and Wyndham Lewis's *Blast* used the poster-form directly.⁶⁴ The American Imagist John Gould Fletcher first noticed the similarities between his own short, free verse poems in a magazine and the advertisements which surrounded it, standing in little islands of white space amid the stream of prose, and

demanding attention with their removal of all superfluous words. After turning an advert for matches into a free verse ‘poem’, he added:

As regards form, which of your scribblers of cosmic bathos and ‘uplift stuff’ could more cunningly weave pipe, ice, lift, strike, and time into a stanza that has half as much swing and verse, as this? Note also the absence of adjectives. In short, here is poetry with a ‘punch’ to it.⁶⁵

The tiny, cut-down forms of an Imagist poem like Pound’s ‘In a Station of the Metro’ are often compared to the serene precision of a Japanese haiku (see Chapter 2). But Pound’s title also indicates how much the poem’s style of ‘direct treatment’ without ‘painted adjectives impeding the shock’ reproduces the values of modern media driven by ‘the limited time and attention of the reader who is suspended from a strap in a swaying underground tram’, as Winifred Holtby noted.⁶⁶ As the eye skates over the broken surface of the newspaper whose stories place serious and trivial side by side, so Mirrlees’s and Pound’s abrupt forms and swerves of direction mime the distracted attention of the commuter, even as they use those jumps to make poems which need far more attention than most commuters could ever give. ‘Modernism has democratized the subject matter and la belle matière of art’, thought Mina Loy, ‘through cubism the newspaper has assumed an aesthetic quality.’⁶⁷ But it is just as true that modernist poetry found an aesthetic through the newspaper; while Pound’s later remark that ‘journalism as I see it is history of to-day, and literature is journalism that *stays* news’ was meant to put journalism in its place, one could equally say it places the journalistic value of the ever-new as the basis of the literary.⁶⁸ In the process of criticising Pound’s *Cantos* for being too difficult, Williams arrived at the same idea:

News offers the precise incentive to epic poetry, the poetry of events; and now is precisely the time for it since never by any chance is the character of a single fact ever truthfully represented today . . . It must be a concise sharpshooting epic style. Machine gun style. Facts, facts, facts, tearing into us to blast away our stinking flesh of news. Bullets.⁶⁹

Modernist poetry is anti-news which is ever new – as well as anti-propaganda which makes war by stylistic means.

Technology and recording

In 1917, Harriet Monroe and Alice Corbin Henderson summed up the new movement in poetry in the desire for an ‘individual, unsteretyped diction, and an individual unsteretyped rhythm’.⁷⁰ Stereotyping was a printing technique

which used fixed moulds instead of movable type, and in their implication that regular form meant cookie-cutter feelings, Monroe and Henderson were updating an older Romantic opposition between the organic forms of art and the mechanical form of industrialism. But machines were intrinsic to modernist ideas about form from the very start, not least because their capacity for waste-free, efficient process enabled Pound to smuggle back the principle that poems should be organic unities without appearing to be too obviously Romantic:

By bad verse, whether 'regular' or 'free', I mean verse which pretends to some emotion which did not assist at its parturition. I mean also verse made by those who have not sufficient skill to make the words move in rhythm of the creative emotion. Where the voltage is so high that it fuses the machinery, one has merely the 'emotional man', not the artist. The best artist is the man whose machinery can stand the highest voltage. The better the machinery, the more precise, the stronger; the more exact will be the record of the voltage and of the various currents which have passed through it.⁷¹

Verse technique is here 'machinery' set moving by the electricity of the 'creative emotion' running through it, rather than short-circuiting, and here Pound is updating Coleridge's claim that in 'genuine Poets, the Sense, including the Passion, leads to the metre'.⁷² By describing poetic emotion as electricity, however, Pound also gave it a useful new set of connotations: poetry is a force which moves instantly across great distances, through apparently solid bodies, and connects apparently separate entities simultaneously. Pound thought history itself could be defined by 'certain facts or points, or "luminous details", which governed knowledge as the switchboard the electric circuit', and the metaphor allows his *Cantos* to focus on such details because they can stand for the entirety without having to qualify, summarise and make individual moments more abstract than they were.⁷³ Since electricity works in neurons and lightbulbs alike, it also brought the useful connotation that the poet and his objects could be energised by a single force, that poetic emotions could be instantly connected from one mind to another, and that writing poetry was active thought and an automatic response at the same time.

The technological correlatives of modernist form are much wider than electrical circuits, of course. In *Paris: A Poem* and *The Waste Land*, we hear bursts of scattered voices from different places and times, like turning the dial across a radio, in which 'all barriers of time and space seem to fall away', as a General Electric advert for the radio put it.⁷⁴ Broadcast technology's power to transmit voices through the physical matter of air and wires was

frequently given added significance by its similarity to the spiritualist networks mentioned earlier. Despite the apparent hostility of spiritualism to rational science, popularisations of quantum physics' redefinitions of matter in terms of energy rather than solid objects provided much comfort to those who wanted to live in a world not split between inner thoughts and exterior matter, and the crossovers between spiritualism and technology particularly attracted H. D. and Mina Loy because they were analogues for the modernist idea that art might instantly connect the one and the all, without interference.⁷⁵ Even to non-spiritualists, radio promised a much more direct relation with its audience than print could provide, a technologically revived oral culture cultivated by later modernists like Basil Bunting or the Beats. The photograph's capacity to make *everything* that falls within its frame significant, no matter how unexciting in real life, is an essential precursor to the documentary poetics of Muriel Rukeyser or the 'field theory' of Williams's *Paterson* or Olson's *Maximus*, in which the banalities of ordinary material are given artistic charge by being poetically framed by structures in which no item or sound is ever subordinated into mere detail. The constant near-repetition of phrase in Gertrude Stein's work or the flow of animated images in *Paris*, on the other hand, draws on the feeling of a continuous present that is the special provenance of the cinema:

I doubt whether at that time I had ever seen a cinema but, and I cannot repeat this too often any one is of one's period and this our period was undoubtedly the period of the cinema and series production. And each of us in our own way are bound to express what the world in which we are living is doing.⁷⁶

And in the sampling and replaying of voices from the past in the immediate present, the modernist poem also works like the gramophone. 'Modernity', Baudelaire had famously remarked, 'is the transient, the fleeting, the contingent; it is one half of art, the other being the eternal and immovable.'⁷⁷ Like so much modernist poetry, the gramophone splices them together, preserving a moment out of the sequence of time, and repeating it for ever.⁷⁸

Apparently so unlike normal life, then, modernist poetry is actually suffused by the cultural forms of its time in which individual and collective, means and end or present and past seem to be unified, whether in the underground, the séance or the gramophone. And it equally manifests the *threat* we sense when normal divisions between or within people are broken down, in shock and vulnerability, mental illness or war. Modernist form, in short, is not just a means to rescue the poem from the world around it, or simply a transparent

reproduction of that world. Rather, it tries to channel its non-poetic surroundings and, in the process, challenges where its own context actually begins and ends – just as its syntax challenges where the reader imaginatively stands in relation to it. In this ambition, it was more or less trying to substitute for a form of social interaction which many modernists felt had been lost from modern life, and which has not had the attention it deserves in recent criticism either: religious ritual.

Modernism and enchantment

Mirrlees wrote *Paris* while staying there with her companion Jane Harrison, the elderly classicist who had taught her at Cambridge a few years before. A remarkable figure, Harrison had been the first female classicist to be taken seriously by her male colleagues, and one of the first to draw British classicists' attention away from the nineteenth-century image of Greece as the foundation of Europe, reason and democracy, and towards a comparative religious approach which emphasised the irrational side of Greek religion and art. Innovatively fusing recent anthropological work on the way 'primitive' tribes organise their societies through religion with Henri Bergson's philosophy about the nature of consciousness and memory, Harrison came to think that the origin and power of art and religion lay in ritual forms where the individual was ecstatically united with the group through engaging his or her unconscious mind. In common with many modernists, she accepted Bergson's criticisms of the common-sense view of the self, in which we have an unchanging, detached 'self' which perceives the different and varied forms of life which pass before it, while remaining unaffected by them. To Bergson, this notion of consciousness is the product of a mechanical, scientific model. We do not experience moments of time like beads strung out on a necklace for detached perusal, we experience it as the very substance of the self:

Memory . . . is not a faculty of putting away recollections in a drawer, or of inscribing them in a register. There is no register, no drawer . . . in reality, the past is preserved by itself, automatically. In its entirety, probably, it follows us at every instant; all that we have felt, thought and willed from our earliest infancy is there, leaning over the present which is about to join it, pressing against the portals of consciousness that would fain leave it outside . . . At the most, a few superfluous recollections may succeed in smuggling themselves through the half-open door. These memories, messengers from the unconscious, remind us of what we are dragging behind us unawares.⁷⁹

Our inner experience, which Bergson called duration, is made up of past and present, conscious and unconscious, in a 'mutual penetration, an interconnection and organization of elements, each one of which represents the whole, and cannot be distinguished or isolated from it except by abstract thought'.⁸⁰ Being indivisible, it 'cannot receive a fixed form or be expressed in words without becoming public property', a process in which its subtleties are always misrepresented.⁸¹ These ideas had a profound impact on modernist poetics, for if the uniqueness of our inner 'duration' cannot be analysed in available public terms, then poetry's job had to be to simulate a new, non-sequential kind of time in which the past is ever-present, and to break up the common order of language which falsifies this inner flux. To Bergson, art allows us 'to put aside for an instant the veil which we interposed between our consciousness and ourselves'. It brings us 'back into our own presence' by 'tearing aside the cleverly woven curtain of our conventional ego', phrases which are almost blueprints for the modernist poems of flux and simultaneous time, whether in Yeats or the Surrealists or the opening *Cantos*.⁸²

For Harrison, however, intuiting this mystical, organic life underneath the divisions imposed by our public selves was also the essence of religious thinking. Bergson's 'duration' was, she claimed, 'figured by the Greek as Dike, the Way', and the different Olympian gods are a later intellectualisation and division of this one life; the Greek mystery religions from which the art of tragedy grew, however, intuit 'the stream and current of that life of duration' and 'the impulse of life through all things, perennial, indivisible'.⁸³ In Bergson, duration is about individuality; in Harrison, it metamorphoses seamlessly into cosmic belonging:

There is the stream of life in time, or, rather, in what Professor Bergson calls *durée*; that is one. Each of us is a snowball growing bigger every moment, and in which all our past, and also the past out of which we all sprang, all the generations behind us, is rolled up, involved.

But we may also think of the oneness in another way, so to speak laterally or spatially, contemporaneously. All the life existing at one moment in the world, and at every successive moment, though individualised, is one. We are all of us members of one another.⁸⁴

For this second thought, Harrison was indebted to the anthropologist Émile Durkheim. In common with many leading intellectuals of the 1890s – Max Weber, Sigmund Freud, William James, Georg Simmel, J. G. Frazer – Durkheim was preoccupied by the origin of religion, and what the study of newly discovered 'primitive' tribes could tell us about the religious urge in every society.

Durkheim's idea was that 'religious representations are collective representations that express collective realities; rites are ways of acting that are born only in the midst of assembled groups and whose purpose is to evoke, maintain, or recreate certain mental states of those groups'.⁸⁵ Our sense of the sacred is originally a form of ecstatic group consciousness, in other words, in which the clan experiences its connection to each other and to all the animals, plants and natural phenomena bound together in a system of common order by the clan's totem, an order which unites members into a single being. 'The men of the clan and the things which are classified in it form by their union a solid system, all of whose parts are united and vibrate sympathetically.'⁸⁶

Now this non-rational group consciousness seems as if it is at the opposite pole to modern, Protestant religion, with its tremendously interiorised, individualised faith, lack of collective emotion and great distance between supernatural and natural worlds. This was the religion of inner discipline which Durkheim's contemporary Max Weber claimed had unwittingly produced our modern sense of 'disenchantment'; the replacement of a world of spirits and moral powers ordained by God with a universe of indifferent physical laws.

Where rational empirical knowledge has consistently carried through the disenchantment (*Entzauberung*) of the world and its transformation into a causal mechanism, there emerges a tension with the claims of ethical postulates – that the world, for religion, is ultimately willed and ordained by God and is therefore, in whatever way oriented, an ethically *meaningful* cosmos. For where the world is considered through the empirical and – most completely – the mathematical, there develops in principle the rejection of every form of consideration that searches out the 'meaning' of innerworldly occurrences.⁸⁷

Weber's point was that in a modern world run by science, that search for a meaningful inner life will have to proceed by other means:

With each acceptance of the rationalism of empirical science, religion is thereby forced increasingly out of the realm of the rational and into the irrational, so that now it is simply the irrational or anti-rational transcendental force.⁸⁸

It is modernity which can only think of religion as the irrational, and which, like Jane Harrison, finds a sense of divine power in the two directions the modern rational self blocks – the unconscious and the collective. With religion now a marginal affair, 'art . . . takes over the function of an innerworldly *redemption* in the face of the everyday and above all the increasing pressure of theoretical and practical rationalism'.⁸⁹ Weber thought this would bring art into conflict

with a mysticism which sought ‘the bursting of all forms to be able to enter into the all-oneness that lies the other side of every sort of determination and the formed’. Writing that at the time of the First World War, he could not know how well he had characterised the coming of modernist art itself.⁹⁰ As it happens, Weber probably adapted the word ‘disenchantment’ from a poem by Schiller, ‘The Gods of Greece’, which lamented the way modern individualism had ‘de-divinised’ the world and made it soul-less.⁹¹ Schiller’s *Aesthetic Education* on the other hand, begins by asking how we can recover the organic, flexiform nature of Greek society for the modern age.

It should perhaps now be clearer why Hope Mirrlees wrote her avant-gardist poem with a dedication to ‘Notre Dame de Paris’ in thanks for graces received. This is poetry whose form tries to *re-enchant* the multifarious life of Paris into totemic order, where all the parts sympathise and vibrate with each other. *Paris* is an experience where inner and outer, the layers of unconscious dreams and the paraphernalia of street signs, all the individual citizens and crowds share a meaning and a moral significance. Like the ecstatic fusion of ritual, the form disorients rational subject–object distinctions in order to give back the original sense of an unconscious unity *and* a collective unity – not only by involving the whole city, but by immersing the reader too, because her participation is essential. It aims to re-situate art at the centre of social life; as Durkheim remarked, in early societies ‘art... is not merely an outward adornment that the cult can be thought of as dressing up in... the cult in itself is aesthetic.’⁹² And it brings past and present together, as a rite gathers the activities of ordinary days and nights into a particular moment which the group can recognise, purify and use to shape the future.

At the same time, however, this is an utterly *modern* form of re-enchantment. Mirrlees’s poem employs a highly individual form, rather than one developed by common consensus, and its unmediated relations between part and whole enact the modern sense of a horizontal society where ‘each of us is equidistant from the centre’, rather than the ancient sense of a hierarchy of beings whose position is ordained by God.⁹³ Moreover, while *Paris* is entranced by ancient forms of belief, it is, in a particularly modern way, sceptical of the religion it sees. At one point, the poem reflects on the fate of art about revolutions, and concludes, sardonically, that ‘Whatever happens, some day it will look beautiful’:

Manet’s *Massacres des Jours de Juin*

David’s *Prise de la Bastille*,

Poussin’s *Fronde*,

Hang in a quiet gallery.

All this time the Virgin has not been idle;
 The windows of les Galeries Lafayette, le Bon Marché,
 la Samaritaine

Hold holy bait,
 Waxen Pandoras in white veils and ties of her own
 decking;

Catéchisme de Persévérance,
 The decrees of the Seven Œcumenical Councils re-
 duced to the *format* of the *Bibliothèque Rose*

(ll. 290–300)

As the French institutions of art have made beauty out of war and death, so the department stores have made taking part in the ritual of the crucified God a shopping opportunity, a chance for the young virgins to anticipate their own marriage. The Virgin herself is assimilated to Pandora, sent to tempt Prometheus, whose myth Jane Harrison had linked to the transformation of Greece from a matriarchal to a patriarchal society.

But although Mirrlees is sceptical about the motives of Catholic ritual, she is not in doubt that religious thinking is real and present in those department stores. For the point of Harrison's reading of Durkheim was that the 'elementary' forms of religion may metamorphose, but they never disappear. Since the idea of the sacred is a social category, *all* societies have transgressions and scapegoats, even modern ones. The concept of 'free examination' is sacred to modern society, Durkheim remarks, because it functions in the same way to mark off 'modern' society from the biases of other primitive unscientific peoples who still believe in, well, the sacred.⁹⁴ So for Mirrlees, the spring sales in the department stores are a modern ritual of clothing oneself anew, at one with the leaves on the trees and Peace conference. And while Eliot was sceptical of Durkheim's claims that ecstatic fusion is the foundation of social life, he also believed that '*all* art emulates the condition of ritual', and adopted Durkheim's panhistorical approach when finding the reincarnations of ancient myths in the minds and behaviours of modern Londoners.⁹⁵ Thanks to the new sciences of anthropology and social psychology, the gods whose disappearance Schiller had lamented could be seen never to have gone away. And this means the 'mythic method' Eliot saw in Yeats, Joyce and Wyndham Lewis as a means of 'controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history' is a controlling which takes place at all levels simultaneously, as it were, because the myths are re-enacted in the emotions of people in the poem, whether they think they are religious or not.⁹⁶

Conclusion

Mirrlees's poem is typical of modernist poetry in a number of ways. Its form takes on the rhythms and experiences of modern life more directly than previous poetry had ever done. By disorienting and bewildering, it attempts to immerse its reader in a kind of unity unavailable to detached thought, and recreate lost forms of collective being. Far from turning away from the world, this is poetry preternaturally sensitive to the sources of its style, and by reflecting them 'into' the poem, trying to reach beyond the borders with which later readers will safely frame it, and get them, too, 'inside the picture'. Yet this very expansiveness is both its attraction and its chief political problem. As will become evident in the following chapters, what modernist poets tend to fear is less popular life than the cultural formations which mediate or interrupt their art's presumed identity between the 'I' and the 'everybody', or artist and public. When that means resisting set genres, tastes which confirm class divisions, stuffy institutions, middle-class respectability or accepted forms of cultural circulation, it's easy to applaud. But for some modernists, it also meant resisting all forms of political representation which mediate between the individual and the state, and finding the immediate fusion of individual and whole in the cultural totalities of authoritarian or Fascist regimes as well as anarchist or communist ones. In one of the earliest surveys of modern poetry, Robert Graves used the analogy of traditionalist, moderate and radical politics to describe the various poetic factions, and it's not a coincidence that he put modernism on the far left, with 'the groups who do not believe at all strongly in Parliamentary methods'.⁹⁷ Weber was prepared to settle for modern disenchantment, feeling that modern states' rule by bureaucratic order was preferable to the authoritarian 'charismatic' rule of kings who would just be the single human embodiment of their people without requiring consent. Pound and Yeats were not prepared to strike that bargain, and the history of the second and third generation of modernist poets, as well as the story of how modernism became so central to university English degrees, is partly about the need to make modernist style safe for democracy, however loosely conceived. The story of how all this happened is the story of the following chapters.

Recommended Further Reading

Tim Armstrong, *Modernism: A Cultural History* (Cambridge: Polity, 2005). Brief but superb introduction to modernist thinking on time, technology, spiritualism, mass markets and more.

Chris Beyers, *A History of Free Verse* (Lafayetteville: University of Arkansas, 2001).

Michael Levenson, *A Genealogy of Modernism* (Cambridge University Press, 1984).

Michael North, *Reading 1922: A Return to the Scene of the Modern* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999). Cultural history setting the famous modernist texts of 1922 alongside everything else published that year.

Helen Sword, *Ghostwriting Modernism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999). On spiritualism's importance to modernist ideas of authorship.

Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge University Press, 1989) and *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2008). Magisterial accounts of the formation of modern selves, the latter giving a more explicitly religious account of the transitions between Romanticism and modernism.

Ezra Pound

Poetry and politics	33
The anthologist as selector	36
The anthologist as compiler	41
The anthologist as teacher	45
<i>The Cantos</i>	50
Where did it all go wrong?	54

Poetry and politics

Pound is one of the most important figures of modern poetry, and one of the most controversial. To his admirers, he rethought what poetry was for the modern world, a world of banks and arms manufacturers as well as meadows and larks. To his enemies, Pound's innovations were motivated by a contempt for the ordinary reader that sent modern poetry fatally off course, an error confirmed by his slide into fascist politics. To see what we are dealing with, take [Figure 1](#), a not untypical section of Pound's epic *The Cantos*, begun as he lay a prisoner of US Forces in Pisa, Italy, in 1945, following his inflammatory and anti-Semitic broadcasts on behalf of Italian fascism during the Second World War, and finished in St Elizabeth's psychiatric hospital, New Jersey, where he was remanded after being found unfit to stand trial:

It is written in a mixture of English, Italian, Greek, Latin, Provençal and Chinese. It looks like an unrelated series of cryptic references, which, when unpacked by years of patient scholarship, turn out to be:

1. A link between three Chinese men praised by Confucius for their resistance to the cruel Emperor Cheou-sin, three leading Italian fascists (including il Capo Mussolini) and three fascist collaborators recently executed by Allied forces.
2. A comparison between US Ambassador and later Major William Bullitt (whom Pound insinuates had moved into diplomacy when tipped off that

balance, President John Adams, and his brother Samuel Adams, as well the Georgian grace of the architects and designers Robert and John Adam.

And all this in a passage officially in praise of clarity. *That*, Pound's critics say, is where Pound's kind of modernism leads: the slivers of incoherent phrase, the intimidatingly wide references, the swagger in splicing his own story and great historical figures, the aggressive tone and ruthless politics, all these are of a piece, and stem from the revolution he began thirty years earlier.

Pound's defenders, on the other hand, would say that Pound kicked a dozy late-Romanticism into the twentieth century, and that *The Cantos* discovers a style so inventive that it overrides its author's mistaken convictions.² The internationalism of the quotations here, for instance, defies any fascist notions of national purity. Like American pluralist democracy, the layered fragments make a poem capable of absorbing the widest range of sources into a dynamic whole, without one source dominating, or any of them being shoehorned into some prior plan. The splinters of phrase form an ever-widening network of 'subject rhymes' which traverse past and present in the blink of an eye to link forms of balanced architecture and political justice, the climbing moon and the gradations of light, or bad emperors and Imperial Chemicals. Those 'rhymes' between people and situations also rebound off their author. The words of Arnaut Daniel are being spoken from the pain of Purgatory, as Pound's own presentation of his voice is speaking to you from prison. And Daniel's line is adapted from a passage which Pound's estranged friend T. S. Eliot had used at the end of their triumphant collaboration in *The Waste Land*, so that the quotation compressing three of the poets whom Pound had done most to promote – Dante, Daniel and Eliot – is now staring back at Pound with horrible irony.

Nobody disagrees that Pound's political choices were terrible; the problem for poets and critics after Pound is to what extent modernist poetry itself is mixed up in them. There are two ways to connect Pound's poetics and politics which I will not be pursuing, however. The first is to try and salvage Pound's artistic achievement by saying that his ideas about poetry were fine until certain obsessions about economics came in during the 1920s and sent him off course. This requires splitting Pound's art from his economic ideas, whereas a letter to his mother written as early as 1909 says that no one will write a true American epic until:

business begets a religion of 'Chivalry in the affairs of money, & when 3% per annum is metamorphorized into the cult of an ideal beauty.' & when america can produce any figure as suited to the epic as is Don Quixote, and when the would be litterati cease from turning anything

that might in 500 years develop into a tradition, into copy at \$4 per. col. within four hours of its occurrence then there may begin to be the possibility of an american epic.³

Pound was always adamant that ‘the effects of social evil show first in the arts’ and devoted his own life to encouraging the kind of poetry that wasn’t driven by the journalist’s need for popularity or quick bucks.⁴ He was attracted to alternative economics, and thence to Mussolini, because they seemed to answer the yearning for a vaguely medieval alternative (‘chivalry’) to finance capitalism. My other road not taken is to attack Pound’s style on the grounds that the fragmented, allusive poetry he wrote to resist ‘copy at \$4 per. col.’ is difficult to read, that difficulty relies on an elitist idea of art, and elitism in art is the natural partner of fascism in politics. But as he declared to his captors, Pound held himself a democrat who believed wholeheartedly in the US Constitution and the rights of the individual. He thought civilisation meant ‘the abolition of violence’ and an end to ‘an ignorance of the nature and custom of foreign peoples, a desire to coerce others, a desire for uniformity.’⁵ What really needs explaining is why Pound thought his difficult poetry was the index of a less coercive society, and how his socialist-anarchist beliefs in local trade networks, decentralised decision-making and an end to the arms trade could prove so vulnerable to the enemies of these beliefs. To put it another way, we need to see how Pound’s poetic could imagine that individual integrity, cultural plurality and the totalitarian state could go together, and my suggestion is that Pound’s activities as an anthologist may provide some connecting thread.

The anthologist as selector

Anthologies were central to Pound’s life. He had begun his career as a translator and enthusiast for the then-neglected poetry of the Troubadours, the travelling singer-songwriters of medieval Provence, and only began to make his name as a force in modern poetry when he edited the anthology *Des Imagistes* (containing himself, H. D., Joyce and William Carlos Williams), in 1914, and then the *Catholic Anthology* (containing Eliot’s ‘Prufrock’ as well as Yeats and Williams) in 1915. In the 1930s he pressured *Poetry* to let Louis Zukofsky run an Objectivist issue (which shortly became an anthology in its own right), and published *Profile*, a collection of all the poets whose work meant most to him. During the 1950s he translated Confucius’ *Classic Anthology* and compiled *Confucius to Cummings*, an anthology of world poetry (eventually published in 1964). Thanks partly to him, the anthology became in the twentieth century

not just an all-in-one collection of familiar poems, but a way to explain strange new artistic movements – Imagism, Vorticism and many other ‘isms’ – by offering the public a selection of work which it could dip into easily and cheaply. But the anthology is a format which can affect the character of what it contains, and its principles would decisively shape Pound’s own creative work.

Firstly, the anthology is a selection of high points, condensed and edited, and Pound’s influence on modernism begins with his insistence on cutting down and removing any kind of padding. The word ‘anthology’ literally means ‘bunch of flowers’, implying that its contents have been carefully chosen, plucked from their various settings, stripped of any extraneous matter, and rearranged in a single display. Pound’s little manifesto for the poet-friends he baptised the Imagists, written in 1912, runs on the same idea:

1. Direct treatment of the ‘thing’, whether subjective or objective
2. To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation
3. To compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of the metronome.⁶

Pound amplifies ‘direct treatment’ in several ways: it means ‘a speech without inversions’ of normal word order for the sake of the rhyme (12), a poetry of ‘no superfluous word’ (4) which is ‘written at first hand’ without ‘convention and cliché’ (11) and has ‘fewer painted adjectives impeding the shock and the stroke of it’ (12). The ‘sequence of the musical phrase’ means composition in free verse, rather than according to set metres, ‘a rhythm, that is, in poetry which corresponds exactly to the emotion or shade of emotion to be expressed’ (9). You can get a fair idea of the kind of poetry Pound was attacking by looking at the final poem in *Georgian Poetry 1911–12*, the volume which first showed Pound that contemporary verse could be published in the anthology format, and from which he had to distance himself despite being asked to contribute. It’s not a poem typical of the breezier style of most of the other Georgians themselves and the younger poets thought it outdated. But the author, Sir Ronald Ross, was a friend of the editor and had won a Nobel prize for discovering how malaria was transmitted, even if his verse does less for human well-being:

Ah whither does thou float, sweet silent star,
 In yonder floods of evening’s dying light?
 Before the fanning wings of rising night,
 Methinks thy silvery bark is driven far
 To some lone isle of calmly havened shore,
 Where the lorn eye of man can follow thee no more.⁷

It is full of the special medieval vocabulary bad nineteenth-century poets reserved for deep feeling; ‘methinks’, ‘whither’, ‘yonder’, ‘bark’ for boat, ‘isle’ for island, ‘lorn’ for forlorn, and ‘thee’ for you, all of which take it out of the realm of what Pound called ‘the testimony of the eyewitness’ (11). It is also full of words which do not contribute to the presentation, like ‘lone’ – what kind of island isn’t ‘lone’? – or ‘calmly’ – what kind of haven isn’t calm? Worst of all is ‘sweet’, which is the most hackneyed term of endearment in the history of poetry and tells you nothing about the star or about the emotion of the person seeing it, other than a wish to sound vaguely poetic and a still stronger need to find an adjective between ‘float’ and ‘silent’ to give him the ten syllables required by the metronomic verse-pattern. What Pound’s demands boil down to is a demand that the poem should present its matter – the poet’s feelings or an external scene – without any convention intruding, and the form of the poem must be shaped to the uniqueness of what it embodies. ‘A man’s rhythm must be interpretative’ (9), Pound insists, part of the discovery of the emotion itself rather than bolted on to something known earlier. Poetry is not to be a vehicle for ideas, ‘the ox-cart and post-chaise for transmitting thoughts poetic or otherwise’ (11); it is a form in which what is said, and how it’s being said, are a unity. The words and their sense must be such as fit the emotion, and the ‘ideas, or fragments of ideas, the emotion and concomitant emotions of this “Intellectual and Emotional Complex” . . . must be in harmony, they must form an organism, they must be an oak sprung from an acorn.’⁸

The poem which is usually used as the test case for these Imagist principles is Pound’s ‘In a Station of the Metro’. Pound described its composition in a memoir for his friend, the sculptor Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, as a process of continual cutting-down. Descending from the Paris Métro, he ‘saw suddenly a beautiful face, and then another and another, and then a beautiful child’s face, and then another beautiful woman’, and though he tried to find the words to express the moment, none was ‘worthy’.⁹ Then, suddenly that evening, he succeeded: ‘I do not mean that I found words, but there came an equation . . . not in speech, but in little splotches of colour.’¹⁰ Thinking of the emotion in terms of abstract painting or equations helped free Pound from feeling he had to represent the scene like a photograph, or tell a story about his feeling. But although he ‘wrote a thirty-line poem’ in this vein, Pound destroyed it because he felt it was work ‘of second intensity’:

Six months later I made a poem half that length; a year later, I made the following *hokku*-like sentence:–

‘The apparition of these faces in the crowd:
Petals, on a wet, black bough.’

I dare say it is meaningless unless one has drifted into a certain vein of thought. In a poem of this sort, one is trying to record the precise instant when a thing outward and objective transforms itself, or darts into a thing inward and subjective.¹¹

Whittling down the poem from thirty lines to two is what he later called 'maximum efficiency of expression', where the writer 'has expressed something interesting in such a way that one cannot re-say it more effectively.'¹²

It has to be said, though, that there is much more that has been cut out of this poem than simply unnecessary adjectives or set rhyme and rhythm schemes. In fact, you could follow all of Pound's original prescriptions for 'direct treatment' and produce a good many modern poems, not just modernist ones. The younger Georgian poets whom Pound so disliked were issuing the same calls for directness, modern language and expressive rhythm in the same magazines in which Pound was publishing, and these ideals have since become a staple of mainstream twentieth-century creative writing. What makes Pound's poem different and more difficult is that, without a main verb, it is unclear exactly in what relation the two statements stand to one another. It is so direct that it refuses you a sense of perspective or narrative framing of the two statements, other than that the faces are 'these' faces, at that moment present to the speaker, and even then, they are ghostly ('apparition'). Is the poet remembering, describing or discovering? Are the petals just a metaphor for the way the faces looked, or are they a memory of another wet spring, or the next sight the speaker saw? And what is the emotion? It may be gratitude for a strange inrush of beauty in an ugly place, which the haiku-like form amplifies by its aura of foreignness, its unpredictable rhythms and the enveloping silence round its tiny lines. It may be regret that the city's faces are only ever 'apparitions', ghosts which come and go as transiently as the blossom. There is probably a hidden parallel with the return of the spring and the Greek myth of Persephone returning from underground, so there might well be a sense of visionary satisfaction that Pound is seeing the Greek myths live again in the Paris metro. There may also be self-admiration in the way that the petals are seen 'on' the bough as if layered in a picture, because it takes an artist to see the ever-moving modern city reveal its momentary beauty. The answer is probably a mixture of all of these things, for the point of the poem's technique is that by cutting out so much it allows an endless, suggestive interplay between its two statements.

It's just this unsubordinated relation which makes the 'Image', as Pound calls the 'intellectual and emotional complex' set up by the relationship between the lines, much more charged than a simple description, because its meaning unfolds in a special way. Because you don't get it at first, the poem has to

come as experience and only then be thought over. As you consider it, you mentally paraphrase it or frame it, but neither paraphrase nor context really contains all that it could mean, in the way that an equation's power to explain is not exhausted by putting actual numbers in the place of x or y . Being unstated, the meaning is more like a seed, individually planted in the mind of every reader and continuing to grow. It never becomes an objective, common property, because that would require the relationship between the two lines to be summed up; it doesn't illustrate some greater system of meaning, and it can't be 'framed' in a single perspective, just as it can't be put in the frame of a regular rhythm. It's the *indeterminate* relation between the two lines that keeps it free and unique, or as Pound put it more combatively:

Constation of fact. It presents. It does not comment. It is irrefutable because it doesn't present a personal predilection for any particular fraction of the truth. It is as communicative as Nature. It is as uncommunicative as Nature. It is not a criticism of life. I mean it does not deal in opinion. It washes its hands of theories.¹³

'Irrefutable' is the telling word: not only does it suggest that the poem is simply there and not to be argued with, it implies that there are squadrons of enemies out there waiting to do just that. In fact, in his series of articles on 'The Serious Artist' for the magazine *The Egoist*, Pound uses an Imagist theory of poetry as the best case for a wider politics of individualism as a resistance to the lazy formulae of modern criticism and government bureaucracy. The magazine's title was drawn from the philosophical philosophy of Egoism, advocated by the nineteenth-century anarchist Max Stirner, who protested that 'every higher essence, such as truth, mankind, and so on, is an essence *over us*', and scorned any form of government or religion which restricted the individual in the name of a higher cause.¹⁴ Pound's articles also argue that art's uniqueness is a lesson in statecraft:

Men still try to promote the ideal state. No perfect state will be founded on the theory, or the working hypothesis that all men are alike. No science save the arts will give us the requisite data for learning in what ways men differ.¹⁵

This essay is an early statement of the lifelong parallel Pound saw between poetry's uniqueness and his hatred of all abstract systems of measurement external to what they measure. 'The Renaissance', he held, 'rose in a search for precision and declined through rhetoric and rhetorical thinking, through a habit of defining things always "in the terms of something else"'.¹⁶ His later formula 'DICTEN = CONDENSARE' puts it as compactly as possible, since

it plays on the German for 'to make poetry' and 'to tighten'.¹⁷ Significantly, however, this phrase appears not during a discussion of art, but in a series of laments about Pound's later obsession, the control bankers – particularly Jewish bankers – have over sovereign states. In Pound's mind, the condensed poem and the nation should both 'achieve self-sufficiency', and everything which is not perfectly integrated must be cut out.¹⁸ In 1911, the poet was to 'use no superfluous word, no adjective which does not reveal anything'.¹⁹ In 1928, Pound would claim that 'when the application of word to thing goes rotten, i.e., becomes slushy and inexact, or excessive and bloated, the whole machinery of social and of individual thought and order go to pot'.²⁰ Fifteen years after that, in the middle of Pound's descent into fascist paranoia, the 'excessive' meant the international conspiracy of Jewish financiers whose profits were grossly out of proportion to the actual human value of the products they financed. 'The semitic is excess', he told the readers of T. S. Eliot's *Criterion*.²¹

The anthologist as compiler

Yet for all the focus on Imagism as 'self-sufficiency', Pound's poetry is full of other poets. Like an anthology, Pound's work is often a compilation of many different voices through translation, allusion and citation, the poet inhabiting the voices of Robert Browning or the troubadours or the Anglo-Saxon poet of 'The Seafarer'. Even the ultra-direct Imagist poems resemble haiku or the fragments of Sappho and the *Greek Anthology*. In an anthology, this mix of poets originally separated widely in time and place means that individual poems can often be seen to have things in common that their authors could never have predicted, and it makes some sense to see *The Cantos*, in particular, as a kind of anthology in this spirit. Hugely expanding the reader's frame of reference, it links wildly disparate poets and documents into a single, permanently contemporary whole, where Chinese rubs shoulders with Provençal, and bar-room anecdotes are stitched into high political theory and occult speculation.

The anthology's way of keeping poets from different ages and places together may help explain Pound's attitude to translation. Like the Image, Pound's translations work like 'planes in relation', one plane being the original text and the other Pound's own era, and the ungrounded, indefinable relation between them is what really interests him, rather than perfect fidelity to the original. Although he always wanted to give the impression of the complete man of learning, Pound's own reading was piecemeal and cranky, his sources sometimes unreliable, and his work in Chinese poetry was heading bravely

into new territory for even the best-equipped translator. It is not surprising that the poems of *Cathay* (1915) miss a good deal of what is going on in the originals, based as they are on a rudimentary knowledge of Chinese filtered through his mentor Fenollosa's unfinished manuscripts. Pound translates them into limpid English free verse, with lopped-off rhymeless lines stretching out into the silence, whereas his sources are staccato, carefully patterned and not meant to be read in a linear fashion. Read as an Imagist poem, however, the translations work in their own right because their concrete details leave the emotional resonances to the reader to figure out:

At sixteen you departed,
 You went into far Ku-to-Yen, by the river of swirling eddies
 And you have been gone five months.
 The monkeys make sorrowful noise overhead.
 You dragged your feet when you went out.
 By the gate now, the moss is grown, the different mosses,
 Too deep to clear them away!
 The leaves fall early this autumn, in wind.
 The paired butterflies are already yellow with August
 Over the grass in the West garden,
 They hurt me.²²

We infer from 'The River-Merchant's Wife' that the monkeys are loud because the trees are spreading over the roof, that the moss is deep because no one at all has come through the gate to tread it down and the wife has no money or spirits to clear it herself (the amplification of the word moss, not in the original, would also remind Pound's contemporaries of Tennyson's 'Mariana in the Moated Grange'). The butterflies 'yellow with August' hurt her because she is afraid of winter, age and loneliness, and Pound's translation makes the suddenly short line end in an ominous, unresponsive silence, part of no rhyme or rhythmic pattern. And none of this can be fully spelt out because her loneliness is a self-protecting emotion which communicates through its own reticence. In Eliot's beautiful description of Imagism, the poem sets 'in motion an expanding succession of concentric feelings', like ripples spreading out slowly from a stone thrown in the water.²³

By using these stop-start rhythms Pound lost the feel of the Chinese as a contemporary of Rihaku might have read it and gave it a specifically modern feeling of alienation. But these poems' schemes of leave-taking exile and homesickness also gain poignancy by Pound's reinvention of them for 1915. Not only do they make other, ultra-modern Imagist poems seem just instances of a much longer tradition, but the estranged and unresolved *feel* of Pound's translated

forms is now charged with the distances between husbands and wives in the First World War, and the cruel inability to count on any future that war forces on separated couples. Bringing these love-letters from a long-distant culture to print makes the reader experience in their sudden, unpredictable form the mixture of direct appeal and diffidence they are talking about, and the poetry rests in these sudden, sobering reverberations between then and now. 'Hard fight gets no reward./ Loyalty is hard to explain', says a soldier in 'South-Folk in Cold Country' ('Eighth Century A. D.') and Pound's friends in the trenches, T. E. Hulme and Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, would agree. However inaccurate his translation, Pound would later bring this layering of the planes of then and now to perfection in 'Homage to Sextus Propertius', where Propertius' difficulties with writing poems about his unfaithful mistress in the 'infinite and ineffable imbecility of the Roman Empire' becomes an indictment of the 'infinite and ineffable imbecility of the British Empire' for which the poem is being translated.²⁴

This peculiar, two-way relationship of the translator and source opens another dimension of Pound's anthologising poetics, the idea that a poem itself can have the voices of other poets speaking through it. Although Pound took liberties with his originals, they were often taken because Pound felt his own voice becoming invaded by the original, rather than the other way round. It was Guido Cavalcanti, he claimed, whose voice broke through 'the crust of dead English, the sediment present in my own available vocabulary', when Pound tried to translate him.²⁵ He celebrated a more general sense of influence in the early poem, 'Histrion':

No man hath dared to write this thing as yet,
 And yet I know, how that the souls of all men great
 At times pass through us,
 And we are melted into them, and are not
 Save reflexions of their souls.
 Thus am I Dante for a space and am
 One François Villon, ballad-lord and thief

Pound would come to regret the way the dreamy soul of late Victorian poesy is also passing through this early work ('hath'), but he never stopped wanting to be influenced. In a letter to Dorothy during their engagement, Pound mentions 'the more difficult art in which we are half media and half creators', and this will be the method of *The Cantos*, where the poet's 'I' disappears into an endless weave of other voices, though the 'I' is most vigorously present in the way they are shaped and cut onto the page.²⁶

This aspect of Pound's thinking has caused endless trouble for his interpreters, however, because it seems to contradict everything he says about the poet's power to create the independent poem. On the one hand, Pound insists that the poem's integrity depends on the poet's own truthfulness to himself, on 'technique as a test of a man's sincerity', and on individual rhythms which must be 'uncounterfeiting, uncounterfeitable'.²⁷ Yet Pound could also say that while 'it is tremendously important that great poetry be written, it makes no jot of difference who writes it'.²⁸ This is not merely confusion on Pound's part, though, for a fusion of the poet's shaping power and the intentions and words of other people is *the* great aim of the startling technical innovations of *The Cantos*. Its technique of cut-and-pasted fragments of poems, documents and letters makes words written in one state of mind significant in ways their authors could not then anticipate, individual stars burning in much larger constellations of meaning. In Canto LXXI, for instance, Pound embeds a private letter of 1815 by the US President John Adams, where he insists that 'nor has nature nor has art partitioned the sea into empires / or into counties or knight's fees'. Adams's intention at the time was to convince his correspondent to hold to the party line and give no quarter to the British during vital treaty negotiations about American sea-power. In its new context of Canto LXXI, it becomes part of Pound's praise for all heroic leaders who defy foreign attempts to privatise what does not belong to them, and parallels his complaints about banks and international finance making profits from factories and labour that really belong to everyone. In the context of *The Cantos* as a whole, however, Adams's reference to the indivisible sea retrospectively illuminates the beginning of the poem, 420 pages earlier, which evokes Odysseus' voyage between the various islands of the Mediterranean with the sea his only constant. There the sea signifies Pound's own exile from his homeland, wandering around translating between different cultures, as well as being a medium where the gods themselves are manifest in waves of desire (Canto II), and an analogue for the poem itself, with its fluid syntax, shape-shifting references and ceaseless play of tiny reflections between syllables or phrases. Adams's speech *retrospectively* makes the sea's ungraspability link these mythic, artistic and sensuous understandings forward to international waters and fishing rights, as if modern American politics were, for a space, continuous with Homer's world. And the Canto ends with a prayer in Greek which praises Zeus, like Adams, for 'governing everything with law' (421); in Greek, the word for 'governing' means, literally, 'steering' a ship.

Like a museum curator, the anthologist can pick works written in different places and times, by authors who did not know each other, to make wholly new connections of subject and style. The anthology, one might say, is a 'vortex',

one of Pound's favourite words for poetry which exists in these unfinished, dynamic, ongoing relationships. The word comes from Plotinus' myth that creation began from a vortex or whirlpool of disparate elements, and in his early poem 'Plotinus' Pound used it to describe the poet's mind at work. But then he applied it to the image itself, calling it a 'vortex or cluster of fused ideas . . . endowed with energy that has not yet SPENT itself in expression'.²⁹ The power of the Image will continue to discharge itself as its readers and circumstances change, like the poems of *Cathay*. It is a 'radiant node or cluster . . . from which, and through which, and into which, ideas are constantly rushing'.³⁰ The vortex did not stop there; Pound used the word to describe the little magazine *Blast*, and then even the city's whole art scene, including its networks of publishing and promotion, because a vortex sucks in everything around it, including the circumstances of its making.³¹ And as a vortex is frictionless, so Pound implies that all these different poems, artists and situations are becoming one inseparable movement. As an assembly of original art and an exercise in publicity, the anthology, in short, would encapsulate Pound's desire to see creation, collaboration and circulation as part of one seamless cultural totality.

The anthologist as teacher

This leads us to the other role of the anthology, to educate and to inform public taste.³² Like many other modernists, Pound was anxious about the way that modern society produced a huge number of novels, books, plays, films and music, far too much for one person to assimilate, and most of it not worth bothering with. His letters are full of reading lists and recommendations, and much of the criticism in the *Literary Essays* consists of arguments about which poets are worth reading, and which not. Pound's ideal college syllabus in poetry, as drafted in 'How to Read', is notoriously sketchy, missing out Greek tragedy, Virgil, Shakespeare, Milton and the Romantics, and even within what remains Pound is at the business of cutting down to the minimum: 'Five or six pages of Sappho. One can throw out at least one-third of Ovid.'³³ Partly, this brisk amputation of various limbs of the poetic corpus is designed to intimidate the academy – which Pound never quite managed to join after failing to complete his PhD – and its culture of specialised learning. 'In my university', he complains in 'How to Read', 'I found various men interested (or uninterested) in their subjects, but, I think, no man with a view of literature as a whole, or with any idea whatsoever of the relation of the part he himself taught to any other part.'³⁴ One of the reasons for writing the *The Cantos* in

fragments would be to slice away the restraints of syntax and situational context on meaning so that everything left would, in some way, relate to everything else.

Partly, though, the crankiness of Pound's reading lists also comes from feeling that so much good work of his own time was not being recognised, because people had got stuck with the wrong models for poetry in the past:

One winter I had lodgings in Sussex. On the mantelpiece of the humble country cottage I found books of an earlier era, among them an anthology printed in 1830, and yet another dated 1795, and there, there by the sox of Jehosaphat was the British taste of this century, 1910, 1915, and even the present, A. D. 1931.³⁵

As time went on, Pound came to believe that this bad taste was not an accident, but part of a conspiracy of forces, all of which are compacted into a passage of Canto XXII about anthologies:

And Mr H. B. wrote in to the office:
I would like to accept C. H.'s book
But it would make my own seem so out of date.
Heaven will protect
The lay reader. The whole fortune of
Mac Narpen and Company is founded
Upon Palgrave's Golden Treasury.³⁶

Pound tells the story in 'How to Read' of his attempts to get a new anthology of poetry printed to update Palgrave's Victorian affair, and vastly to extend its range. Such a volume would have no chance, he was told, because Palgrave's publishers depended on its sales to survive. 'I perceived', adds Pound,

that there were thousands of pound sterling invested in electro-plate, and the least change in the public taste, let alone swift, catastrophic changes, would depreciate the value of those electros (of Hemans, let us say, or of Collins, Cowper and of Churchill) . . . against ignorance one might struggle, and even against organic stupidity, but against so vast vested interest the lone odds were too heavy.³⁷

By the time of this Canto, that little story has come to exemplify for Pound what has gone wrong with Western culture more widely. The 'C. H.' getting a bad referee's report in this passage is Major C. H. Douglas, whose *Economic Democracy* (1920) set out proposals for reform of the financial system – and with it, a reversal of the present, top-down system of government which concentrates power in the hands of bankers and bureaucrats and requires 'the complete subjection of the individual to an objective which is externally imposed on him.'³⁸

This centralised control, claims Douglas, is maintained by the ‘exploitation of “public opinion” manipulated by a Press owned and controlled from the apex of power’. As the title suggests, *Economic Democracy* makes its proposals in order to invert this pyramid structure so that government, newspapers and banks will serve the individual.³⁹ Pound latched on to Douglas’s ideas, and those of his collaborator, A. R. Orage – editor of *The New Age*, in which Pound had published two series of articles – because they seemed to correspond to his own general sense that modern society meant squashing the individual, and his specific feeling that its bad taste in art was a symptom of this domination.

Douglas’s and Orage’s economic argument wasn’t simple, but its core idea was that market price does not reflect true value to the community. If the laws of supply and demand are operating as they allegedly should, what’s for sale, what people want, and the amount of money available to pay for it should all balance out. But Douglas and Orage believed that the whole system was actually being manipulated by banks and their friends in politics and the press who wanted to keep the public ignorant, like the economist ‘H. B.’ (J. A. Hobson). *Economic Democracy* claims that the price of anything must include the wages of the workers who made it, plus the cost of raw materials, power, and so on. But if the workers are being paid less than the total cost of the goods they make at one factory, then they are being paid less in all of them, which means the amount of money in circulation as wages never balances the full cost of the goods, and the workers cannot afford to buy all they make. At present, the gap is currently covered by loans from banks, loans which the banks are allowed to count as assets, rather than money flowing out. Goods and their prices, then, come not from what people work for, need or can afford, but what will allow firms to pay back their debts; while banks make huge ‘profits’ for doing nothing, there is constant pressure on firms to sell anything and everything. Douglas and Orage claimed that this flawed economy actually promoted colonialism (annexing other nations to create markets to dump surplus goods on), shoddy goods (to oblige people to keep on having to replace them), and relentless advertising (to persuade people to buy things they don’t need):

The tawdry ‘ornament’, the jerry-built house, the slow and uncomfortable train service, the unwholesome sweetmeat are the direct and logical consummation of an economic system which rewards variety, quite irrespective of quality and proclaims that is it much better to ‘do’ your neighbour than to do sound and lasting work.⁴⁰

In other words, Pound found his early criticism of ornamentation, poor construction, indirectness and bad taste in poetry here scaled up to an indictment

of a whole culture. The banking system was effectively assessing value in monetary terms, and then valuing only the things which would make them the maximum amount of money in interest payments on their loans. It had lost sight of what money was actually *for*, or, as Douglas put it, 'if by wealth we mean the original meaning attached to the word: i.e., "well-being", the value in well-being to be attached to production depends entirely on its use for the promotion of well-being . . . and bears no relation whatever to the value obtained by cost accounting'.⁴¹ The replacement system, Social Credit, would mean the 'establishment of a stable ratio between the use value of effort and its money value' by establishing a 'just price'. It would bypass banks by allowing local communities to decide what projects would get credit, and measuring their value by a new system of money which directly represented available goods and work done.⁴² Above all, it would prevent usury, which means not simply the charging of interest on loans, but the capacity of the whole credit system and its measure, money, to affect the *nature* of what that money represented. Just as Pound had protested against the measure of set metres coercing the meaning of the poem, in Social Credit he found a system which would ensure that what was produced (the content), and how it was packaged (the form) perfectly harmonised. Profit would be made when there were more things made or grown, not when more loans could be made or more interest charged. And this would be true, too, of the government's relation to the people it represented. When 'political and financial systems [become] auxiliary rather than definitive', Douglas summarised, Britain will be a society of 'maximum efficiency', and it is more than coincidence that 'maximum efficiency of expression' had also been Pound's definition of the perfect poem seven years earlier.⁴³ In the passage from Canto XXII, then, Palgrave's own title, the *Golden Treasury*, becomes not merely a metaphor, but a symptom of the finance culture which protects bad art.

Pound became an obsessive preacher of Social Credit in the 1920s and 1930s because it linked the formal strategies of modernist art – no pre-set forms, no artificial measures – to the forms of society in which art could flourish. Poetry and song had once been united in the courtly culture of the troubadours: with their decline at the hands of the new mercantile and middle-class society of the Renaissance, poetry and song were also divorced, and stiff and artificial forms like the sonnet took their place.⁴⁴ Social Credit, on the other hand, would again create conditions where art could be made properly, for people and communities, and not for profit or speculation. Social Credit also provided an economic explanation for Pound's personal feeling that the deaths of his friends Hulme and Gaudier-Brzeska in the war were a symptom of the way Western 'civilisation' hated living art, a conviction which resulted in most people's

favourite Pound poem, the satire *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*. In this culture of 'tawdry cheapness', everything is poisoned by money and its indifference:

The tea-rose tea-gown etc.
 Supplants the mousseline of Cos
 The pianola 'replaces'
 Sappho's barbitos. . . .
 Even the Christian beauty
 Defects – after Samothrace
 We see το καλόν
 Decreed in the market-place.⁴⁵

Like much of Pound's earlier satire, the oppositions seem clear enough: the pre-banking culture of ancient Greece produces fabrics with connotations of light and air (mousseline also means ultra-thin glass and a light whipped sauce); England produces the 'tea-gown' in mass-produced 'tea-rose' patterns, as if all its crafts and cultures had to be soaked in warm brown liquid. Sappho composed on a seven-stringed lyre; modern Britain has the mechanical piano which plays as you turn the handle. Christian beauty has defects and it defects to the enemy; the Greek '*to kalon*' ('the beautiful/fine') is what Socrates asked his students to define, but in 1920 it had become a brand of soap and the name of an American racehorse. 'Samothrace' is the famous figure of the 'Winged Victory' in the Louvre, after which Pound thought that sculpture declined because the market began to impose its taste. Indeed, the poem's finest moment comes when it laments the bodies of men killed in the First World War for a 'civilisation' neither side knew the meaning of:

There died a myriad,
 And of the best, among them,
 For an old bitch gone in the teeth,
 For a botched civilisation . . .

 For two gross of broken statues,
 For a few thousand battered books.

(552)

The accusatory repetition of 'for', the spat-out alliterations and marvellous parharyme of 'bitch' and 'botch' make this one of Pound's most instantly memorable passages. But its target is not entirely straightforward. Quantifying the statues in gross and thousands (rather than identifying them individually) seems the sort of thing a mercantile society would do. Yet Pound himself thought real civilisation was definitely evident in *some* broken statues and battered books: the Winged Victory is headless, after all, and despite the poem's

earlier praise for the ‘sculpture’ of rhyme, Pound’s own work had broken it apart in his evocation of the fragments of classical manuscripts. Mauberley attacks the ‘accelerated grimace’ of the modern world’s desire for art made with ‘no loss of time’, but hadn’t the Image presented its complex ‘in an instant of time’?⁴⁶ As it turns out, Mauberley’s perspective is not exactly Pound’s, because in the ‘Life’ sections which follow these satires, Mauberley himself is criticised for being an ineffectual aesthete, whose appreciation of art leads to ‘no immediate application / Of this to relation of the state / To the individual’ (560). This means that the criticism of London is also a slant look at the kind of person who would make such straightforwardly horrified oppositions between a good past and a wicked present, or a pure art and a corrupting society. ‘The symbolist position, artistic aloofness from world affairs, is no good now’, Pound wrote in 1921 after his move to Paris.⁴⁷ Aided by Douglas on the one hand, and new contacts with the Paris Dadaists on the other, Pound kickstarted his stalled *Cantos*, and spent the rest of his poetic career making them the opposite kind of poetry to Mauberley’s ‘social inconsequence’; poetry that would *be* a kind of action, and which would see art and the society in which it was made as part of one simultaneous reality.⁴⁸

The Cantos

The contrast between *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* and *The Cantos* also suggests why Pound could only be satisfied by his dismayingly, exhilaratingly complex form. Mauberley was an artist who wanted to keep beauty safely tucked into art and away from political life, and his poem is mostly written in rhyming quatrains with uneven rhythms, a form which most people would instantly recognise as a slightly bent version of ‘proper poetry’. It was written in that style, Pound remembered, in response to Eliot’s call for a new ‘classicism’ in poetry to counter the ‘general floppiness’ of the free versifiers, in particular those carrying on the ‘Imagist’ brand in Amy Lowell’s 1915–17 anthology series *Some Imagist Poets*.⁴⁹ But the trouble with writing in any well-understood form, as the avant-gardists knew, is that it keeps poetry neutralised in the accepted frame of ‘art’, even if that poetry’s content is vigorously protesting against society. *Mauberley* adopts the clipped quatrains of Theophile Gautier’s *Emaux et Camées*, Gautier being a devotee of art for art’s sake who wanted his form to announce its difference from life. Wanting to put art and the just society on the same plane, *The Cantos*, on the other hand, are constructed from countless snippets of factual, historical materials; Canto after Canto is cut-and-pasted

from the letters of US President John Adams or J.-A.-M. de Moyriac de Mailla's history of the Chinese emperors, as if to say that the poetry is latently there in these lives, and Pound is simply slicing away the extraneous matter to reveal their poetic core. Cutting and pasting also implies that the process of poetic composition and the words of public life are continuous. 'Artists are the race's antennae', he famously remarked, meaning both that they are supersensitive feelers ahead of their time, *and* that they are radio antennae, conduits for the static and the traffic of a whole culture.⁵⁰ And if you have ever turned a radio dial slowly across the bandwidth and picked up the fragments of sentences, inane comments, pop songs, anecdotes, operas and adverts, then you have experienced something like the form of *The Cantos*.

This continuity between life and art is also the reason that reading *The Cantos* is more like being immersed in the city than it is looking at a sculpture in a gallery. It cannot be held in the head like a single sight: not only does it take at least a week to read as a whole, but the technique of piling noun phrase on noun phrase with few verbs deliberately blurs the *agency* of each of them, so that it is unclear which is an example of what, which is the subject and which the object. With no single perspective available to sort them all out, your mind is constantly having to readjust the elements' relative positions and its own perspective on them, until it too, becomes one of the planes in relation. In a phrase that grows more boastful the more you think about it, Pound called *The Cantos* 'an epic including history', a whole so large that it must *absorb* its own context and its reader too, for if it could be comprehended from some exterior position, it would betray what it is talking about.⁵¹ In the early vision of Canto V, for instance, the poem is discussing the gods and itself:

Measureless seas and stars,
 Iamblichus' light,
 the souls ascending,
 Sparks like a partridge covey,
 Like the 'ciocco', brand struck in the game.
 'Et omniformis': Air, fire, the pale soft light.
 Topaz I manage, and three sorts of blue;
 but on the barb of time.
 The fire? always, and the vision always,
 Ear dull, perhaps, with the vision, flitting
 And fading at will. Weaving with points of gold,
 Gold-yellow, saffron . . . The roman shoe, Aurunculeia's
 And come shuffling feet, and cries 'Da Nuces!'⁵²

This passage riffs off the mystical philosopher Iamblichus' idea that light is the basic material from which the universe is made and Ficino's principle that each intelligence is capable of forming every shape ('omniformis'), doing so by moving at the speed of light across the modern boundaries of mind and matter. The stars and the souls ascending to heaven are simultaneously the sparks of a log ('ciocco') struck as part of a fortune-telling game where people try to read their future. Jewels – refractions of this one light – symbolise different emotions, and blue here is to do with emotions of time, so the sparks of fortune ascending into the dark blue sky are instantly compressed into the sparkle of the 'topaz'. Iamblichus also claims that the gods give the fire of creativity to the poets, so that their poems are made of the same stuff as makes all things. Those points of light then metamorphose into the woven 'points of gold' and 'saffron', details which Pound takes from the Roman poet Catullus' wedding hymn XVI, connecting human fertility to the earlier idea of creative fire. And as you puzzle all this out, you realise that your mind is doing what the passage is talking about, 'weaving' together thoughts and objects, sensual experience and mystical philosophy, through a syntax which refuses to state which is subject, verb or object. Pound is an unmetaphorical poet, because he rarely talks about a real situation which might be described in terms taken from somewhere else: his syntax and his mysticism make everything in the poem different aspects of the same reality, including the reader.⁵³ Once the resonance of each phrase is understood, all the poem's elements begin to refract off each other, and so what from one point of view is getting lost might also be called immersing yourself in the immediate, total whole. As Yeats put it:

Everything rounds and thrusts itself without edges, without contours – conventions of the intellect – from a splash of tints and shades, to achieve a work as characteristic of the art of the times as the paintings of Cézanne, avowedly suggested by Porteous, as 'Ulysses' and its dream association of words and images, a poem in which there is nothing that can be taken out and reasoned over, nothing that is not part of the poem itself.⁵⁴

This is not to say, however, that *The Cantos* does not have some very clear themes and patterns of imagery. Its major constructive principle is 'subject-rhymes', where each Canto constellates 'luminous details' from different cultures which resemble one another. One constellation is heroic men of action who stand out against the general corruption and incompetence of their times. This links the letters of Sigismundo Malatesta and his struggles to build a 'Tempio' of pre-Christian art (Cantos VIII–XI) with Thomas Jefferson and John Adams, and their struggles to build the American democracy against its

enemies abroad and within (XXXI–XXXIV, LXII–LXXI), to the long list of good and bad rulers of China (LII–LXI) and both by implication to Mussolini, whom Pound thought was resisting corporate control and actively building an Italian state based on true value (XLI). Another is the contrast between the natural increase of love and honesty compared to the destruction caused by the growth of usury and mistaken values. The sequence about the art funded by the Medici bankers (XXI–XXX) shows how art declines with the rise of capitalism, and reaches its pitch in Cantos XL–XLVI with the famous denunciation of the way usury corrupts the most private and the most public affairs alike:

no picture is made to endure nor to live with
 but it is made to sell and sell quickly
 with usura, sin against nature,
 is thy bread ever more of stale rags
 with no mountain wheat, no strong flour
 with usura the line grows thick
 with usura is no clear demarcation
 and no man can find site for his dwelling.⁵⁵

Usury is a cancer which spreads between art, natural fertility, diet, farming, town planning, dishonest weights and so forth. And mixed in with all of these are ‘rhymes’ with stories Pound heard, the Chinese ideograms and anecdotes from his own life. In the *Pisan Cantos* (LXXIV–LXXXIV) – composed as Pound found himself a prisoner of war, spending his initial captivity outdoors in a cage – reminiscences come flooding in, as Pound has almost no books to read, and is forced to ask what his life has come to instead. Folded into these memories are the sights and sounds of guards passing by, the insects who were his only companions, and the ‘music’ made by the shape of the birds perching on the stave of the telegraph wires. Just as it tells you about the publishing history of Palgrave’s *Golden Treasury* or the details and receipts of Malatesta’s Tempio, *The Cantos* is art which flags up the material sources of art, including its own, because social life itself ought to be poetry too.

Indeed, it would be misleading to talk about ‘material sources’ in Pound if that implied an opposition to ‘spiritual forces’, because happily intertwined with all these sections are visions of the divine (as with Canto V) in which spiritual and material, soul and environment are the same substance, and the disabling modern splits between mind and matter are overcome. Pound probably got the idea that history has ‘subject-rhymes’ from his friend Allen Upward, whose book *The Divine Mystery* tries to reinterpret all religion, psychology and magic as symbolic versions of one truth, with art the inheritor of this tradition in a secular age. Upward’s poet is a magician-cum-telepathist who senses the

harmonies of 'ethereal influences as they are manifested within himself, in his emotions'.⁵⁶ This was close to Pound's own belief, too: a god is manifest when 'states of mind take form' in art, he once stated, and man becomes god 'when he enters one of these states of mind'.⁵⁷ Art and emotion are simultaneously subjective and a revelation of the gods which the poet's 'mediumistic function' manifests, and, in so doing, his private creation is connected to the current of the 'vital universe' of 'tree and living rock'.⁵⁸ In short, poetry means states of ecstatic fusion between the self in all its individuality and the forces which make all things happen. The point of the *Cantos*' style, then, is not to tell a message or show a picture, but to make you a participant in that imaginative unity of being which the secular subjectivity of the modern West, its systems of accountancy and habits of government, denies you.

Where did it all go wrong?

There are many reasons why Pound turned to fascism in the mid-1920s. He was devoted to Italy as the centre of so much Western civilisation, and justified Mussolini's rise as a revolt against a corrupt Western system of international finance and its allies that would let no nation determine itself. Like Yeats, he thought that Italian fascism meant government by an individual, rather than by the impersonal, number-based system of democracy, and that it would be good for true individuals. Fascist anti-Semitism dovetailed neatly with his specific dislike of rich Jewish banking families, and Pound didn't usually make the effort to distinguish the two (though he did support the establishment of Israel, believing in 'Zionism against international finance').⁵⁹ His own long war to get poetry published in England had led him to see all opposition as inevitably stupid and merely confirmation that he was right. With Nietzsche and Machiavelli, he believed that 'there are few real men, the rest are sheep', and that art and politics alike are really only affected by geniuses.⁶⁰

But believing any of these things does not automatically link Pound's politics to the way the poetry is written. Curiously, it may be Pound's aesthetic of wholeness, or the way he imagines what true democracy is, which does that. The most democratic part of *The Cantos* is the Adams Cantos (LXII–LXXI) which quote John Adams's struggles to keep America democratic against the machinations of the British and the pro-banking members of his own government, with many implied parallels to Mussolini. Cantos LXVII–LXVIII celebrate Adams's long-sighted separations of power between 'legislative, executive and judicial' elements, and 'the one, the few, the many', i.e. between President, Senate and People.⁶¹ This constitutional system of checks and balances is Adams's brilliant

solution to the problem of power being concentrated in any one element of the nation and tyrannising the others, as with the aristocracy in Britain 'with the people its mere dupe', or the violence of the popular assembly during the French Revolution.⁶² But everything in these Cantos' style is actually about the *unification* of power, in the sense that Pound believed good government partakes in the one law which also governs natural fertility, sex, divine vision, poetic form, honest money, and so on. On the same page on which Pound mentions the separation of powers, for instance, Adams's ideas on government are connected to Milton, whose utopian commonwealth is by implication as wrong-headed as his Latinate poetry style, to techniques of ploughing and pruning, to sensible financial reform, and to Pope's mistranslations of Homer.⁶³

Two undemocratic things follow from this. The first is that Pound's ideal is not one which respects the boundaries of private and public: effectively, it assumes that the good state and the good individual are simply aspects of the same natural law. Pound once wrote to a poet, Iris Barry, that 'To a primitive man, a thing only IS what it does. That is Fenollosa but I think the theory is a good one for poets to go by.'⁶⁴ The principle that being is doing is meant to indicate why Fenollosa's Chinese ideograms have a concrete reality and a wholeness missing from Western languages. But taken into the political realm, it leaves few resources to fight for, say, human rights, which depend on a difference between what citizens are and what they do. The second is that Pound shows a distinct lack of interest in any mechanisms for disagreement, as in his early statement that poetry ought to be irrefutable. Because his poetics are always intent on protecting the individual element from interference, *and* imagining non-coercive and dynamic wholes made of those individuals – as the image is both unique and a vortex – he has little interest in any structures of representation by which various ones need to be related to the all, or, politically, how different individual views can be brought into coalitions and parties.⁶⁵ Both individual and system are organic, so *cannot* come into collision, and anything which mediates their relationship is in the way. Socially based measurement implies mediation, bureaucracy and the reduction of things into average units – one man, one vote – whereas poetically, true value was non-negotiable, instantly recognisable 'accurate' measurement of the nature of the thing. As Cary Wolfe points out, Pound's interest in Chinese ideogrammatic directness and Social Credit's attack on market value both boil down to a desire to know the values of things without social disagreement.⁶⁶ This desire for unmediated relations is not fascist either, of course. Wanting poetry to make a direct connection between the unique and the universal is a general feature of post-Romantic poetry itself, and Pound's poetics would continue to inspire the leftist-anarchist Black Mountain and Beat poets during the years of

his incarceration in St Elizabeth's Hospital, New Jersey. But it's fair to say that because Pound tended to do all his thinking with reference to poetry, these poetics did not give Pound enough internal warning when Mussolini began to eradicate all checks on his own power.

Nor did they give Pound quite enough warning when his own style slips from rapture to lecture. Anyone who sets out to read *The Cantos* will sooner or later experience a conflict between the sensation of immersion and the sensation of being told what to think. David Moody puts the positive side of the poem's technique very well:

Perhaps it should not be thought of as 'meaning' at all, but rather as an energising of the mind to see things in relation to each other and so to develop an original way of conceiving the ready made world.⁶⁷

But too much of the later *Cantos* is also Pound prodding his finger at you to get the meaning; the compressed references lose any intrinsic beauty and become a series of notes pointing at sources backing up Pound's point. Ironically, Pound's attempt to evoke sensuous unity of being for itself becomes a preachifying list of examples, texts which are always being *used* in Pound's war against the capitalists. The anthologist as teacher overtakes the anthologist as creator. But then, as he wrote in 1922, 'a revelation is always didactic.'⁶⁸

Recommended Further Reading

The Cambridge Companion to Ezra Pound, ed. by Ira B. Nadel (Cambridge University Press, 1999).

Charles Ferrall, *Modernist Writing and Reactionary Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 2001).

Lawrence Rainey, 'Pound or Eliot: Whose Era?', in *The Cambridge Companion to Modernist Poetry*, ed. by Alex Davis and Lee M. Jenkins (Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 87–113. A trenchant comparison of their different styles and critical fortunes.

Carroll F. Terrell, *A Companion to The Cantos of Ezra Pound* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980).

Cary Wolfe, *The Limits of American Literary Ideology in Pound and Emerson* (Cambridge University Press, 1993).

Chapter 3

T. S. Eliot

The paradoxes of self and world 57

Eliot's early criticism 62

The Waste Land 68

Eliot's later criticism 73

Eliot's Christianity 77

The paradoxes of self and world

T. S. Eliot was a creature of paradoxes, and paradoxes which he did his best to cultivate and sustain. He wrote a jumpy, fragmented poetry about terrifying isolation, while insisting he was keeping with the oldest traditions of civilisation and order. *The Waste Land* has come to be seen as *the* poem of the twentieth century, and yet Eliot was profoundly unhappy with that century, and distrusted his contemporaries' reasons for thinking they understood him.¹ He was the American who thought the English were so 'very different from ourselves' in 1917, while at the same time positioning himself as the guardian of the truest English culture.² He deplored using poetic learning for the 'more pretentious modes of publicity', and yet worked night and day to write the literary journalism and cultivate the contacts which would make him *the* authority in mid-century English letters.³ Part of his campaign involved attacking other poets for insincerity and rhetoric, immediately after he had written a PhD thesis which argues that there is absolutely no fixed boundary between the inner life and social experience, and that 'the self is a construction'.⁴ He criticised many rival poets for not being individual enough, and then advised them to 'surrender' to tradition.⁵ He felt good poetry would have only a small but discerning public, and that it depended on popular culture to survive.⁶ And these various judgements are each delivered with complete assurance and mordant criticism of his opponents. This mandarin conviction – and his own generation's willingness to be impressed by it – would give younger critics ample reasons to want to pull Eliot off his pedestal, and they have been helped by new

information about his wretched first marriage, new searchlights turned on his anti-Semitic and misogynistic writing, and revealing detective work about the far-right politics of his associates.⁷

Now that Eliot's reputation is not what it was, though, more sympathetic critics have turned back to these paradoxes as evidence of Eliot's relentless self-irony, undercutting all that he appears to say most dogmatically.⁸ Or they have seen his capacity to argue on either side of the case as a ruthlessly pragmatic way to outflank his opponents.⁹ Eliot's paradoxes certainly have these useful effects, allowing him to sound like he has anticipated all possible positions without being restricted by any of them. But part of Eliot's distinctiveness comes from the way he really *believes* in those paradoxes. His criticism works tremendously hard to insist that opposites really are related, that self and world really are two sides of the same coin, that the individual and the tradition or the elite and the popular are mutually interdependent. And the emotions around the separation and fusion of irreconcilable points of view are a signal feature of the poetry itself. 'Opposition is true friendship', remarked Blake, a poet whose influence is stronger in Eliot's oeuvre than Eliot's criticism would lead you to suspect, and it's a motto for the fencing-match between 'you and I' maintained by Eliot's most famous early success, J. Alfred Prufrock.

Let us go then, you and I,
When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherised upon a table;¹⁰

Since we never learn anything more about the 'you' here, most people think 'you and I' are two aspects of Prufrock himself, and that the poem is about a pathological self-consciousness in which the 'I' is constantly seeing itself as 'you', like a vain TV actor wondering if the cameras are catching him in the best light ('they will say: "How his hair is growing thin!"). The idea is supported by a passage from Eliot's PhD thesis written a few years later, in which he describes how there is an unbridgeable gulf between the way we know the world by practical experience, and the way theoretical, objective philosophy knows it, because both ways make the world 'a construction':

We can never, I mean, wholly explain the practical world from a theoretical point of view, because this world is what it is by reason of the practical point of view and the world which we try to explain [theoretically] is a world spread out upon a table – simply *there!*¹¹

The engaged 'I' perspective can never share the same world as the 'I' described from the outside as a 'you' or 'he'. This philosophical split between an internal and external knowing which must, on some other unattainable level, be part of the same thing, becomes in Prufrock's case a spiralling of perspectives; from the

self he feels to the self known to others ('upon a table'), to the self which knows and fears what others think when they see him, to the self which is then aware it is falsifying those original feelings by being so self-conscious about them, to a self which despairs of its own divorce from itself, and so forth. Prufrock is the ageing would-be dandy, a remnant of the type noted by Baudelaire and cultivated by Laforgue in the nineteenth century, who mentally 'live and sleep before the mirror'.¹² Possessed by the need to 'make himself an original', the dandy's self-appointed mission was to revolt against the soulless, democratic homogeneity of the masses through faultless self-possession in manners, and an expensively minimalist, 'absolute simplicity' of dress: 'my necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple pin' supplies the perfect touch of menswear-ad narcissism.¹³ Eliot was first attracted to the dandy ethos of individualism when he came across Arthur Symons's description of Baudelaire's and Laforgue's own verse as a 'revolt against exteriority, against rhetoric, against a materialistic tradition' and, like him, Prufrock loathes the 'eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase' and pin him 'wriggling on the wall' for all to see.¹⁴

This desire to stay unfixd is, however, also what keeps Prufrock from ever declaring himself, as the dandy's need to be original requires a constant evasion of others' expectations. As the rhythm is constantly 'withdrawing' from a pattern and then 'approximating' to it (Eliot's definition of free verse), so the poem moves with the constant push-and-pull of Prufrock's own desires to speak out and his fear that, if he does so, he will be misunderstood by other people's formulae.¹⁵ That anguish is then increased by the thought that he's avoiding the issue by not speaking, immediately followed by bitter cultivation of such despair as aesthetic compensation for this failure to act. After the long six- and seven-stress lines about what 'they' will say of his dress, for instance, the verse is suddenly brought up short with a theatrical pause:

Do I dare
Disturb the universe?

The dramatic silence after 'dare' conveys both the decision's awful potential and a certain flamboyance, and the alliteration round it makes clear that Prufrock is rhetorically admiring himself for the gesture, while at the same time crushingly aware of its cosmic ridiculousness, as if the universe could *ever* be disturbed by himself. 'In a minute there is time' sounds as though it might be hopeful – there is always time to decide – but the same thought immediately becomes a way of putting it off, and the verse flows back into the comfortingly hopeless sing-song of 'decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse'. This convoluted mixture of self-inflation, self-deprecation and self-inflation *through* self-deprecation is Prufrock's masochistic, hysterical hallmark.¹⁶ He oscillates between the desire to be an individual 'I', the despairing knowledge

that he is always, for others, a general 'you' or 'he', a fear that such knowledge has already generalised his own feelings, and a certain consoling superiority at such self-awareness. All four are present in the casually absurd rhymes ('murder and create' with 'plate'; 'crisis' with 'ices', 'me' with 'tea'), and in the lurking vanity behind the protestations of his own unimportance:

But though I have wept and fasted, wept and prayed,
 Though I have seen my head (grown slightly bald) brought in upon a
 platter
 I am no prophet – and here's no great matter.

John the Baptist (and later, Lazarus and Prince Hamlet) are all figures whose suffering reveals the empty values of the worldly powers that oppose them (Herod, Dives, Claudius): denying that he ever could be such a lonely hero, however, ironically suggests how much Prufrock had hoped to be one, weeping and fasting in order to see himself become a prophet.¹⁷ 'Wept and fasted' sends Prufrock's vanity up by comparison with King David's mourning for his enemy Saul, but the same self-mockery is a way to admire himself as a martyr to honesty by doing the mocking.¹⁸ 'No! I am not Prince Hamlet' ghosts a phrase from Walter Pater's *Appreciations*, 'No! Shakespeare's Kings are not, nor are meant to be, great men', as if Prufrock has all along been modelling his humble failure on great literature.¹⁹ And since Eliot thought Pater was appreciating his own sensitivity rather more than the subjects he wrote about, the hint is that Prufrock's own climb-downs are yet another self-absorbed pose.²⁰ 'At times, almost, the Fool', concludes the passage, mournfully, but recuperating its sense of self-importance by being perfectly aware that the fool is still the one who speaks the truth to kings.

This continual re-framing of each feeling as a pose presents a problem for the reader of the poem, though. At what stage does Prufrock stop knowing himself? Are these literary allusions a humiliating giveaway, or are they themselves self-protectively knowing usages of famous poems to deflect criticism of Prufrock's own desires? When Prufrock says, 'I have heard the mermaids singing', he is alluding to Donne's song 'Goe, and catche a falling star', whose list of impossibilities includes hearing mermaids sing and culminates in the impossibility of finding a faithful woman.²¹ Is the allusion a coded way of saying that *he* has found such a woman (although not one interested in him), or that he recognises his own desires in Donne's lyric, or a way to safely distance himself from those desires by glancing them off Donne's song? The trouble is that every statement in the poem can be taken as an expression of internal feeling, a dramatically ironic reflection on that feeling as if from outside it, a disclosure of the complex internality which stages such self-divided reflections, a suspicion that this complex internality is itself a defensive move, and ever

onwards. 'I should have been a pair of ragged claws', says Prufrock, and the wish reveals an unexpected similarity between these continual re-presentations of feeling and the exoskeletal structure of the crab, whose insides are on the outside, and who lives by scavenging from the dead. Indeed, the reader's alternation between sympathy and judgement for Prufrock – a sad old man, a superior self-victimiser? – is stuck in the same gap between external and internal perspectives which Prufrock is in. We think we know what he feels, but then we realise that this might be a pose, which we then feel clever for spotting, but then realise that, on the same logic, we are posing to ourselves as superior beings, and the cycle goes on. External and internal must both be true, but neither can account for the other – and more than one reader has exclaimed, on trying to explain her intuition of Prufrock's tangle of feelings, 'it is impossible to say just what I mean!', and found her own response already in the poem itself.

These sudden, unstable reversals between intimacy and distance – between 'you' and 'I', or reader and poem – have their social counterpart in the trapped, claustrophobic atmosphere of the early poems. When Prufrock notes how 'the women come and go / Talking of Michelangelo', the 'the' suggests the bored isolation of one who has 'known them all already' ('the room', 'the women') and yet focuses, hypnotised, on evocative but inexplicable details – 'Michelangelo', and later, 'men in shirt-sleeves', or 'arms that are braceleted and white and bare'. Like close-cropped snapshots, the details gain a mysterious power by cutting off their owners and settings, while the social paraphernalia – 'the novels', 'the teacups' – seem to be all that persists of the vaporous humans who read them or drink from them. But the rapid switch between the unexplained and the over-familiar has the effect of eliminating the normal world of choice and action between them, which gives Eliot's early poems their feel of life happening automatically and helplessly. In the city of 'Preludes', for instance, people don't go to work or smoke pipes; their bodies do it for them disconnectedly with trampling feet and 'short square fingers stuffing pipes'. It's the evening which 'settles down', the morning that 'comes to consciousness', and the night that reveals, as if the people settling or waking were sleepwalking, acting their parts set out for them by the day's progress. However isolated it wants to be from this uncanny puppet-like world ('a vision of the street as the street hardly understands'), the lonely perceptive consciousness of the speaker is, like Prufrock, unable to act or influence it. The soul which projects itself outside the confines of the body appears to be in opposition to the soulless bodies of the city, but when it becomes a part of the evening 'stretched tight across the skies', you are always kept waiting for the action to arrive. 'Stretched' sounds like the main verb, but it is contradicted by 'or trampled by insistent feet', suggesting that both are adjectival subclauses – 'his soul, stretched

tight . . .’ – which precede another verb after the colon: but the short square fingers and evening newspapers have none, as if the soul were always powerless to act. And the outside world’s repetition is echoed by the repetition of the speaker’s own words, the newspapers from vacant lots and evening newspapers, curled hair-papers and curled fancies, yellow feet and muddy feet and so on. Like the city’s ‘furnished rooms’ and ‘vacant lots’, the same words have different intentions inhabiting them temporarily, as if the speaker were feeling his own words to be only borrowed, too.

The same horrible reversal between the innermost self and its environment is visible when the speaker of ‘Rhapsody’ goes slumming. As in ‘Prufrock’ and its predecessor, ‘Prufrock’s Pervergilium’, poverty tourism is usually a middle-class pastime where the shocks and horrors encountered are salved by the precious feel of the voyager’s internal superiority: it matters rather less whether the emotion on seeing the poor is pity or hard-heartedness.²² But Eliot’s drifts around the night-time city seem held together only by the clock (as Prufrock is measured by coffee spoons), since they consist of images in which ‘the floors of memory’ dissolve, and with it, the consistent personality which memory guarantees. The woman’s eye that ‘twists’ recalls ‘twisted things’ like branches, but the broken spring or the child’s automatic hand could belong to memory, the present, or present desire constructing memory, for ‘memory is an elaborate and artificial product.’²³ Without a verb to coordinate them, the accumulating images make it unclear what is subject and what object, what is interior and what exterior. It’s as if the speaker has himself become as automatic and vacant as what he sees, turning out poetry as mechanically as the street pianos that tinkle so wistfully throughout Eliot’s earliest poems, *Inventions of the March Hare*. All that remains in ‘Preludes’ are the persistent ‘smells’ of cocktails, women and cigarettes, significant because smell is the most intimate and the most violating of all the senses. As Pound noted after finishing editing *The Waste Land*, Eliot noticed ‘above all else . . . smells / Without attraction’; smell evokes the most vivid memories and a contaminating sense of inhaling foreign bodies. In these early poems, then, inside and outside, soul and body, or simply ‘you and I’, are presented as opposite, like Prufrock recoiling in horror from his world. But then they turn out to be two aspects of the same thing, and it is the rapidity of that identity shift which makes the nightmare landscape between them.

Eliot’s early criticism

Eliot had completed many of these poems before he arrived in England in August 1914 to begin a PhD thesis on the Oxford philosopher and recluse F. H. Bradley. During his first year, however, he also became involved with Pound,

Wyndham Lewis and other revolutionary artists in London. Pound published 'Preludes' in *Blast* (1915), and Eliot began to write literary journalism, first as the assistant editor of *The Egoist*, and then, as his reputation for intelligent and caustic criticism increased, for papers including the *New Statesman* (British and anti-modernist), *The Athenaeum* (progressive, though not to Eliot's taste), *The Dial* (American and generally pro-modernist) and the *Times Literary Supplement* (distinguished but often very conservative). None of these paid enough for him to survive on journalism, so he took a job with Lloyd's bank and wrote many of the reviews late at night, sick with exhaustion and anxiety about the marriage he'd made in 1916 to Vivien Haigh-Wood. Eliot's sheer hard work in the cause of his own literary values, coupled with his skilful navigation through the different alliances and loyalties of these papers, has struck several critics as at odds with his 'axiomatic' belief that 'a creation, a work of art, is autotelic', with its own goals and values, although it is quite in keeping with Prufrock's hypersensitivity to his own appearance and the delicate audience-baiting of 'Portrait'.²⁴ By 1922 he had become well enough known to take the helm of his own periodical, *The Criterion*, initially financed by Lady Rothermere, estranged wife of the proprietor of the conservative, middlebrow and xenophobic *Daily Mail*. It is a nice irony that the modernist, intellectual Eliot, whose *Dial* criticism enjoyed lambasting the typical *Mail* reader who 'rejects with contumely . . . all the individuals who do not conform to a world of mass-production', was being funded by the latter's profits. But Eliot managed it because his criticism over all these years had been developing two apparently contradictory strands.²⁵ One was devoted to criticising the wilful conformity, blandness and homogenisation of middle-class society and its poets in the name of a truer individuality. But the other strand, the sort which could appeal to Lady Rothermere's social pretensions, was dedicated to criticising soulless, levelling modernity for its democratic illusions, and promoting a return to an anti-individualistic, 'royalist' and 'classical' society, run by an elite. This produces some remarkably self-contradictory pieces, but they make more sense if we see Eliot's criticism continually trying to find scenarios where the free individual and a social order can be immediately fused together in an 'autotelic' (self-defining) whole, scenarios which include the poem, the poet, what Eliot calls 'tradition', and then in *Notes towards the Definition of Culture*, a 'culture' itself.

The very first scenario where the individual and the collective are fused, however, comes in Eliot's PhD thesis on Bradley, the philosopher who is quoted in *The Waste Land*. In the poem, Eliot cites Dante's imprisoned Ugolino, who heard the key 'turn in the door once, and once only' and knew he would never escape, and footnotes this with a quotation from F. H. Bradley's *Appearance and Reality*:

My external sensations are no less private to myself than are my thoughts or feelings. In either case my experience falls within my own circle, a circle closed on the outside; and, with all its elements alike, every sphere is opaque to the others which surround it.

It seems so clear: *The Waste Land* is all about the ‘indestructible barriers between one human being and another’, and this is of a piece with the poem’s fragmented form and its characters’ utter lack of sympathy for each other.²⁶ When this quotation appears in Eliot’s philosophical writing, however, it is part of an argument moving in quite a different direction. Eliot’s PhD criticises the standard ‘realist’ position that there is a common, external world out there that is contrasted with various subjective feelings about this world inside every person’s head. Instead, it argues, ‘there is never more than a practical separation between the object and that which apprehends it.’²⁷ The world is not split into things and minds: things are what they are because of the way they are known by minds, and minds are what they are because of the world they sense. Consequently, ‘the *Ich* and its objects then form metaphysically one whole, a whole from which we can abstract in either direction.’²⁸ This whole is what Bradley called ‘a finite centre’ – an immediate cluster of mind and world – and the universe (the ‘absolute’) is made of all possible finite centres. In consequence, Eliot’s PhD is always attacking the equal and opposite errors of believing the ‘self’ is naturally isolated from the world (for it is one with the world it sees), and believing that it can be understood by any external system (for it is one with the world it sees). The paper in which Eliot summarises this uses Bradley’s words about ‘external sensations’ to attack the second error, but as part of an overall argument to show that Bradley’s significance lies in holding *both* positions, as the next few pages make clear:

On the one hand, my experience is in principle essentially public. My emotions may be better understood by others than by myself; as my oculist knows my eyes. And on the other hand everything, the whole world, is private to myself. Internal and external are thus not adjectives applied to different contents within the same world; they are different points of view. . . . the point of view from which each soul is a world in itself must not be confused with the point of view from which each soul is only the function of a physical organism, a unity perhaps only partial, capable of alteration, development, having a history and a structure, a beginning and apparently an end. And yet these two worlds are the same. And if the two points of view are irreconcilable, yet on the other hand neither would exist without the other, and they melt into each other by a process which we cannot grasp.²⁹

And melting into each other is exactly the phrase Eliot also used in a footnote to describe the interaction of the characters in *The Waste Land* (as ‘the one-eyed merchant, seller of currants, melts into the Phoenician sailor . . . so all the women are one woman’). Everyone in that poem is isolated, and all of them are also homogenised: each exists as a ‘function’ of their environment, time and place, and each is unique. And the point is that there are *no* half-way stages between them, and neither one grounds the other:

The world, we may insist, is neither one nor many except as that one or many has meaning in experience, and it is either one or many according as we contemplate it altogether as an object . . . or as we treat the world as finite centres and their experiences . . . and the two views are so far from antagonistic as to be complementary. The self, we find, seems to depend on a world which depends upon it; and nowhere, I repeat, can we find anything original or ultimate.³⁰

This is the spiral that Eliot’s early poems are trapped in, turning continually between feeling lonely and feeling that their feelings are clichés or just symptoms of his time and place. But it also offers Eliot an unassailable position in his criticism. On the one hand, many of his Georgian and Imagist contemporaries are dismissed for their clichés and sentimental attachments to poetic words which they do not really feel.³¹ They are posing to themselves as poets, and do not understand that:

The Arts insist that a man shall dispose of all that he has, even of his family tree, and follow art alone. For they require that a man be not a member of a family or of a caste or of a party or of a coterie, but simply and solely himself.³²

The echoes of Jesus’ demand to the rich young man in Luke 18:22 (‘sell all thou hast, and distribute unto the poor . . . and come, follow me’) emphasises modernism’s challenge to all inherited positions. But the other strand of Eliot’s criticism insists the truly individual artist’s task is not self-expression, as you would expect. Rather, it is to distil himself into the work so that the personality ‘loses its accidents’ and ‘becomes a permanent point of view, a phase in the history of mind’, part of a greater whole.³³ Only by discovering a ‘profound kinship, or rather of a peculiar personal intimacy, with another, probably a dead author’ can the poet change ‘from a bundle of second-hand sentiments into a person’.³⁴ And so Eliot’s rivals are also criticised for being too individualistic, for having no idea of their place in literary tradition.³⁵

That word is the keynote of the famous essay in which these two strands intertwine, ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’, with its insistence that ‘the

most individual' part of the artist's work is exactly where 'the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously'.³⁶ Contrary to the prevailing wisdom of most creative writing classes, Eliot insists here that what matters for the poem is *not* what matters personally for the artist. The artist must treat his own impressions and experiences as so much material, and material which can be woven through with the work and feelings of other poets and artists, creating a pattern of feelings greater than the person compiling them. The poet *becomes* individual, paradoxically, by writing 'not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe . . . has a simultaneous existence and a simultaneous order' (38). With Dante and Homer at his elbow, the artist must become aware that 'the poet has, not a "personality" to express, but a particular medium' (42). And for the personality to be a medium, channelling the voices of the dead, requires:

A continual surrender of himself as he is at the moment to something which is more valuable. The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality. (40)

In 'The Function of Criticism', written two years later as commentary on 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', Eliot expanded on the social implications of what he meant by 'self-sacrifice'. He was putting the idea forward, he said, that 'men cannot get on without giving allegiance to something outside themselves', and he went on to attack his colleague Middleton Murry, who thought that artists 'must depend on the inner voice' as a way to 'a self that is universal'.³⁷

My belief is that those who possess this inner voice are ready enough to hearken to it, and will hear no other. The inner voice, in fact, sounds remarkably like an old principle which has been formulated by an elder critic in the now familiar phrase of 'doing as one likes'. The possessors of the inner voice ride ten in a compartment to a football match at Swansea, listening to the inner voice, which breathes the eternal message of vanity, fear, and lust.³⁸

Eliot's moral criticism is inextricable from rancorous snobbery: listening to your inner voice is what the chaotic, undisciplined, uncultured working classes – worse, the Welsh working classes – do. The 'inner voice' is actually a product of an industrialised, class-divided society, and is no way to promote either the artist or his culture. Both are found through discipline, and for the artist that discipline means submitting your creative inner voice to the system of 'organic wholes' made by each country's tradition, 'only in relation to which, individual works of art . . . have their significance'.³⁹ This is the voice of the

Eliot who, as early as 1916, had lectured in favour of ‘classicism’, defined as ‘form and restraint in art, discipline and authority in religion, centralization in government’,⁴⁰ and it seems to put ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ firmly in the line of reactionary criticism Eliot has become infamous for, and which seems to be at such an odds with his fragmented poetry.

But just as being individual actually requires tradition, so the ‘tradition’ is rather more friendly to the individual than it might seem. Despite all his talk of self-sacrifice and surrender – charged terms at the end of the First World War – Eliot is not saying we should go back to the past, for at the same time as the poet is fitting into the tradition, he is also *changing* it. If the whole of literature composes a simultaneous order, what happens when a new work of art comes along?

The *whole* existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new. Whoever has approved this idea of order, of the form of European, of English literature will not find it preposterous that the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past.⁴¹

Instead of the individual restrained by tradition, the tradition accommodates itself to the individual, just as Eliot’s PhD thesis thought ‘the self depends on a world which in turn depends on it’.⁴² Eliot has read Dante, but Dante’s hell will look different after Eliot’s vision of modern commuters which quotes it. And for the artist, ‘surrendering’ to the tradition also means that his work will be future-proofed. It may change, for great poetry’s ‘moral and social relations’ are ‘created in the process of history: we cannot tell, in advance, what any poetry is going to do, how it will operate upon later generations’.⁴³ But it cannot be superseded, because the future always involves reanimating the past.

A lot of critical ink has been spilt trying to reconcile these two strands. How can Eliot demand individual art, and yet say that the work exists by virtue of its relation to other works, and is thus endlessly changing? How can the artist be truly himself, and yet also a medium?⁴⁴ But like his PhD, Eliot’s thinking always makes these oppositions continuous aspects of the same thing, an attitude in which mysticism and pragmatic opportunism also coalesce. Yet the mysterious result is that Eliot’s recipe for social and artistic cohesion – the immediate fusion of individual and tradition – is horribly close to the contemporary nightmare of *The Waste Land*, in which solitude and the crowd are also, it seems, the same thing.

The Waste Land

As one of the most famous poems of the twentieth century, *The Waste Land* is also one of the most infamously obscure. Its technique of interconnecting fragments of speech, myth, quotation, allusion, gives you a myriad possible points of view, and none of them grounds or holds together the others. But part of its difficulty has been made by all the scholarly explanations of the allusions, because it takes so long to work through them that the poem becomes only a summary of its sources, and the point of its style goes missing. Like all modernist poetry, the manner in which the poem speaks is part of what it is talking about, and it is talking about getting lost. One of the features of a waste land, after all, is that there aren't any places to stop and get your bearings; another is the overwhelming sense of despair it inspires in anyone trying to cross it. The more you understand the allusions, in fact, the more you are meant to experience the feeling of going round and round in circles.

Take the opening two lines, for instance. The title alludes to the empty, poisoned landscape Arthurian knights had to cross in order to find the Chapel Perilous and the Holy Grail, which would cure the king and heal the land. In Eliot's source-text, Jessie L. Weston's *From Ritual to Romance*, this blighted land is caused by the maiming of the Fisher King, an archetypal story which she claims reappears in many religions and cults around the world, and certainly other elements of it resurface in the references to Parsifal (202), St Augustine on chastity (307–8) and fishing (189–91, 424). But the waste land also links to other deserts: the deserts of the Bible from which the prophets came and in which Jesus was tempted (20); the blasted landscapes of the First World War, in which so many had died after the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand (14, 366–76); the hellish landscape of the underworld in Dante's *Inferno* (63), the desert in which the nightingale sings (101) and – in no particular order of awfulness – Margate Sands (300). The next lines are a quotation from Petronius' *Satyricon* reporting the Sybil, a prophetess whose job was to lead people down to the underworld – as *The Waste Land* is always miming Virgil and Dante's voyages there – but her torment was to grow ever older while remaining, like the miserable shades, unable to die. This looks forwards to the speaker of the opening lines of the poem, for whom spring is a torment because it brings him back to life (1–7); to the clairvoyant and medium Madame Sosostriis (43) and all the poem's foretellings in Tiresias (243); to the speaker, 'neither / Living nor dead' (39–40), the dead sound of the beginning of the working day in the City (68), and the sprouting corpses of soldiers which follow (71–4), the abandoned disciples (328–9). It is the cruel double of all the rising gods of spring and fertility (198, 324–7, 428) and its returning swallows (428). It also

connects outwards to the streets of London and Paris after the war, full of soldiers whose bodies lived in the present but whose minds were stuck in some horrific trench, and to the grieving parents haunted by their dead sons because they had been unable to see them buried properly. But the Sybil would also issue her cryptic responses in poems written on leaf fragments, often scattered by the wind (173, 388, 430), or by sounding her words through a network of caves and chambers so her voice became many voices, which look forward to the cancelled title of part II, 'In the Cage', a Henry James story about a young woman in a telegraph office misinterpreting a love affair by piecing together the brief telegrams wrongly, and of course, to you and me, its struggling readers.

The best way of grappling with *The Waste Land* at first is to try to connect each fragment to one or more of these chains of association. Apart from deserts and prophecies, other major ones include:

- Bad sex: Tristan and Isolde (31–4, 42), Belladonna (49), the rape of Philomela (99–102), Antony and Cleopatra (77), Albert, Lil and Marvell's 'To his Coy Mistress' (139–72), Sweeney (198), the Typist and the Clerk (215–56), the canoe (294–5), Queen Elizabeth I and her favourite, later executed, Lord Leicester (266–90)
- Water as both death and life: the rivers (173–84), the jungle rain (394), the Phoenician Sailor (47, 312–21), *The Tempest* (48, 125, 257) and all the unstated connections to baptism and new life towards the end
- Empty and decaying buildings: the speaker's mind (117), the City churches, threatened with demolition to build more banks (67, 264), London Bridge (62, 426), falling towers, broken wells and the collapsed cities of civilisation (371–5, 307, 429)
- Lucid madness: the 'nerves' of the couple arguing (111), Ophelia (172), the 'unreal city' (207), the psychotic of Tennyson's *Maud* (30), Hieronymo's plot for revenge by play-acting (431), Gerard de Nerval's sonnet about the 'black sun' of depression (429)

As you go on reading, however, each chain begins to dissolve into another. The devastation of the First World War battlefields, for instance, joins with the buried allusions to Whitman's Civil War elegy 'When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd', and thence to the sexual wars in *Antony and Cleopatra*, or the queer sexualities of Whitman, Tiresias and Mr Eugenides. 'By the waters of Leman' (182) compresses Psalm 137's lament at being forced to sing by Israel's captors and Eliot's own treatment for a breakdown on Lac Léman (Lake Geneva), both looking at water and making a song about being unable to sing for pain. Yet leman is also an Elizabethan poetic term for lover, and there may be other allusions to an adulterous scandal involving the aunt of

Marie Larisch, the ‘Marie’ urged to hold on tight (15–16). There are many more links than this, but I have to stop somewhere, and of course, the poem is partly *about* this impossibility of coming to a natural end, like the Sybil. For the ever-expanding network of allusions and links also means that reading *The Waste Land* is less like looking at a poem than being absorbed by it. As each fragment reflects another, they in turn begin to reflect onto the mental constructions you are trying to make in order to understand it, so that the perspective you want to take on it can be already found in some aspect of the poem. Bored and stuck in a library? See Baudelaire’s poem satirising the ‘hypocrite lecteur’ (76), callously indifferent to the horrors he’s reading about. Feeling the pressure to pretend to ‘understand’ it? ‘Why then Ile fit you’, as Hieronymo says about performing for the authorities (431). Unable to express what you feel? ‘I could not / Speak’ (38–9).

This feeling of being absorbed into the thing you want to criticise is fundamental to the poem itself. The best description of what it feels like to read, in fact, is Eliot’s allusion to it during Harry’s description of madness in *The Family Reunion*:

The sudden solitude in a crowded desert
 In a thick smoke, many creatures moving
 Without direction, for no direction
 Leads anywhere but round and round in that vapour –
 Without purpose, and without principle of conduct
 In flickering intervals of light and darkness;
 The partial anaesthesia of suffering without feeling
 And partial observation of one’s own automatism.⁴⁵

There has been much debate about whether *The Waste Land* is a diagnosis of modern civilisation’s spiritual condition in general, a vision of ruined post-war Europe in particular, or simply ‘the relief of a personal and wholly insignificant grouse against life’.⁴⁶ But Harry’s point is that in this kind of nightmare, personal misery and social collapse are really the same thing. Feeling you cannot feel, or knowing that your own ‘automatism’ is one with the mechanical bodies you recoil from, means that the real horror of *The Waste Land* is the way the poem’s disgust is so thoroughly contaminated by the culture which disgusts it. When the typist lays out her food ‘in tins’ (223), for instance, the tiny detail is a mixture of social satire (a mechanised society consumes mechanised food), pity and snobbery. But since the poem’s meaning comes from the relationships between the fragments, rather than any particular one, that dislike of tins is subtly linked to the artificial preservation of life in the Sybil-figure hanging in her jar at the beginning of the poem (‘in ampulla pendere’), and the feeling of

being imprisoned in Part V ('I have heard the key / Turn in the door' (411–12)), as if the poem were talking about a state of mind, or a way of thinking, which it is itself sharing. To take another example: the poem is difficult to read because it jumps perspectives so rapidly, and many have taken this difficulty as proof of Eliot's high-cultural disdain for ordinary life and ordinary readers. But the rapid switches of point of view undercut all the distinctions between high and low culture that such disdain rests on; the rape of Philomela from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (99) is being repeated, not parodied, by the semi-rape of the poor typist in Part III. And when she 'puts a record on the gramophone' (256) to distract herself, its scratchy warble is not only symptomatic of the mechanical, alienated relationships of the modern city, but precisely what the poem is itself doing at this point – abruptly looping the songs of the past into the most alien context, and failing to console. If Eliot really believes what he says in the PhD thesis, all the ills of the modern city are actually part of the construction of the very consciousness which revolts from them.

This power to ironise itself has a disorienting effect on any potential critical stance we want to take towards the poem. One recent trend, for instance, has been to argue that Eliot's beliefs about art's 'autotelic' nature are contradicted by the real economic circumstances which make his art possible.⁴⁷ It's certainly true that the poem would not mean what it does without them, but so much of *The Waste Land* is set in the City of London, amidst what Eliot would later call 'the dictatorship of finance', that it's hard not to see part of the melancholy of the poem being its entanglement with money and power, even as it laments it.⁴⁸ Georg Simmel had remarked that the urbanite's 'evenly flat and gray' mood, in which no object 'deserves preference over any other' is 'the faithful subjective reflection of a completely internalized money economy', and part of the poem's unhappiness is surely that its own levelling of the important and trivial is bound up with the banking culture in which Eliot was working.⁴⁹ The notorious ambiguities of the poem's ending, without a full stop, are another case. Many readers see in the references to Jesus' resurrection reappearance at Emmaus (359) and the gust of rain an optimistic story about the eventual rising of all the poem's dying gods, the return of spring and new life. On the other hand, there are so many living dead in the poem already that it is unclear which triumphs which, and whether the 'Shantih' which ends the poem is peace from hope, or peace in the loss of all hope. 'These fragments I have shored against my ruins' could be relief that there is something of value salvaged from the ruins of culture, no matter how broken, or a nervy exclamation of how last-ditch the defence is ('these *fragments* . . . !'). But in deciding what this poem is 'finally' saying, your interpretation has to take into account what the poem is saying about conclusions and finalities in general.

The issue is perhaps sharpest when it comes to the poem's biographical origin. We know now that Eliot was preoccupied with failed sex and sterility during the writing of the poem because his own marriage had gone disastrously wrong. Vivien admired his intellect but resented his coldness, while he needed her sensitivity but was embarrassed by her forwardness, and relations were strained from their wedding night onwards. The letters so far published show them continually ill, anxious about money, and worn out. Both wanted to nurse the other, but neither flourished under the other's strenuous care, and it's hard to avoid the feeling that the overweening kindness and self-denial became a subtle kind of point-scoring – a temptation whose power Eliot himself quietly acknowledged in *Murder in the Cathedral* with its devil who tempts Becket to martyrdom. It's recently come to light that Bertrand Russell, who had kindly lent them his flat while they were very short of money, took it into his head that Vivien's depression could be lifted by a brief affair, and that Eliot's discovery of her betrayal was the great personal horror that catapulted him towards a nervous breakdown and the poem.⁵⁰ The sense of betrayal must have been all the more appalling because of his suspicion that his own coldness or inadequacy had something to do with it. Immediately we have a biographical reason for the revulsion from women in the poem, as well as sympathy for the betrayed ones (Ophelia, Philomela), and perhaps Eliot's interest in the confusion of gender roles (Tiresias, Mr Eugenides). But by being inserted into the network of voices and reflections, that private horror is being altered: the *poet's* 'experience', wrote Eliot in 1933, 'may be the result of a fusion of feelings so numerous . . . that even if there be communication of them, the poet may hardly be aware of what he is communicating'.⁵¹ So *The Waste Land* metamorphoses problems with a marriage break-up into the *Metamorphoses*, or the loneliness of the *Pervigilium Veneris's* longing for spring, and these in turn are fused with his feelings about Europe and the war, and the place of fragmented modern poetry in this world of failed couplings. With each quotation and allusion hooking into dozens more within and beyond the poem, the problem is less uncovering a hidden biographical source than the fact that there are just too many sources in every line.

For instance, the manuscript evidence is that one of the poem's best moments – 'what you get married for if you don't want children?' – was actually penned by Vivien herself, who was never allowed to have children because of fears her mental instability would be passed on. We know she helped with other sections, too: Eliot wrote from Margate Sands that he had written Part III, but 'must wait for Vivien's opinion as to whether it is printable'.⁵² So we have to imagine her collaborating on a poem which she knows is partly inspired by feelings of horror about her – that she, too, has had to endure Tradition and the

Individual Talent's separation of the suffering poet and the creating mind. But this means that *all* the poem's feelings about gender are being framed by the scenario of the poem's genesis and editing between husband and wife. And the same is true for Pound's drastic cutting-down of the poem, since the locker-room 'Bolo' verses Eliot sent him, obsessed with rape and buggery, suggest that their collaboration had a fair element of male homosocial bonding to it. Eliot's gender-relations are everywhere in this poem, which is another way of saying they are also too diffuse to know which of them to lean on for any particular interpretation.

When Eliot says a poem should be 'autotelic' (its own goal), then, he does not mean it should be cut off from social relations. On the contrary, Eliot's real defence against being contextualised is to make his poem utterly permeated by relations, because its fragments lower the barriers between art and life, or one person's words and another's. The poem encourages so much traffic between text and context – including us, as its readers – because Eliot wants *nothing* to be able to stand definitively outside it. And this, of course, is part of its technique of unstoppable, enveloping horror.

Eliot's later criticism

If the poem works by the rapid interchange between its words and the world, it is not surprising that Eliot's literary criticism of the time also turns rapidly from discussing art to the diagnosis of an entire culture. And though his contemporaries could not understand how Eliot could promote his social and political programme of 'classicism' while writing a poem of such disorder, the fragments' power to connect everywhere may provide a clue.⁵³ For although Eliot calls classicism the belief that 'men cannot get on without giving allegiance to something outside themselves', that appeal to an unspecified 'outside' order faces both ways. It appeals to the anti-democratic, anti-liberal reactionary who favours religious authority and social hierarchy.⁵⁴ But at the same time the call to unite 'outside' with inside is really a recipe for an all-embracing cultural unity which, like the tradition or the fragment, has nothing outside itself to affect it, and in which everything is linked to everything else. Truth to tell, Eliot's 'classicism' is not so much opposed to real Romanticism as a subdivision of its interest in organic, inclusive forms. He was much influenced by T. E. Hulme's essay 'Romanticism and Classicism', which first defined classicism as an opposition to the 'Romantic' individualism of modern society.⁵⁵ But though 'Romanticism and Classicism' starts by demanding discipline, it moves into defining 'classicism' as the artist's 'vital or organic vision', where

no part of the poem can be lost from the whole, and it ends with praise of Coleridge's arch-Romantic theory of the all-reconciling Imagination.⁵⁶ Rather like the tradition, classicism sounds hierarchical, but is really an argumentative weapon to exclude poetics and politics that Eliot thinks insufficiently inclusive.

In the essay on 'The Metaphysical Poets', written as he was composing *The Waste Land*, Eliot expounded his theory that the splits of modern society have been fatal for the unified personality necessary for great poetry. 'A thought to Donne was an experience: it modified his sensibility', but, he claims, after the English Civil War and the rise of individualised, capitalist society, our habits of thinking and feeling broke apart in a 'dissociation of sensibility'.⁵⁷ So 'Tennyson and Browning are poets, and they think; but they do not feel their thought as immediately as the colour of a rose.'⁵⁸ This modern division of head from heart is a microcosmic version of the many other separations which Eliot lamented: between artist and audience, between different parts of society, and by extension, between a culture and its leaders. With this Schillerian perspective, Eliot's later literary criticism tests various writers against the standard of 'the mind of Europe', and finds most of them failing to make art that is sufficiently united.⁵⁹ Dissenters in both religious and political senses, like Lawrence, Hardy and Milton, are judged too one-sided to be comprehensive: good poets like Tennyson and Baudelaire are unique, but they are victims of their century's split between head and heart. For the same reason, the burden of Eliot's cultural criticism is to find a tradition, or later an 'orthodoxy', that will unify individual minds in societies 'worm-eaten with liberalism'.⁶⁰ Liberalism – our current norm based on maximising individual freedom to choose, and therefore in favour of markets, democracy and human rights – meant, for Eliot, an atomised capitalist bureaucracy which made its citizens mentally sick and politically apathetic. By showing no interest in the deepest questions of life and death, its democracy could give its citizens nothing to live or vote for except the restlessness of money. The question for Eliot was 'how can we, out of the materials at hand, build a new structure in which democracy can live?', and the answer would be through a qualified form of it involving aristocratic privilege, kingship and, later, the benevolent advice of an unelected 'clerisy'.⁶¹ He was a reactionary, in the tradition of anti-modern modernists like Baudelaire and Maurras, and proud of it:

The only reactionaries today are those who object to the dictatorship of finance and the dictatorship of a bureaucracy under whatever political name it assembles; and those who would have some law and some ideal not purely of this world.⁶²

The peculiar result is that Eliot's cultural criticism is ever seeking to make common cause between the techniques of elite art and the greatest social unity. While acknowledging that modern art 'can only please a very small number of people', for instance, he nevertheless believed that 'fine art is the *refinement*, not the antithesis, of popular art', and *The Waste Land* is saturated with references to the pop culture of the day.⁶³ Eliot criticised Q. D. Leavis's *Fiction and the Reading Public* for thinking high and low could be separated:

We may say that it was only to be expected that when the whole public had been taught to read, it would choose to read very poor stuff; that the taste of the mob can never be much elevated, because of its invincible mental laziness; and that the Athenian crowd would never have applauded Aristophanes if it had experienced the pleasures of Mr Noel Coward and the cinema. But there is a great deal more to it than this. An *élite* which is only recognised by itself is in a bad way.⁶⁴

And it was desire to be recognised by a wider public that led Eliot to his rather strained verse-plays. He could praise equally Joyce's use of myth to create the radical modernist form of *Ulysses*, and music-hall comedians for creating new comic myths, where the spectator is 'purged of unsatisfied desire, transcends himself, and unconsciously lives the myth, seeing life in the light of imagination'.⁶⁵

That interest in myth as a means to transform the artist-audience relation is important for Eliot's ideas about governments' relation to their people, too. Using his reading in anthropology, Eliot came to think that ritual and myth were permanent needs for all civilisations, not just 'primitive' ones, that the British were a tribe like any other, and that no society could really be united spiritually and emotionally without something symbolic to express what unites it. So just as he could praise entertainers like Charlie Chaplin or Marie Lloyd for making an 'expressive figure' which allowed the lower classes to 'find the expression and dignity of their own lives', he thought 'loyalty to a King, who incarnates the idea of the Nation' the best solution to social disorder.⁶⁶ Indeed, the ritual and symbol of monarchy were actually 'the alternative to Nationalism', and particularly its fascist variant:

The feeling towards a dictator is quite other than that towards a king; it is merely the consummation of the feeling which the newspapers teach us to have towards Mr. Henry Ford, or any other big business man. In the *success* of a man like Mussolini (a man of 'the people') a whole nation may feel a kind of self-flattery.⁶⁷

Whether in art or in government, only ritual, myth and symbol can express individuals in something better than themselves, and then – unlike realism – actually transmute them into a community, rather than an aggregation of isolated people or a crowd:

When the Stranger says: ‘What is the meaning of this city?
Do you huddle close together because you love each other?
What will you answer? ‘We dwell together
To make money from each other?’ or ‘This is a community?’⁶⁸

[Choruses from *The Rock*, CPP 155]

One serious problem with this kind of communitarian politics, though, is that it tends to exclude people who cross those symbolic boundaries of being ‘one of us’, though they might belong to the nation as citizens with rights. Notoriously, Eliot’s lectures in Virginia in 1933 collected as *After Strange Gods* claimed that a true tradition meant ‘all those habitual actions, habits and customs, from the most significant religious rite to our conventional way of greeting a stranger, which represent the blood kinship of “the same people living in the same place”’, a definition which seems tacitly to endorse segregation.⁶⁹ Eliot then made things even worse by claiming that ‘what is still more important is unity of religious background; and reasons of race and religion combine to make any large number of free-thinking Jews undesirable.’⁷⁰ Yet the following year he praised the First World War poet Isaac Rosenberg because his ‘Hebraic’ poetry gave the English tradition ‘a new rhythm’, which ‘may have a fertilizing effect upon English: and fertilization, either from its own relations or from foreign languages, is what it perpetually needs.’⁷¹ This makes it unlikely that Eliot was anti-Semitic by conviction, though a poem like ‘Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleistein with a Cigar’ certainly makes it hard to distinguish criticism of nouveaux-riches Jews from satire on Eurotrash and American tourists. Rather, Jews get the blame when they are the element which reveals the potential lack of fit between Eliot’s two ideas of tradition, a local culture free from industrial capitalism and foreign invasion, and the dream of a single European politico-cultural order in which the merely local or national could broaden its perspective and learn to know itself better. In common with many reactionaries, Eliot’s thinking about culture tended to assume that the small-scale tribes of the anthropologists, with their known rituals and lack of bureaucratic layers, were the ideal models for a unified ‘culture’, and so he tended to be suspicious of social *movement* between communities because it reveals the instability of both the small group and the great tradition which holds it in place. Needless to say, this social mobility was also his own story: as Vincent Sherry points out apropos of ‘Burbank with a Baedeker’, what else was Eliot but a not-quite-assimilated foreigner and former banker, whose most

famous poem thrives on decay?⁷² Perhaps this is why he was just as fearful of the deracinated American intellectual and the social-climbing middle classes as of free-thinking Jews, although he would have friendships with people from all of those groups.⁷³

Eliot's Christianity

Eliot's own ideal for the successful fusion of individual and universal through ritual was, of course, the Church, and he was convinced that other people's clamour for fascism and communism alike were substitutes for religious belief. Liberalism, meanwhile, left a society whose 'only monument' would be 'the asphalt road / And a thousand lost golf balls'.⁷⁴ But although the public Eliot was never really happy to make common cause with any particular politics (an unconscious repetition of his Unitarian heritage of dissenting inclusiveness, perhaps) his faith demanded not merely tradition and order, but repentance and forgiveness, and these would be the subject of his poems following his official conversion in 1928. Eliot had private reasons, too. During the 1920s, he had veered between various reconciliations with Vivien and a frosty estrangement from her. Neither had lasted, and with various signals of her increasing mental instability he had separated from her in 1933, with a mixture of relief and mortification. Although he was now an eminent public figure, in private he felt himself a tired failure, renting rooms or sharing with friends, and condemned to loneliness by his part in the ruin of his marriage. *Ash Wednesday* (1930), which was originally dedicated 'to my wife', explores the soul's painful process of exposing those failures to God, and finding that its sinful desires make every feeling of honesty more likely to be another pose of the sinful self, desperate to insist that it is not so bad, after all.

Both in the day time and in the night time
 The right time and the right place are not here
 No place of grace for those who avoid the face
 No time to rejoice for those who walk among noise and deny the voice

[. . .]

pray

For children at the gate
 Who will not go away and cannot pray:
 Pray for those who chose and oppose

The insistent, childish inner rhymes here feel like someone telling himself off, and actually clutching too tightly and becoming panicky. 'No place of grace

for those who avoid the face' is jingly, as if even the warning is spoken by someone in need of grace. The final rhyme, 'chose and oppose', captures the point; we choose God, and in the very act of choosing, we manage to oppose him. And the poem's bitter irony is that it ends up, knowingly, sounding a bit self-righteous itself: Eliot may be admonishing himself, but he is also making an example of his conspicuous refusal of cheap grace, and the self-promotion continues in another way.

While *Four Quartets* is no less exacting in recognising that loving God demands 'a condition of complete simplicity / (Costing not less than everything)', its search for God moves more fluidly between Eliot's own autobiography and the rise and fall of nations.⁷⁵ When the altered sonnet of Part IV of *Little Gidding* describes how 'the dove descending breaks the air / With flame of incandescent terror', for example, the spiritual principle that we are 'redeemed from fire by fire' – that losing our addiction to everlasting pain will be an intensely painful experience – has compacted into it many experiences of fire: Dante's Purgatory, the Great Fire of London, Eliot's own experience as a firewatcher in the blitz, a reference back to 'The Fire Sermon' in *The Waste Land* and its renunciations of the flesh, to name only a few.⁷⁶ Like the myths in *The Waste Land*, this principle of fiery redemption keeps returning in human experience on every level and in every era. But rather than simply assert the ever-presence of myth, in Albert and Lil as much as Antony and Cleopatra, Eliot's concern now is to find how these spiritual stories, principles or myths have to be lived in time, in order to explore how any event in the past can be 'redeemed'. 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' had claimed that history was a 'simultaneous order', but the first of the quartets, *Burnt Norton*, begins with the fear that 'If all time is eternally present, / All time is unredeemable.'⁷⁷ Eliot now believes that time is real for humans – that there is a past, present and future – but it does not run in one direction, as the modern secular notion of time believes, nor is it indifferent to what happens in it. All time is present to God, and eternity means when the present events become part of a pattern in which they makes sense, not something outside time altogether. Charles Taylor calls this sense of time, taken from St Augustine, 'gathered time', and describes its significance for the medieval church ritual well:

The Church, in its liturgical year, remembers and re-enacts what happened . . . when Christ was on earth. Which is why this year's Good Friday can be closer to the Crucifixion than last year's mid-summer day. And the Crucifixion itself, since Christ's action/passion here participates in God's eternity, is closer to all times than they in secular terms are to each other.⁷⁸

Eliot uses the same word: 'the still point of the turning world' is 'where past and future are gathered', and the *Quartets* are a search for these still points where life's worries and accidents are suddenly given peace by a glimpse of the spiritual pattern they might be part of.⁷⁹

The moments of happiness – not the sense of well-being,
 Fruition, fulfilment, security or affection,
 Or even a very good dinner, but the sudden illumination –
 We had the experience but missed the meaning,
 And approach to the meaning restores the experience
 In a different form, beyond any meaning
 We can assign to happiness.⁸⁰

But Eliot also knew that 'you cannot *revive* a ritual without reviving a faith', and the modern poet's great problem of tone is that there is so little shared faith between himself and his audience. Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*, he felt, was only a 'pageant of Primitive Culture'.⁸¹ So instead, Eliot tries to recreate the effect of ritual's power to gather time through musical effects. As music changes time from a line into a pattern, whose expectations and resolutions make movement and stillness part of the same feeling, so Eliot uses poetry to simulate the movement of the soul into this gathered time:

Words move, music moves
 Only in time; but that which is only living
 Can only die. Words, after speech, reach
 Into the silence. Only by the form, the pattern,
 Can words or music reach
 The stillness, as a Chinese jar still
 Moves perpetually in its stillness.⁸²

Although this appears to be philosophical meditation, the meditative repetitions ('move', 'only', 'music', 'words', 'reach', 'still') make your own presence in time as you read them evident – they are not simply informational data for a disembodied consciousness – while their repetition gives the rhythms of closure which a simple process of events can never have. The short line 'can words or music reach' makes you expect something else, so as to hear the stillness at its end; when the word itself comes in the next line, the repetition of 'still', in its double sense of finish and persistence, is making the same point at the level of its rhythm. Just as the individual lines of a quartet's instruments pick up and harmonise each other's notes, so words, motifs and elements (the fire, earth, water and air to which each Quartet is assigned) reappear, while

the principles that losses are gains or that fire refines constantly come back in different stories or moments.

Theologically, this is Eliot's way to link the rhythmic power of poetry with Christ's incarnation: divine eternity is only reached through the human body and its lived sense of time, in which present, past and future all balance. More personally, it allows him to show the processes of time, revision and second thoughts at work in his own writing, too. 'That was a way of putting it – not very satisfactory' grumbles 'East Coker', and the poem is studded with similar moments where Eliot recoils from some rhetorical flourish to confess that 'trying to learn to use words' actually always means 'a different kind of failure'.⁸³ This being Eliot, though, the very confession brings back Prufrock's 'It is impossible to say just what I mean!', to call attention to the difference: Eliot's need in 1940 to step down from his own pedestal, or at least to make the monument to someone fallible. Cynics might say a poem about retracting your own poetry is really giving an alibi for all the boring parts. But Eliot's point is that since words always must move in time, what he thought he meant in 1912, or 1940, has come to have new meaning to him now in the time of its writing, as it will again in the future. So the poem is often taking words or phrases from the past, a past then in the process of becoming the academic effigy of 'Modernism', and trying to find his own present awareness latently there. For instance, 'East Coker' worries that the conditions for great art are not good at present, before musing that there is 'perhaps neither gain nor loss'.⁸⁴ But the echo of Phlebas the Phoenician who 'forgot the profit and the loss' suddenly makes Eliot's merchant a prototype of himself as an artist, and then rebukes that artist for not having learnt Phlebas' lesson in trying to calculate the value of his own times.⁸⁵ Other autobiographical moments – out at sea near Cape Ann in 'The Dry Salvages', or by the Mississippi in St Louis – show Eliot attempting a kind of therapy, searching back through memories of his own past for aspects in which God's call can be seen to be at work, despite his being unaware of them then. And this process of gathering time is true of nations as well, for the poem's search for moments of spiritual understanding which are 'both a new world / And the old made explicit' takes in both Eliot's own experience as an American returning to his ancestors in England, and the implication that America has been necessary to make England what it is, too.⁸⁶

This capacity for the new to free the old from the chain of time is what Charles Pollard calls 'New World modernism', which has made Eliot, for all his faults, a useful poet for post-colonial successors.⁸⁷ Poets who need a model of how an oppressive past can yet be a resource for a freer present – a present which in turn will show the latent possibilities of freedom in that past – find Eliot's idea of 'tradition', where 'the past is altered by the present' a liberating

one. It is not only the case that Eliot's commuters over London Bridge make Dante's souls in Hell look different: the ability of poets such as Derek Walcott or Kamau Brathwaite to use Eliot to reclaim white European writers as ancestors of the multi-racial, creolised Caribbean makes *Eliot* look different. And that, I hope, is how Eliot would have wanted it.

Recommended Further Reading

- David Chinitz, *T. S. Eliot and the Cultural Divide* (University of Chicago Press, 2003). On Eliot's relationship with pop culture.
- T. S. Eliot in Context*, ed. by Jason Harding (Cambridge University Press, 2011).
- M. A. R. Habib, *The Early T. S. Eliot and Western Philosophy* (Cambridge University Press, 1999).
- Louis Menand, *Discovering Modernism: T. S. Eliot and his Context* (Oxford University Press, 1987). A brilliant book on Eliot's ability to turn the contradictions of early modernist poetics to his advantage.

Chapter 4

W. B. Yeats

- Love and conflict 82
- The occult poet 85
- The dynamic union of opposites 87
- Poets remake mankind 91
- Yeats's times 95

Love and conflict

In 1908, William Butler Yeats finally got what he had sought for so long, and it was not what he had hoped. Since the day in 1889 that the hansom cab bearing Maud Gonne – former *débutante*, dislocated aristocrat and passionate Irish nationalist – drew up outside the bohemian Yeats family home in Bedford Park, London, the young poet had been besotted. Nurtured on Shelley and the Pre-Raphaelites, his young dreams had been of remote, tragically beautiful women, powerful, independent and yet vulnerable, and now that dream had arrived at his front door. For the next twenty years her image would hypnotise his love poetry and, with it, his imagination of what an Ireland free from British rule would look like. Believing that ‘there is no fine nationality without literature, and . . . there is no fine literature without nationality’, their joint cause was to found an Ireland that had thrown off the divisive, materialistic culture of the British and discovered a national unity through recreating ‘the ancient arts . . . as they were understood when they moved a whole people and not a few people who had grown up in a leisured class’.¹ While she drew his politics towards her unflinching republicanism, he in turn introduced her to his occult and mystical societies, bent on discovering in the supernatural tales of the Irish peasantry ancient truths which would create a symbolic order adequate to the coming nation. But to Yeats’s despair, political and mystical collaboration did not make her love him, and his Celtic Twilight poetry of these years would have to mix its solemn, ritualised search for the ‘red-rose-bordered hem’ of ancient Eire’s dress with a disappointment that he had not yet been fit to touch

Gonne's. Over the years, their intense 'spiritual friendship' pitched the poet between a desperate hope and successive disenchantments, as he came to learn of her lovers and children, to see her married, and particularly after the Jubilee Riots of 1897, to fear her enthusiasm for violent revolutionary crowds. But despite his growing dislike of populist nationalism, her image would always electrify him, and several other affairs foundered because of it.

In 1908, though, a series of dreams and mystic revelations convinced them both that the time had come, despite their other commitments. The letters become more tender, the astrological calculations more deliberate, and Yeats's biographer Roy Foster believes that their love was finally realised.² Shortly afterwards, Yeats wrote 'No Second Troy':

Why should I blame her that she filled my days
 With misery, or that she would of late
 Have taught to ignorant men most violent ways,
 Or hurled the little streets upon the great,
 Had they but courage equal to desire?
 What could have made her peaceful with a mind
 That nobleness made simple as a fire,
 With beauty like a tightened bow, a kind
 That is not natural in an age like this,
 Being high and solitary and most stern?
 Why, what could she have done, being what she is?
 Was there another Troy for her to burn?³

Turning disappointment into self-mythologising tragedy, this poem sets the tone for much of the second, modernist half of Yeats's career. On the one hand, his dislike for Gonne's fanatical republicanism would become a refrain over the next thirty years. He would scorn it not only in the Irish revolutionaries of 'Easter 1916' or the terrorism of the civil war that followed the founding of the Irish Free State in 1922, but also in the later attempt to ban divorce by Catholic nationalists in the Senate, and all conservative attacks on modernist or shocking art. Blake's principle that 'opposition is true friendship' was a lifelong motto for Yeats, and in his lexicon, fanaticism came to mean any one-sided, one-party, one-religion, one-culture solution to Irish life that would attempt to forget the lesson later summarised in *A Vision* that consciousness is 'combat'.⁴ But opposing one-sidedness did not make him a tolerant liberal, as the poem's fascination with Gonne's aristocratic inability to compromise suggests. As Yeats aspired to ever-firmer membership of the Protestant Ascendancy class – landowners who, though Irish by birth, took their identity from the English – he was attracted to Nietzsche's doctrine that power belonged to certain people

by nature rather than by democratic consent. So there is admiration in 'No Second Troy' for the way no weak-minded deliberation interrupts Donne's politics, and an assumption that the 'little streets' are simply there for her to hurl, if only they were brave enough. 'No Second Troy' deplores her 'most violent ways' and yet admires her 'high, solitary' single-mindedness; it approves of her aristocratic opposition to 'an age like this' while fearing she revives an ancient war. The impression of a tragic conflict-in-unity is reinforced by the way Donne seems to be on *both* sides of the Trojan war. She is the unbearably beautiful Helen who causes great kings to fight over her, and she is the means of destruction, the fire and the bow. With Donne's characteristic brilliance, 'bow' itself catches all Helen's opposing roles in the flicker of its other meanings, a dress decoration, a gesture of respect and, in conjunction with 'stern', part of the thousand ships launched by her own face.

Trying to fuse opposition, conflict and mastery into a single political system would be a pressing need for Donne amid all the upheavals of the Easter Rising and the Irish Civil War. In the 1920s, one answer came in the mystical theories of history in his work *A Vision*; in the 1930s, another in eugenics and a sort of Irish fascism. But it would be truer to say that Donne always thought poetry the place where oppositions of lovers or enemies could remain dynamic and yet harmonised through the power of myth and symbol, as he does with Helen or the bow. This does not mean that poetry was simply a way to compensate in imaginative terms for real events, though. For the discreet equation between Donne's real-life politics and Homer's *Iliad* in 'No Second Troy' not only suggests her violence and Donne's misery are both predestined, but that life and love come already organised by the patterns of art. Although the poem ends with an anguished question about predestined failure, then, the unstated parallels on which it rests are actually astoundingly confident: I am your Troy; politics is ourselves, and though you are destined to ruin me, it is poetry that makes us evermore one tragic event.

Donne was right, almost. Fifteen years later, he and Donne really would find themselves on opposite sides of the Irish Civil War, fought between the government which accepted the Anglo-Irish treaty of 1922 with a British Ulster, and rebels who, like Donne, saw anything less than full territorial independence as a betrayal of the martyrs of the Easter Rising of 1916. Though he was now married, many of Donne's great late poems continue to understand the Civil War and the settlement that followed in terms of mythic patterns of sexual violence and adultery. For that reason, Donne's late squib on 'Politics' is disingenuous. To Thomas Mann's portentous statement that 'in our time, the destiny of man presents its meanings in political terms', the old poet retorts:

How can I, that girl standing there
 My attention fix
 On Roman or on Russian
 Or on Spanish politics

But the girl was always political for Yeats, ever since Maud Gonne had been the mystic Rose of Eire, because he thought love one aspect of the same deep principles of opposition and unity that underlay great art and the patterns of history – and his interpretations of that would cause him to flirt with the same fascist politics that Mann was in the process of deploring. Yeats's imagination, in fact, would rarely catch fire unless it found some plane where his erotic quests, political situation and spiritual principles were all intersecting, and the difficulty and depth of his great modernist poems are due to the way that all three are so often in play simultaneously.

The occult poet

For a long time, though, Yeats's researches for these patterns among mediums, psychics and occult religious orders were not taken seriously. Partly this was because Irish politics seemed a much firmer base for interpretation, partly because his reports back from the spirit world were so incomprehensible (*A Vision* bewilders everyone who reads it) and partly because his companions were so embarrassing. Meeting in secret at suburban addresses in Hammer-smith, the astrological rituals, secret names and ceremonial robes of Yeats's Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn seem too obviously dressed-up ambition to warrant attention. And some of its correspondence really is more *Harry Potter* than hermetic wisdom: Yeats's uncle, a fellow member, once received a letter that began, 'Dear Sir, With reference to the Fire Wand enclosing a magnetised rod, our G. H. Frater Non Omnis Moriar usually keeps a stock here, which he sells to members. At the present moment we are out of them, but some are on order.'⁵ Not that Yeats wasn't contemptuous of some of his fellow-voyagers either; he thought G. R. S. Mead, the founder of the Quest Society to which Pound would take the young T. S. Eliot, had the intellect 'of a good-size wheelk'.⁶ And the Preface to *A Vision*, which recounts the remarkable story of how the fundamental patterns of history and personality were dictated to his new wife George by spiritual 'instructors' in automatic writing sessions, admitted his own fear that it was all a fantasy. 'Some will ask if I believe all that this book contains, and I will not know how to answer.'⁷

To an outsider, that scepticism rings true. George knew her husband was still obsessed with Maud Gonne and her daughter Iseult, and she also knew that the way to Yeats's heart was through his wand. It seems obvious she made up the messages from her instructors in order to give her husband a new mission in life which only he and she could share. But Yeats's answer to his own doubts also clarifies why occultism was essential to his concept of poetry. 'Does the word belief, used as they will use it, belong to our age, can I think of the world as there and I here judging it?', he wonders. The modern world's 'belief' implies a mind separate from the world it is believing in, but the spiritual plane is one where there is no independent 'I' looking in detached scientific judgement on objects. In this realm, one 'no longer knows / Is from *Ought*, or *Knower* from the *Known*' (A Dialogue of Self and Soul). As a space in which our rational divisions of the inner from outer are surmounted, a place in which spectators become participants, it has strong affinities with what was becoming modernism.

So excited was Yeats by this passport to a realm where inward emotions and outer events were dynamically interacting that he offered to devote the rest of his life to building a philosophical system from the fragments left by his instructors. 'We have come to give you metaphors for poetry', they insisted.⁸ But what Yeats actually took was a metaphysics for poetry, a system which would explain its power over the emotions in terms of spiritual forces at work, and prove 'that the laws of art . . . are the hidden laws of the world'.⁹ As Alex Owen has described, many people were drawn to the occult between the 1880s and 1930s because its séances, astrology and ritual meditation promised private souls a means to connect with the spiritual realm which underlay the universe and the events of world history, a connection flatly denied by scientific, individualised, disenchanted modernity in which feelings and facts were different orders of being.¹⁰ Entry to the spiritual plane in which all humanity was connected inspired not only new religions like Theosophy, but quite a lot of the visionary socialism of *The New Age*, and some kinds of feminism based on alternatives to bodily confinement. But for Yeats, the 'unity of being' behind these false modern oppositions between mind and world was the reality which poetry made manifest.¹¹ The individual poet imagining is one with the power that makes all things happen, for 'solitary men in moments of contemplation receive, as I think, the creative impulse from the lowest of the Nine Hierarchies, and so make and unmake mankind'.¹² Those 'nine hierarchies' are the nine levels of creation, in which every being finds its place in the Tree of Life. Since the poet can access this order, his poetic symbols are not just metaphors, but maps. To meditate on the symbol of the moon is to move with the same power which pulls the cycles of women's bodies

and the changes of history, as surely as it does the tides of the sea. 'If I look at the moon herself and remember any of her ancient names and meanings', Yeats added, 'I move among divine people, and things that have shaken off our mortality.'¹³

The occult, in other words, was guaranteeing for Yeats what modernist syntax was only promising for Pound: a complete fusion of the realms of art and life. It allowed him to think of his poetry not as commentary on the calamities of Irish politics or compensation for failed love, but as prophecy and intervention in them. And it was because the occult was doing Yeats's modernism for him that his own style did not have to follow Pound's extremities, though it is never less than a performance. In the maze of his occult material, we can trace two dominant patterns by which Yeats engaged with his times.

The dynamic union of opposites

The theosophical and occult circles in which Yeats moved during the 1880s believed that physical, time-bound things have no independent existence, as materialism states, but are emanations of a single life-force which has divided and multiplied itself in time and space. Conflicts and divisions in human life are, therefore, ultimately, different phases of one spiritual reality emanating at different levels, or two necessary halves of a single spiritual process, be they conflicts within the poet or between one human and another. Much of *A Vision* is taken up by explaining how every person's conscious will has a secret opposite force, a 'Daimon', just as his imagination ('Creative Mind') has a destiny which opposes it ('Body of Fate') and 'all the gains of man come from conflict with the opposite of his true being' rather than their elimination.¹⁴

If man seeks to live wholly in the light, the *Daimon* will seek to quench that light in what is to man wholly darkness, and there is conflict . . . when however in *antithetical* man the *Daimonic* mind is permitted to flow through the events of his life . . . and so to animate his *Creative Mind*, without putting out its light, there is Unity of Being . . . He who attains Unity of Being is some man, who, while struggling with his fate and destiny until every energy of his being has been roused, is content that he should struggle with no final conquest. For him fate and freedom are not to be distinguished; he is no longer bitter, he may even love tragedy like those who 'love the gods and withstand them'; such men are able to bring all that happens, as well as all that they desire, into an emotional or intellectual synthesis.¹⁵

Thanks to Jung's adaptation of the same occult principles, the wisdom of recognising one's shadow side has passed into popular psychology. But Jung made it all a conflict within the psyche, whereas Yeats makes no distinction between inner and outer. This conflict of man and Daimon describes events in history which Yeats saw as the opposition of two great principles, 'Primary' and 'Antithetical', that, like the dark and light aspects of the moon, waxed and waned over 2000-year cycles, and it equally describes different personality types, whose various aspects are at different strengths and proportions. The point in either case is that the unity of the whole depends on the oppositions within it, and Yeats's imagination was always on the look-out for moments in history which would have an artistic completion to them, or for heroes who freely become their own fate by accepting this everlasting struggle.

Of course, his feeling of being united to your opposite by fate also describes his experience with Gonne, but to Yeats love and politics were patterned alike. In 'An Irish Airman Foresees His Death', for instance, Yeats fictionalises Robert Gregory, the son of his friend and patron Lady Gregory, in whose mansion he often stayed. Discovering a belief in spirits and ancestors still alive and current among the local peasantry with her, Yeats thought her collection of stories as basic to the coming Irish culture as the *Mabinogion* to the Welsh or the Arthur stories to the English. But her son was less committed to mythology or nationalism, and with the coming of the First World War had swiftly volunteered for the British Royal Flying Corps. Lady Gregory was devastated when he was killed in action, but Yeats's consolation was to imagine him as an airman who knew on the ground that he would die, and when up in the air, balanced his life as he balanced his plane:

Nor law, nor duty bade me fight,
 Nor public men, nor cheering crowds,
 A lonely impulse of delight
 Drove to this tumult in the clouds;
 I balanced all, brought all to mind
 The years to come seemed waste of breath
 A waste of breath the years behind
 In balance with this life, this death.

The Royal Flying Corps airman and his German enemy have disappeared in the Irish aristocrat's 'lonely impulse', indifferent to any external pressure (or, conveniently, public duty to his tenants, since 'no likely end could . . . leave them happier than before'). In the same manner, Yeats's more public elegy 'In Memory of Major Robert Gregory' lists the fallen hero's many talents, 'as 'twere

all life's epitome', but also refuses to let him be defeated. 'The bare chimney is gone black out / Because the work had finished in that flare', he concludes, as if Gregory's life were a work of art, and his death merely finishing it off rather than having it interrupted. 'Accident is destiny', wrote Yeats later that year, adding, 'the Daemon is our destiny', as though Gregory's death had been actually a triumphant resolution with his spiritual opposite.¹⁶

Such consolation could be cruel to other soldiers, though. Yeats was notoriously haughty with Wilfred Owen, dismissing him from the *Oxford Book of Modern Verse* because 'passive suffering is not a theme for poetry'.¹⁷ What other options trench warfare offered is never clear, but Owen had, it seems, failed to master his fate in his art. Owen's situation should be retrospectively read into Yeats's dialogue on the purpose of art, 'Ego Dominus Tuus', written as the first serious battles in Flanders were underway. Its protagonists are *Hic* [this], the modern artist searching for 'himself and not an image', and *Ille* [That], a Yeatsian artist who scorns such a belief:

Ille. That is our modern hope and by its light
We have lit upon the gentle, sensitive mind
And lost the old nonchalance of the hand

Paradoxically, instinctive, powerful art must come from focusing on images in opposition to that self – enemies or critics – and creating art from their 'tragic war' (whether inward or outward). As Yeats glossed himself a little later:

Some years ago I began to believe that our culture, with its doctrine of sincerity and self-realisation, made us gentle and passive, and that the Middle Ages and the Renaissance were right to found theirs on the imitation of Christ or of some classic hero. St Francis and Caesar Borgia made themselves over-mastering, creative persons by turning from the mirror to meditation on a mask.¹⁸

Obviously this has affinities with T. S. Eliot's idea of the poet's search for originality through impersonal tradition rather than against it. But the calculated off-handedness that equates St Francis and the ruthless Borgia, or creativity with 'over-mastering' (as if mastery were not enough) illustrates the way that, for Yeats, self-mastery makes other people only elements in one's own composition. By the poem's end it becomes clearer that *Hic* and *Ille* are not so different, since the pursuit of the authentic self and the pursuit of one's opposite are both seeking perfect integrity:

I call to the mysterious one who yet
Shall walk the wet sands by the edge of the stream
And look most like me, being indeed my double,

And prove of all imaginable things
 The most unlike, being my anti-self,
 And standing by these characters disclose
 All that I seek.

To find one's opposite is one's double and provides 'all that I seek' means there is no real *other* in this relationship: all opposition turns out to be within the symmetrical game between them, just as *Hic* and *Ille* are really after the same thing. The poem's title means 'I am your master', and though it is originally spoken by a stern-faced Love in Dante's *La Vita Nuova*, here Yeats means it as a lesson in self-mastery. 'To be free is to be self-determined but we come to the self through the mask "a form created by passion to unite us to ourselves".'¹⁹ And the poem enacts it through Yeats's amazing capacity for assonance, which underneath the blank verse quietly links 'I call' and 'all', or 'sands', 'standing' and all those 'ands', as if desires and objects, narrating conjunctions and narrated events are all made from the same substances.

For the poet, 'Ego Dominus Tuus' is an encouragement: failure and disappointment are essential if great art is to be made. But it has serious problems as a view of history, since if all enemies can be seen as anti-selves, then all conflict is really a process toward unity, and an *artistic* necessity. In the late 'Lapis Lazuli', Yeats seems calm about the coming war, though 'hysterical women' tell him that they are sick of art, and that:

If nothing drastic is done
 Aeroplane and Zeppelin will come out,
 Pitch like King Billy bomb-balls in
 Until the town lie beaten flat.

But art, it seems, will turn out to be master after all. 'King Billy' compacts both the German Kaiser Wilhelm and William of Orange, the Protestant champion of the Boyne, to suggest with rather contemptuous alliteration that the coming war will ultimately be another civil war, where the two sides will form one tragic, necessary opposition of self and anti-self, no less bloody for being one thing. While it may be the hysterical ladies who say this, Yeats then takes over their part; in war, 'all perform their tragic play', and true to Hamlet and Lear the show must go on:

They know that Hamlet and Lear are gay;
 Gaiety transfiguring all that dread.
 All men have aimed at, found and lost;
 Black out; Heaven blazing into the head:
 Tragedy wrought to its uttermost.

'Black out' stunningly makes an air-raid precaution become part of some cosmic theatre script, and the lights or the firebombs equally 'blazing' in the cause of Tragedy which, no matter how dreadful, is always still being 'wrought'. Mass destruction has an artistic pattern, for, as Yeats had written a year earlier:

'Tragedy must be a joy to the man who dies.' Nor is it any different with lyrics, songs, narrative poems . . . the maid of honour whose tragedy they sing must be lifted out of history with timeless pattern.²⁰

And so the coming war will simply mean another 'old civilisation put to the sword'; 'all things fall and are built again, / And those that build them again are gay.' Those builders, in Yeats's case, would include the poets.

Poets remake mankind

Since Yeats thought that the union of opposites was a fundamental principle, he saw it in history, personality and poetry alike, and to it he ascribed the particular power of formal verse. Back in 1900 he had called for 'wavering, meditative, organic rhythms, which are the embodiment of the imagination that neither desires nor hates, because it has done with time'. But Yeats very rarely wrote such rhythms himself, and never really liked the more experimental verse of the younger modernists like Pound, though they had learnt much from reading books on occult theory, Japanese theatre and Chinese poetry together in the winters of 1913–15.²¹ In Yeats's words:

Because I need a passionate syntax for passionate subject-matter I compel myself to accept those traditional metres that have developed with the language . . . if I wrote of personal love or sorrow in free verse, or in any rhythm that left it unchanged amid all its accident, I would be full of self-contempt . . . I must choose a traditional stanza, even what I alter must seem traditional.²²

But although Yeats did not write like Pound or the Imagists, his justifications for regular verse are exactly in line with theirs for fragmented or free verse: to create a pattern in which nothing external could pressure the poem. Lacking this 'contrapuntal structure' of passionate speech rhythms run across regular metres, free verse, he felt, treated the emotion as an accident rather than a destiny, as merely personal as the 'bundle of accident and incoherence that sits down to breakfast' rather than the 'idea, intended, complete' which is true art. Regular form, on the other hand, provided a counterpoint which connected the poem to the eternal and universal. Summarising a lifetime's occult researches,

the 'General Introduction for My Work' claims that regular pattern is the 'ghostly voice' of the folk tradition, whose counterpoise to the poet's individual rhythm brings the whole to a state of perfect balance between maximal activity and maximum passivity: 'I am awake and asleep, at my moment of revelation; self-possessed in self-surrender.'²³ Form reconciles the visionary poet with the spirit of the people, raising the poet above the 'literature of the point of view', and opening access to the immortal things which their traditions transmit.²⁴ In a dizzying but crucial passage, Yeats asserts:

All that is personal soon rots; it must be packed in ice or salt . . . I commit my emotion to shepherds, herdsmen, camel-drivers, learned men, Milton's or Shelley's Platonist, that tower Palmer drew. Talk to me of originality and I will turn on you with rage. I am a crowd, I am a lonely man, I am nothing. Ancient salt is best packing. The heroes of Shakespeare convey to us through their looks, or through the metaphorical enlargement of their speech, the sudden enlargement of their visions, their ecstasy at the approach of death . . . The supernatural is present, cold winds blow across our hands, upon our face, the thermometer falls, and because of that cold, we are hated by journalists and groundlings. There may be in this or that detail painful tragedy, but in the whole work none.²⁵

It is the leaps in this paragraph which do the arguing. Form preserves the personal (like ice) because it fuses the artist's emotions with the folk (shepherds and herdsmen), with the magicians who study the spirits (Milton's or Shelley's Platonist), and with the supernatural itself in the spirits of distant ages and times (camel-drivers). The resulting poem is equally and indifferently the work of a crowd and an individual and a nobody, and in it private pain or shame is freed from its humiliating dependency on the body and becomes part of the dance of the immortals.

How does it do this? Like a ritual or a mask, the rhythmic poem is in fact a vehicle for drawing down the dead:

All sounds, all colours, all forms, either because of their pre-ordained energies or because of long association, evoke indefinable and yet precise emotions, or as I prefer to think, call down among us certain disembodied powers, whose footsteps over our hearts we call emotions; and when sound and colours and form are in a musical relation, a beautiful relation to one another, they become as it were one sound, one colour, one form, and evoke an emotion that is made out of their distinct evocations and yet is one emotion.²⁶

This is not a clothing of ordinary feeling in supernatural robes, but a stunning reorganisation of the usual boundaries of interior and exterior, active and passive. Inner emotions *are* spirits, and the sounds and colours of art the means by which they move within us. The forms and sounds of Yeats's verse are not decoration, but an invocation, a subtle, non-rational but real correspondence between objects apparently separate.²⁷ And if the spiritual world is ultimate reality, there is nothing 'outside' one of Yeats's poem which is not being drawn into it, including us, its readers.

All this pours into another extraordinary poem written after his failure with Gonne, 'The Cold Heaven':

Suddenly I saw the cold and rook-delighting heaven
 That seemed as though ice burned and was but the more ice,
 And thereupon imagination and heart were driven
 So wild that every casual thought of that and this
 Vanished, and left but memories, that should be out of season
 With the hot blood of youth, of love crossed long ago;
 And I took all the blame out of all sense and reason,
 Until I cried and trembled and rocked to and fro,
 Riddled with light. Ah! when the ghost begins to quicken,
 Confusion of the death-bed over, is it sent
 Out naked on the roads, as the books say, and stricken
 By the injustice of the skies for punishment?

As the mortifications and furies of spoilt love return so vividly, all the poem's ambiguities turn on whether this is a revelation of truth, or whether the very act of understanding is itself caught up in suppressed despair and anger again. Taking the blame out of 'all sense and reason', for instance, suggests taking it disproportionately, as if the lover accepts it is his fault, while knowing it a piece of guilt-ridden desperation to wish the other back on any terms. But it also suggests someone trying to think in a more detached manner, wanting to 'take the blame out' of what sense and reason are saying, and the very possibility of understanding is contaminated by the line's more recriminatory edges. In this state of mind, even calling it 'love crossed long ago' combines the tragedy of the 'star-cross'd lovers' of *Romeo and Juliet* with hints of anger ('don't you cross me') and the aura of revenge and mistrust in other things proverbially crossed, like swords, hearts or bridges. 'Man can embody truth but he cannot know it', Yeats said when asked to sum up his life's work, and, realising its own mixed motives, the lover's heart is 'riddled' with light, as if the truth were both so strong and deadly it would pierce him through (like bullets, like worms) and yet remains a riddle to him in his earthbound state. Neither icy

indifference nor 'hot blood' can make a fair assessment of what went wrong between them; the ice itself burns and the skies are unjust, a feeling amplified by the unsatisfied rhythms of the poem. Nominally in six-stress lines, the even-numbered lines crowd extra unstressed syllables in towards the beginning, as if the thought were coming in torrents and the pattern only dimly discernible. But the closing 'injustice of the skies' pulls the poem off-balance the other way, since there are at most three or four naturally stressed syllables stretched across the metre:

By the **in**justice of the **skies** for **pun**ishment?

This is a poem about heart trouble, and it ends with the sound of faltering. But if we take Yeats's occult ideas seriously for a moment, the lover's distraction here is also prefiguring what will be the case after death, when the spirit returns to *Anima Mundi*, to where all spirit/memory/desire must return and become the images of our dreams:

We carry to *Anima Mundi* our memory, and that memory is for a time our external world; and all passionate moments recur again and again, for passion desires its recurrence more than any event . . . thoughts bred of longing and of fear, those parasitic vegetables that have slipped through our fingers, come again like a rope's end to smite us in the face.²⁸

Happily, this torment is part of a growth in the spirits' understanding. 'Gradually they perceive . . . harmonies, symbols and patterns, as though all were being refashioned by an artist' and begin to reconcile themselves to each other, a 'running together and running of all to a centre and yet without loss of identity'.²⁹ But Yeats's interest is their effect on the living:

The dead, living in their memories, are, I am persuaded, the source of all that we call instinct, and it is their love and desire, all unknowing, that makes us drive beyond our reason, or in defiance of our interest it may be . . . and in turn, the phantoms are stung to a keener delight from a concord between their luminous pure vehicle and our strong senses.³⁰

If instincts are themselves incarnations, then the deepest feelings of 'The Cold Heaven' may actually be repetitions, as if lovers were the vehicle for other, long-dead lovers to continue their affairs, patterned on the eternal images of Romeo and Juliet or Paris and Helen:

I doubt indeed if the crude circumstance of the world, which seems to create all our emotions, does more than reflect, as in multiplying

mirrors, the emotions that have come to solitary men in moments of poetical contemplation.³¹

The peculiar result of Yeats's occult belief that emotions *are* spirits is to collapse the distinctions not only between the present and the past, or between acting and being acted through, but between the artist's power to create and his context. If the dead feel themselves shaped 'by an artist', then art's power to organise is one with that redemptive justice, and 'the most horrible tragedy in the end can seem but a figure in a dance'.³² And if you are moved by 'The Cold Heaven', then the dead are working over your heart too, in whatever year you are reading this. Yeats's occultism makes poems not reports on experience, but spells: patterns of force in which the dead and the living, artist and audience are simultaneously, dynamically present. In the momentous upheavals of Irish and European politics in the early twentieth century, he would return frequently to the excitement of feeling his own feelings to be part of some scheme which his art is actually helping to bring about; the thrill of channelling the apocalypse.

Yeats's times

With the beginning of the First World War, Ireland's political situation remained in an impasse. Although it had been promised Home Rule, the war meant the British government could put off implementing it, and the Ulster Unionists refused to cut a deal with republican leaders to make it work. At Easter 1916, two dissident groups of Irish republicans defied the Sinn Féin leadership and took over strategic locations in Dublin to proclaim an Irish republic. A week of fighting left parts of the city in ruins and all seven leaders captured and summarily executed. As news of their mistreatment at the hands of the British security forces grew, however, Dubliners' initial scepticism about the rebels' foolish idealism turned to anger at the brutal British response, and Yeats's most famous poem grew from this changing of opinion. By now he was no friend of the rebels: although he had spent many of his early years agitating with Gonne for an independent Ireland, he had fallen out with Sinn Féin and other nationalists because he thought them middle-class philistines, thanks to their opposition to plays such as Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* staged at his Abbey Theatre. Yeats's Ireland was to fuse ancient beliefs and avant-garde art, religious pluralism and an aristocratic kind of leadership: Sinn Féin, he felt, was a social movement for lower middle-class agitators, who

would turn the new nation into a Catholic version of the moralising, mercantile British they had rejected. ‘Romantic Ireland’s dead and gone’, he had lamented in ‘September 1913’. But at Easter 1916 Romantic Ireland was back, except that it was fired by rebels whom Yeats knew and disliked, most particularly Seán MacBride, Maude Gonne’s drunken, violent husband. So the poem scans their faults as well as his own former ‘polite meaningless words’. It notes their petty-bureaucrat origins (‘coming with vivid faces / From counter or desk’), the ‘shrill’ fanaticism of the once sweet-natured Constance Markievicz, the over-ambitious schoolmaster-poet Pearse (who ‘rode our wingèd horse’ like Bellerophon on Pegasus, promptly smitten by Zeus for arrogance) and the ‘drunken, vainglorious’ MacBride.

Yet I number him in the song;
He, too, has resigned his part
In the casual comedy;
He, too, has been changed in his turn,
Transformed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born.

In truth, he had been taken by surprise by the Rising (though he claimed that Maud Gonne had seen parts of it in a vision), and therefore saying ‘I number him’ carries an obvious sense of surprise at what events have brought him to. Yet, ever-sensitive to thoughts which change reality, Yeats sensed a counterpart to magical thinking in the processes of public reputation, whose opinion of the rebels was moving from seeing them as incompetents to viewing them as martyrs. As thought and emotion were changing what Ireland might be, Yeats registers the stirring of a new spirit in the turn of the rhythm’s tide from a three-stress lilt to the marked pause of ‘he, too’, and the dying fall of ‘transformed utterly’, with its unstressed rhyme that retrospectively ironises the swing of its rhyme word, ‘comedy’, too. And the rhythmic shift is part of Yeats’s sense that his own creation is continuous with this historical shift. His rebels have given up comedy for the ‘terrible beauty’ of tragedy, not some non-artistic reality, and his present-tense grammar assumes ‘the song’ he is making (as if there were only one) is continuous with the events themselves.³³ As David Lloyd points out, Yeats felt threatened by the rebels’ performative declaration of independence – the performative being a speech act which brings something into being rather than describing a prior state of affairs – and wanted to wrest back the initiative.³⁴ And so in the poem’s continued reference to its own writing, (‘I number him in the song’, ‘I write it out in a verse’) Yeats mixes the sense of being overtaken by events with the sensation that he is performing the rites which will alter the direction of their rebels’ significance.

Sensing itself an intervention as well as a response, then, 'Easter 1916' is a valediction with a persistent undertow of criticism. The rebels' hearts were 'enchanted to a stone', suggesting that their sacrifice was not from deep feeling but sheer hardness of heart. There may also be a buried plea here to Gonne not to sacrifice herself to the memory of her martyred husband, and return instead to the 'living stream' of Yeats's ever-changing present. Suggesting that 'our part' (it is still a play) is to sing a lullaby, as if they were naughty children now asleep, implies not only bewilderment and grief, but more subtly that the rebels are *our* offspring, and we do not have to take lessons from them. Then Yeats interrupts himself: 'no, no, not night but death', a line which breaks the rocking rhythms and the sentimentality to seize the opportunity for a new direction. The obvious way to read 'was it needless death after?' is to assume it to be a rhetorical question implying the answer 'no', and that their deaths will turn out to be the foundations of something great. But if that is the case, the rebels have nothing to teach us: 'we know their dream', and we know, as they do not, that they are dead. Or the question may be serious, and their death may really have been 'needless', for if England *does* 'keep faith' and offer back Home Rule, they will have achieved nothing. If the 'excess of love' for the Gael that Pearse boasted of actually 'bewildered' them, then the rebels were deluded lovers, and British military repression disappears from the picture. In short, it is not merely in their deaths that Connolly and Pearse are being 'changed, changed utterly', and to 'write out' this change in a verse suggests, perhaps inadvertently, that Yeats's poem cannot help *erasing* them from the script, even as it makes a permanent record of their change.

'Terrible beauty' mingles a fear that something unstoppable had been unleashed and a sense of excitement at the wheels of history turning. It would be a recurrent feeling in the great poems of Yeats's later years, as he witnessed the atrocities of the IRA guerrilla war with the British-backed Black and Tan mercenaries in 1919, and sat out part of the 1922 Civil War in the tower he had bought for himself and his family. Built by the Normans to subdue the local Irish, 'Ballylee' was a symbol of where his own politics were headed, a place both to retreat from Dublin intrigue and to align himself with the feudal aristocracy. From its height, Yeats thought he could see Ireland's continuing violence simply as one aspect of a wider change in Western civilisation, the rise of democratic, money-minded and scientific thinking (or what Yeats called 'materialism'), which ushered in not peace and prosperity but an awesome new violence:

Logic is loose again, as once in Calvin and Knox, or in the hysterical rhetoric of Savonarola, or in Christianity itself in its first raw centuries,

and because it must always draw its deductions from what every dolt can understand, the wild beast cannot but destroy mysterious life.³⁵

Following a fairly loose logic itself, Yeats's term compresses science and one-size-fits-all bureaucracy with religious fanaticism (including the rebels' obsession with sacrifice) and modern socialist versions of Calvin's and Knox's Reformation. All were movements designed to discipline the people into a utopian, democratic commonwealth, which, he felt, would actually unleash revolutionary massacre. This 'wild beast' loosed here would become the 'rough beast' that stalks 'The Second Coming', the symbol of the 'blood-dimmed tide' of anger and anarchy which justifies its inhumanity by such precepts. The symbolism is marvellously chilling: this man-lion-sphinx has no centre, 'moving its slow thighs' like a robot rather than actively walking, its gaze 'blank and pitiless', 'loosed' and then slouching – like a lion on the prowl, but also like a spectre of the unemployed poor, depressed, aimless and insolent.

Yet what gives this poem its edge is not the magnificent *aperçu* – 'The best lack all conviction, while the worst/Are full of passionate intensity' – but the question of where Yeats figures himself in all this. For no sooner has he said this than the semi-rhyming octave breaks off, and the tone rises:

Surely some revelation is at hand;
 Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
 The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
 When a vast image out of *Spiritus Mundi*
 Troubles my sight.

This image is a vision happening to the poet, there and then, as though he, too, is a necessary part of the inevitable stirrings of history, and the poem's power comes from the same source as the events themselves. In 'The Symbolism of Poetry', twenty years earlier, Yeats had claimed rather grandly that 'all those things that seem useful or strong, armies, moving wheels, modes of architecture, modes of government, speculations of the reason, would have been a little different if some mind long ago had not given itself to some emotion . . . and shaped sounds or colours or forms, or all of these, into a musical relation.'³⁶ Though the tone is less preening, the thought here is the same: revolution is 'mere anarchy', nothing grander, and is liable to the worst acts of violence and cruelty. But the poet's power to say 'mere', and to incorporate anarchy into a poem, comes from the same force which will eventually shape anarchy, too, into a new 2000-year cycle.

The horror and the thrill of anticipated violence is also the complex behind 'Leda and the Swan', originally stimulated by Yeats's fears about the Russian

Revolution. Though the sympathy is with all actors whom the power of the gods (or the people) force towards violence, Leda seems subconsciously to sense the awesome part she will play: her fingers are 'vague', her thighs 'loosening', and since the 'shudder' is of fear and pleasure, it is never clear whose loins it belongs to, or whether she may be feeling her own heart made 'strange' by the experience as well as the heart of her rapist. Although Yeats is careful to say the god is brutal, many critics have been repulsed at the way his sonnet mollifies so many of its condemnations – 'white rush', in particular, makes the swan's snatch and grab sound like a basket to lie in – not to mention its phallic worship ('feathered glory', for heaven's sake). But the really odd thing is the ending's conviction that knowledge *and* power are both now some kind of ceremonial robe to be 'put on', as if Leda were choosing to become an adept in Zeus' mysteries rather than a helpless victim. Given the bloodshed of Troy, that knowledge seems rather feeble compensation, but it makes much more sense if Leda is a *poet's* fantasy, with the poet-mage aghast and strangely thrilled by the knowledge he puts on from the spirit world and, in shaping a ceremonious sonnet from it, is part of the process of tragedy that wrests necessity from violence. The poem's famously immediate opening, 'a sudden blow', not only moves the reader directly into the middle of the action, but suggests the poet is reliving the events before him, which, if emotions are the dead crossing over your heart, he must be, and so must his reader. In the same way, the sudden turn to the present tense at the end of 'Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen' catapults that poem from detached contemplation of the fall and rise of civilisations to 'a sudden blast' where Ireland's present anarchy, past violence and the 'images' of the poet are become one event:

Violence upon the roads; violence of horses; [. . .]
 Herodias' daughters have returned again,
 A sudden blast of dusty wind and after
 Thunder of feet, tumult of images,
 Their purpose in the labyrinth of the wind.

As in the spirit realm 'thought has become . . . event and circumstance' so the making of these poems, and their present performance, is continuous with the terror they sense.³⁷ 'Love war because of its horror, that belief may be changed, civilisation renewed', wrote Yeats a few years later, for 'belief comes from shock and is not desired'.³⁸ What sounds like the passivity of revelation is actually a complete conviction that the poet's power derives from the very antagonisms it fears and channels.

With the award of the Nobel Prize in 1923 and his nomination as a Senator, Yeats became one of the fledgling Irish state's most public figures, and he used

his position to agitate for modern divorce law reform, a national theatre, child-centred education, and against artistic censorship. His basis for these modern-sounding and liberal principles, however, was an increasing conviction that democracy meant a threat by the Catholic majority to the Protestant minority, and that true government had to be by a few who expressed unity of being by belonging to the 'universal bent and current of a people' not the 'momentary majority' of democratic process.³⁹ Because 'the lives and ambitions of the Many are private', he felt, power should be in the hands of the 'Few . . . who through the possession of hereditary wealth, or great personal gifts, have come to identify their lives with the life of the State.'⁴⁰ Yeats had been doing that in poetry for a long time, of course, but it was his artist's and magician's feeling that power should symbolise the nation it grew from, rather than abstractly representing it through some intermediary system of numerical majority, which drew those politics towards a flirtation with fascism in the 1930s. He admired Mussolini for his overthrow of the 'anti-human party machine' and replacement of it with direct rule, and he briefly interested himself in Eoin O'Duffy's formation of an Irish fascism, the Blueshirt movement.⁴¹

As Roy Foster argues, however, what Yeats meant by fascism had nothing to do with anti-Semitism or totalitarianism, or the enthusiasm for Hitler that Iseult Gonne would profess. His version opposed the way democracy substituted 'for the old humanity with its unique irreplaceable individuals something that can be chopped and measured like a piece of cheese', and demanded a nation run by families and individuals, rather than the modern state.⁴² In truth, that longing for an agricultural, anti-industrial Ireland put Yeats's politics closer to feudalism than to fascism. 'Under Ben Bulben' implores his fellow-poets to:

Scorn the sort now growing up
 All out of shape from toe to top,
 Their unremembering hearts and heads
 Base-born products of base beds.
 Sing the peasantry, and then
 Hard-riding country gentlemen,
 The holiness of monks, and after
 Porter-drinkers' randy laughter;
 Sing the lords and ladies gay
 That were beaten into the clay
 Through seven heroic centuries.

The eugenic sneer of 'base-born' is not curling its lip towards the poor or any ethnic group, but the rootless, well-behaved middle-classes who have forgotten

their ancient origins, as the earthy and supernaturally minded folk never have.

In these last years, Yeats was a great hater of middles, compromises and mediations: just as his occult studies had promised unity of being by uniting folk stories with magical secrets of the few, so these politics attempt a direct fusion of the rather abstract 'peasantry' with gentlemen and lords, bypassing the middle classes entirely. That desire for a cultural, personal and political unity without mediations would become his late dream of Byzantium. Yeats was attracted to this civilisation for several reasons. It represented a fusion of East and West, Christian figures and pagan gods, magical thinking and orthodox faith. It unified power and religion through an emperor, with a corresponding lack of private wealth and citizen rights, and produced beautiful decorative art displaying no evidence of the personality of the artist. Yeats may well also have been drawn to its icons, whose stylised representations of Christ or the Virgin are meant to be windows on to heaven, drawing the spirit away from daily reality into prayer, rather than keeping the viewer at a distance by showing them a realistic tableau. That was Yeats's aim for poetry too, and in Byzantium he saw an ancient culture where the public realm was shaped by art:

I think that in early Byzantium, maybe never before or since in recorded history, religious, aesthetic and practical life were one, that architect and artificers – though not, it may be, poets, for language had been the instrument of controversy and must have grown abstract – spoke to the multitude and the few alike. The painter, the mosaic worker, the worker in gold and silver, the illuminator of sacred books, were almost impersonal, almost perhaps without the consciousness of individual design, absorbed in their subject-matter and that the vision of a whole people.⁴³

This unity of culture is achieved not by consent, however, but a form of magic. Byzantine architecture 'disdains / All that man is', while the patterns on 'the Emperor's pavement' draw the flames of 'blood-begotten spirits' and purge all their 'complexities of fury', 'dying into a dance / An agony of trance'. Those oxymorons celebrate art's power to balance all opposites, self and anti-self, pain and beauty, into a suspension where souls are equally active and passive. And as with 'Leda' or 'Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen', here the poem is testifying to its own composition, as Yeats describes the moment of vision in terms which could equally describe himself as one of the living calling up the dead, or the dead calling him, or the power of impersonal art to summon them both:

A mouth that has no moisture and no breath
 Breathless mouths may summon;
 I hail the superhuman;
 I call it death-in-life and life-in-death.

This fusion of shaping and being shaped continues into the final stanza's infamous syntactic confusions, which make it sound as if Yeats himself is stunned by his own revelation, suspended between his own power to make a beautiful artifice purged from change (the poem's exquisite sound-modulations from 'mere' and 'mire' to 'miracle' and 'marble', for instance) and the flood of incoming images before his eyes:

Astraddle on the dolphin's mire and blood,
 Spirit after spirit! The smithies break the flood,
 The golden smithies of the Emperor!
 Marbles of the dancing floor
 Break bitter furies of complexity,
 Those images that yet
 Fresh images beget,
 That dolphin-torn, that gong-tormented sea.

Read purely as esoteric doctrine, this implies that art can 'break' the 'bitter furies' of the living and purge them for the return to *Anima Mundi*. As 'Sailing to Byzantium' puts it, Byzantine artifice allows the poet to sing 'of what is past, or passing, or to come', and here the city's art is apparently founded on a power to control the living and the dead alike. Yet the syntax suggests they do so against the will of the particular spirits concerned, and there is no sign here of a reconciliation taking place *between* any of them. There are no willed agreements or mutual collaborations, only compulsory, structured antagonisms that speak of a reconciliation higher up the nine layers of being. From his studies in the occult and of Nietzsche, Yeats was convinced of the tragic necessity of violence for human nature: it can't be wished away by humanist democracy or eradicated by spiritual fervour, for even the purged spirits are held entranced in 'agony', a word which means 'pain', 'struggle' and 'contest'. But though the wisdom of accepting that people, or nations, or classes *always* have a shadow side to them avoids blithe optimism, it also provides an excuse for seeing all conflict as equally inevitable, and for erasing the difference between negotiated disagreements and full-blown war. 'Government', he wrote in 1934, 'is there to keep the ring and see to it that combat never ends.'⁴⁴ That's one way of keeping the ants in the pants of democracy, or ensuring that no one really triumphs over another. But it is in another sense *the* justification for a

military state – and it suggests that the Trojan War is not necessarily the best myth to base your love-life on, either.

Recommended Further Reading

R. F. Foster, *W. B. Yeats: A Life*, 2 vols. (Oxford University Press, 1997–2003).

Marjorie Howes, *Yeats's Nations: Gender, Class and Irishness* (Cambridge University Press, 1996).

Louis MacNeice, *The Poetry of W. B. Yeats* (London: Faber & Faber, 1941, rpt. 2008). Still one of the best introductions.

Alex Owen, *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (University of Chicago Press, 2004).

Chapter 5

Modernist America

Williams, Stevens, Moore

Modernism and America: Whitman and Crane 104

William Carlos Williams 110

Marianne Moore 121

Wallace Stevens 129

Modernism and America: Whitman and Crane

Modernist poetry was not invented in America, but so many of its leading English-language poets were American that it is scarcely surprising how deeply its poetics are entwined with American cultural ideals. ‘Make it new’ was Pound’s literary slogan and equally America’s encouragement to all its citizens, immigrant and native-born, that the past could always be left behind and a future re-made. Like America, modernism demanded that forms of expression had to be found or chosen for oneself, rather than handed down or adopted through politeness. Breaking the rules of poetic form for freer self-expression also perfectly replayed America’s democratic break from rule by the British crown, and its later citizens’ escapes from other tyrannies. Explaining why he had adopted his radically all-inclusive free verse in *Leaves of Grass*, Walt Whitman told Ralph Waldo Emerson in 1874 that ‘the genius of all foreign literature is clipped and cut small, compared to our genius, and is essentially insulting to our usages, and to the organic compacts of These States’.¹ It’s a beautiful metaphor: European poetic forms are like palace topiary, artificial shapes clipped by the servants, but America and its poetry can never be hedged in or belong to privilege. Forty years later, the American modernist poetry magazine *Others* described its ‘revolutionary’ experiments as ‘the expression of a democracy of feeling rebelling against the aristocracy of form’.² Modernist poetry’s insistence that formal principles and intellectual meanings could never be found separately from an ongoing experience of encounter with the material was also thoroughly in keeping with the pragmatist strain in American

philosophy. Unity was always in the process of achievement for William James, for a finished state has the wrong kind of politics:

Things are 'with' one another, in many ways, but nothing includes everything, or dominates over everything. The word 'and' trails along after every sentence. Something always escapes . . . the pluralistic world is thus more like a federal republic than like an empire or a kingdom.³

The idea that things are 'with' each other but never contained by any overarching system is a principle of modernist syntax and modernist difficulty alike. And, of course, the modernist techniques of jumps and montages went well with the speed and multifarious levelling of America's roaring twenties, in its newly confident cities where people from every background were mingling, where the streets were a forest of competing signs and adverts, and relays of telephone switchboards could put anyone in touch instantly with anyone else. All modern cities had these, but America was *proud* of being distinctly further ahead and more modern than the rest. As Mina Loy noticed after her arrival from Europe, the avant-garde's experiments with hybrid and fused language encountered their real-world counterpart in American cities:

where latterly a thousand languages have been born, and each one, for the purposes of communication at least, English – English enriched and variegated with the grammatical structure and voice-inflection of many races, in novel alloy with the fundamental time-is-money idiom of the United States. Out of the welter of this unclassifiable speech, while professors of Harvard and Oxford labored to preserve 'God's English,' the muse of modern literature arose, and her tongue had been loosened in the melting pot.⁴

Nevertheless, there were reasons why Pound, Eliot or H. D. went to Europe to make what would become modernism. Pound's 'make it new', of course, is about re-energising the past rather than erasing it, and all three were in search of a tradition to continue, which an American ethic of breaking with the past and maximising individual choice could not supply. All wanted an alternative to the dominance of American commercialism in deciding what good taste was, and (like Stein) they feared the suffocatingly genteel culture of American art as it then was. One might describe the modernist style developed in London or Paris or Rapallo as a remarkable hybrid of American and European cultures, the join evident in Eliot's idea of a tradition 'which cannot be inherited', or H. D.'s cultivation of the ancient fragment written in the present continuous tense.⁵ Pound's conviction that politically one could have Jefferson *and* Mussolini, not just 'or', is perhaps another.

The modernism these exiles invented was not wholly American, in other words, and their absence meant the modernist poetry which developed in America alone was rather different. It was less concerned with finding a lost tradition which would resituate art within social or religious bounds, like Eliot or Yeats, because that tradition had never been there for its settlers. Nor was it so concerned with work which challenged art's relation to the state, like Pound or the European avant-gardes, because there was so little of the broad Schillerian tradition of state-subsidised culture to attack. It is far less full of dense allusions to vanished civilisations, not really interested in undemocratic politics, and rather more at ease with the immediate and vernacular. In the visual arts, Modernism had come to America through Alfred Stieglitz's journal *Camera Work* and the 1913 Armory show, both of which presented it in terms of the shock of the new – the former by asking readers to appreciate the photographic technology that brought them their first glimpse of the Picassos in Gertrude Stein's studio, the latter by compressing thirty years of competing European 'isms' into a single spectacular event framing modernism as an all-at-once assault on outdated decorum.⁶ American 'native' modernism rather followed suit in claiming its forms meant new, vital modes of unrestricted perception. Alfred Kreymborg's little magazine *Others*, in which Stevens, Loy, Moore and Williams would all appear, advertised itself as the 'fresh natural product of American soil, uninhibited by American puritanism and untainted by Anglo-Saxon decadence'.⁷ And when Pound cajoled *Poetry* (Chicago) run by Harriet Monroe into publishing his 'Imagists', it's noticeable how quickly her American contributors seize the idea but don't search for inspiration in the reappearance of Greek gods or Chinese translations; their interest is in unfiltered impressions of the present, like Carl Sandburg's portraits of Chicago or Amy Lowell's rather leaden portraits of herself, while *Poetry* sought parallels in the naive art of children and of Native Americans.⁸ Truth to tell, America already had a straightforwardly declarative free verse in the populist work of Edgar Lee Masters or Vachel Lindsay, and the rapid expansion of Imagism in magazines like *Poetry* or *Seven Arts* really continued this trend towards everyday language and unrestrictive forms, rather than turning it in a really new direction.

The question which would distinguish American modernism, on the other hand, was first asked by Whitman himself: how are the poets of this most diverse country to be 'national expressers, comprehending and effusing for the men and women of the States, what is universal, native, common to all'?⁹ Whitman's own free verse searches for that universal in lines which stretch and swell to catalogue every type of American experience – women, slave and free. Without a narrative to fit stories into, or metrical lines to fit syllables into, it deliberately lacks any formal tension between parts and whole, because

Whitman's vision of democracy means everyone must be included; it is verse without hierarchies, internal conflicts or any choice to be made between one element and another. In other words, Whitman's provisional, self-revising form of narration was modernist before its time, and his idea of the endlessly expandable poem of America, where the all is in every part simultaneously, where there are no formal masters or slaves, where there is no 'high' or 'low' art, and where no experience is too shameful or too banal to be included, would become a blueprint for much later American verse, including Hart Crane's *The Bridge*, Charles Olson's *Maximus* and Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*.

But Whitman's technique would also leave a problem for modernism, because it links this ever-expanding awareness with an insistent self-narration. Admitting that 'the fear of conflicting and irreconcilable interiors, and the lack of a common skeleton, knitting all close, continually haunts me' (762), his hymns to diversity make the poet's prophetic 'I' that skeleton, so that everything that happens is also happening to a single 'I', and can only be registered by its effects on that 'I'. It's as if Whitman is constantly thrilling to the democratic poem of America that is manifesting itself through him, and then at his worst moments, overriding its diversity with his own prosy reportage:

I will effuse egotism and show it underlying all, and I will be the bard of
personality,
And I will show of male and female that either is but the equal of the
other,
. . . And I will show that there is no imperfection in the present, and can
be none in the future,
And I will show that whatever happens to anybody it may be turn'd to
beautiful results . . . (‘Starting from Paumanok’)

Now it might seem that the invention of the modernist syntax that merges self and world would remove this difficulty for Whitman's most direct successor, Hart Crane, allowing him to channel America rather than constantly foreground himself. Like Whitman before him and Ginsberg after him, Crane was attracted to the all-inclusive poem of the all-inclusive nation for private as well as political reasons: excluded by his homosexuality, from the beginning he dreamt of situations where hidden inward emotions would become one with public situations. An early poem, 'Garden Abstract', imagines an Eve figure longing for an apple, but, rather than eating it, to fuse herself with the tree on which it hangs:

And so she comes to dream herself the tree,
The wind possessing her, weaving her young veins,
Holding her to the sky and its quick blue . . .

'Veins' here fuses the thin tree-branches and blood pulsing inside the woman's body, while 'quick' links the windswept sky to her body's vigour. Transferred adjectives would be a mainstay of Crane's technique for all his short life, because they fuse the emotional life of the individual and the swirling currents of his social setting, like the blurring of figure and ground in a modernist picture. Crane once explained to the editor of *Poetry* magazine, Harriet Monroe, that his apparently illogical verb–noun combinations were a kind of 'short-hand' fusion of inward and outward.¹⁰ Citing Eliot's famous line from 'Rhapsody on a Windy Night', 'Every street-lamp that I pass/Beats like a fatalistic drum', he noted that no one has ever heard a street lamp beat: 'the relation between a *drum* and a *street lamp*' is created 'via the *unmentioned* throbbing of the heart and nerves in a distraught man', Eliot's implied, invisible speaker.¹¹ Hurling through the subway between Manhattan and Brooklyn in 'The Tunnel' section of *The Bridge*, Crane's speaker is submerged into the clamour around him:

"What do you want? getting weak on the links? fandaddle daddy don't
ask for change—IS THIS
FOURTEENTH? it's half past six she said—if
you don't like my gate why did you
swing on it, why *didja*
swing on it
anyhow—"

And somehow anyhow swing—

The phonographs of hades in the brain
Are tunnels that re-wind themselves, and love
A burnt match skating in a urinal—

Hanging on to the swinging straps, the speaker is physically underground and, amid the screaming wheels and gasping brakes, metaphorically in a Hades full of inane jabber. But the subway network through which his body jolts is also the 'tunnels' wiring his own brain, as if what is happening to him is also already within him, endlessly looping and repeating. Obviously this subway journey's repetition recalls Eliot's damned commuters in *The Waste Land*, but in Crane's case it also recalls the repetitiveness of his own addictions: a later section connects being shaken about with the retching tremors of Edgar Allan Poe, poisoned by alcohol in a way Crane knew all too well. Even more compressed is the link between going underground and the gay underworld of public toilets, whose brief flares always end as a 'burnt match', with recriminations about pissing one's life away somewhere in the background. Public America and Crane's private life interpenetrate, as he desired, for poetry's resistance to industrialised anaesthesia demanded 'an extraordinary capacity

for surrender, at least temporarily, to the sensations of urban life'. Without that surrender, the modern world 'can not act creatively in our lives, until, like the unconscious nervous responses of our bodies, its connotations emanate from within – forming as spontaneous a terminology of poetic reference as the bucolic world of pasture, plow and barn'.¹²

But Whitman's problem of belated self-consciousness would recur in another way in *The Bridge*, for most of it is not nearly as modernist in feel as 'The Tunnel', and its diction does not surrender in the same way. The bridge is Brooklyn Bridge, its span a symbol for Crane's leaping between the poetry of the Romantic past and the industrial present, between the different states of America and the people within them, across borders of education, sexuality, race and class. With such an awesome Whitmanian mission, it's no wonder that Crane's address gets caught up in its own rapture:

So to thine Everpresence, beyond time
Like spears ensanguined of one tolling star
That bleeds infinity – the orphic strings,
Sidereal phalanxes, leap and converge;
– One Song, one Bridge of Fire!

(‘Atlantis’)

For all that the bridge-struts and the poet are meant to be the strings of Orpheus' lyre, resonating with the music of the spheres, these rapid switches of metaphor between spears and soldiers, lyres and bells, and the relentlessly high-Romantic diction leave the dominant impression of the poet singing very much on his own. Wishing to make every abstract thought intensely physical, Crane sounds overwhelmed and overwhelming in every line.

That exalted inability to keep anything in reserve and the neediness such torrents of metaphor betrayed kept Crane off the modernist map for a while. Though his early career was boosted by his friendship with two student-poets who would go on to become very influential critics, Allen Tate and Yvor Winters, their version of modernism saw the good poem as a model of impersonal balance and self-discipline, while Crane's willingness to risk everything for 'absolute beauty' and his self-destructive binges seemed only to confirm the opposite.¹³ As modernism's Romantic roots have become more accepted, Crane has generally made his way into the anthologies, but a case like his reveals the strain between any account of American modernism that acknowledges Whitman's paramount importance, and the more impersonal ethos associated with Pound and the Objectivists. Crane evidently thought himself in the modernist vanguard, being an early signatory to the 'Proclamation' of the surrealist-friendly modernist journal *transition*, which includes the claim that 'pure poetry is a lyrical absolute that seeks an a priori reality within

ourselves alone'.¹⁴ But how can this absolute subjectivity be reconciled with Williams's insistence in 'Paterson' that there are 'no ideas but in things', with Moore's impersonal assemblages of quotation, or with Wallace Stevens's constant reversals between the realms of inward imagination and outward reality?

The problem has led several recent studies to argue that there are really two streams of 'native' American modernism, 'objective' and 'subjective'. 'Objective' modernism is said to come from Imagism, Pound and Williams through to the Objectivists and forward to the 'Language' poets of the 1970s, all concerned with making the poem an impersonal presentation of things or signs without grounding their significance in the poet's self or feelings. 'Subjective' modernism is said to be the line from Whitman, Symbolism and Crane to Stevens and perhaps Ginsberg, emphasising the poet's lyrical representation of his own emotions faced with the world.¹⁵ While there are some differences along these lines, it is not a distinction I want to employ here. It's not just that the subjective-objective division has difficulties placing some of its poets; Zukofsky nominated Moore and Stevens among his Objectivists, for example, while Williams insisted on the artist's personality: the poet 'writes to free himself, to annihilate every machine, every science, to escape defiant through consciousness and accuracy of emotional expression', he thought.¹⁶ More importantly, categorising modernists by their position on a line between subject and object omits the crucial *intersubjectivity* of modernist poetics, the democratic America their formal experiments are always in search of. No matter whether it is talking about inner states, outer things or the fabric of the language itself, their poetry has an irreducible social dimension because it is always trying to recalibrate the usual hierarchies of value and order, not least the ones that set self and world at odds. As Kryzstof Ziarek puts it with the modernist avant-garde in mind, 'art's transforming works not on the level of objects, people or things, but in terms of a modality of relating, which, in the forms of perception, knowledge, acting or valuing, determines the connective tissue of what we experience as reality'.¹⁷ From Whitman forward, American modernist experiment is all about remaking that connective tissue into something more universal and more democratic, and understanding Williams, Stevens and Moore means grasping the social appeal they are making in the way they arrange their words to be heard.

William Carlos Williams

Still, it has to be said that Williams himself encouraged his readers to see him as a poet committed to objects, and to a form which would present things

directly without tidying them up or smearing them with emotional jam. An early essay declares:

The true value is that peculiarity which gives an object a character by itself. The associational or sentimental value is the false. Its imposition is due to lack of imagination, to an easy lateral sliding. The attention has been held too rigid on the one plane instead of following a more flexible, jagged resort . . . The thing that stands eternally in the way of really good writing is always one: the virtual impossibility of lifting to the imagination those things which lie under the direct scrutiny of the senses, close to the nose.¹⁸

If we are to avoid projecting associations onto things, the poem's form itself must be as 'jagged' as the thing, not neatly sewn up, or narrating some kind of satisfying moral closure. Williams has become celebrated in poetry anthologies as the democratic modernist whose imagination slices up sentences jaggedly, cutting away all extraneous words and punctuation to get at the sheer baffling *thereness* of the object, the red wheelbarrow or the old lady munching plums ('To a Poor Old Woman'). But this account of Williams's simplicity misses the social dimension of this 'direct scrutiny', and the demands it makes on the reader, as in 'Young Woman at a Window':

She sits with
tears on

her cheek
her cheek on

her hand
the child

in her lap
his nose

pressed
to the glass

It is as objective, ordinary, unexalted description as you could want, without a trace of comment or moralising. As with many Williams poems, there is so little judgement that at first reading the feeling is slightly 'yes, and so what'? But the poem's subtlety starts with that feeling of not knowing what to do with it. Although it is one sentence, the lack of punctuation and five little blocks of text (you can scarcely call them stanzas) make it resemble one of Pound's ideogram stanzas in *The Cantos*, which you can read upwardly and downwardly rather than following the syntax. They give the poem a blocked, spurting feel like

the teardrops held on the woman's cheek. As you wind through the sentence, though, you can feel how the way Williams has paired the lines pulls against its natural rhythms. The verse encloses the pauses after 'cheek', 'hand' and 'lap', where commas would normally go, and puts stanza gaps between parts of the sentence that syntactically should flow. Compare the first version of this poem, which breaks its stanzas in more natural places:

While she sits
there

with tears on
her cheek

her cheek on
her hand

this little child
who robs her

knows nothing of
his theft

but rubs his
nose

It has the same lumpy feel, but without the counter-pull of the syntax, its blocks remain inert gobbets, with one-word lines like 'there' sounding flat and sentimentally bare. By the second version, Williams could cut out the details about the child robbing the young mother of her life, because the push-and-pull of the syntax against the stanza breaks was now describing the emotional closeness and resistance between mother and child for him. She cradles him, he wants to press up against the window; she loves her child but can't help but resent the way that he is now running her life for her. We can *guess* that she sees her child will keep her poor, is wondering how different life might have been if she hadn't got pregnant, and hates herself for thinking such things. We can wonder about fathers and responsibilities, and also wonder why we are so quick to blame or judge. But it's important that the poem doesn't tell us what to think about it, because overt appeal or commentary would override just this balance of sympathy and distance that the poem's static form is trying to create in its reader's imagination.

For all his talk of presenting things directly, Williams's lifelong interest was much more in the social relationships implied by the way the poem organises them. Although 'no ideas but in things' became one of his mantras ('Paterson'), the phrase originally comes in a poem which imagines the multifarious life of

the city of Paterson as the thoughts of a philosopher called Paterson, so that the ‘actual florid detail of cheap carpet’, or a ‘canary singing’, or ‘geraniums in tin cans’ are all ‘the divisions and imbalances / of his whole concept’.¹⁹ The poem is not about geraniums or lurid carpets, but the kind of idea which can bring these things and their owners into a democratic balance. It is a warning to poetic thought not to impose abstract systems on the sensuous or overlook the ordinary and local if it is ever to see the world as a ‘whole concept’:

A poem is touched by no quality it borrows from a logical recital of events *nor from the events themselves* but solely from that attenuated power which draws perhaps many broken things into a dance giving them thus full being.²⁰

This formal ‘dance’ opens a new way to link events and social relations through the untraditional way that what’s described comes at you. Williams’s poems are not, therefore, simply presenting an imaginative rearrangement of things for us to stare at. Believing that imagination is ‘an actual force comparable to electricity’, his poems are a kind of force-field, in the sense that they make art by holding together scraps of non-artistic life – other people’s insults, menus, soda signs, or eventually the whole city of Paterson, New Jersey, in the five-book epic of *Paterson* (1946–58) – into a charged whole into which you, as a reader, also have to step.²¹ To feel the motion of his poems’ form is to begin this process, as in the fabulous later poem, ‘To Close’, made from the scrappy misunderstandings of a desperate phone call to the Williams house and surgery:

Will you please rush down and see
ma baby. You know, the one I talked
to you about last night

What was that?

Is this the baby specialist?

Yes, but perhaps you mean my son,
can’t you wait until . . . ?

I, I, I don’t think it’s brEAtin’

The ever-busy Dr Williams Sr resents the interruption, and the broken punctuation and rhythmless prose betray his distracted cross-purposes with the caller. But then the ‘I, I, I’ of the last line suddenly makes him – and you – catch the caller’s own panicky breathing in the gaps, hearing the living body behind the words in the little scream of ‘brEAtin’’. Suddenly neither reader

nor speaker are processing information but hearing someone breathing when a baby is not, and from trying 'to close' the call, we suddenly fear it's too close to call. That disarming moment of connection is what all Williams's form aims for: when he said that the modern poet's task was to cut away all 'presupposed measures', he meant both traditional poetic forms and social classifications, anything that would hinder the reader from getting things clear and whole, a 'unity of understanding'.²²

Williams consequently came to despise the high-cultural snobbery that thought true poetry couldn't have real, unglamorous, poor America in it. Although he could see Manhattan's skyline being built and rebuilt on the grey, marshy horizon, his practice as a busy doctor in rapidly suburbanising Rutherford, New Jersey, was a cultural world away from the avant-garde *salons* cultivated by Walter Arensburg or Alfred Steiglitz where he had first encountered modernist artists such as Marcel Duchamp, Mina Loy, Marsden Hartley and Charles Demuth in 1917–18. While such metropolitan and internationalist circles would not be Williams's natural home, his poems do apply something of Duchamp's avant-garde principle that there should be no borders between art and Rutherford, that art could be taken 'ready-made' from its conversations, neon signs or grocery lists. His poorer patients drove him to distraction, but he had a profound sense that his poetry was already being made where he lived, in the desperate bursts of spring in the trees alongside the filthy river Passaic, in notes on the fridge ('This is just to say') or the down-at-heel lives he briefly came into contact with as a town doctor. The early poem, 'Portrait of a Woman in Bed', for instance, makes its stanzas from chopping up the complaints of the bed-ridden Robitza, a squatter faced with eviction. 'I won't work / and I've got no cash', she declares, and then lashes out immediately, 'What are you going to do / about it?' This defiant despair is the hallmark of what follows:

My two boys?
 —they're keen!
 Let the rich lady
 care for them—
 they'll beat the school
 or
 let them go to the gutter—
 that ends trouble.

This house is empty
 isn't it?
 Then it's mine
 because I need it.

Oh, I won't starve
 while there's the Bible
 to make them feed me.

Refusing to pay her dues or accept pity, taking charity but denying anyone thanks, Robitza rebuffs anyone who tries to get involved with her, and the poem's jerky, stop-start rhythm, with its sudden short lines, refuses to let you fall in with it, always making *you* readjust to Robitza's outbursts. Her Polish-Austrian immigrant name and free-loading attitude is meant to evoke racist fears of hard-working Americans being swamped by free-riding scroungers, but by making the poem a monologue Williams puts his reader instead uncomfortably on the receiving end. Outrageously ungrateful, Robitza's cynicism also angrily exposes the obligations and dues which the charitable expect in return, and whose formal counterpart would be any regular rhythms or approved forms of rhyme and stanza-shape where the poetry-reading classes know what they'll get. 'I wanted to throw her in the face of the town,' Williams commented in the 1950s. 'The whores are better than my townspeople.'²³ The only weapon Robitza has left is to put the upright citizen or middle-class doctor on the defensive:

You could have closed the door
 when you came in;
 do it when you go out
 I'm tired.

Williams had not yet (1917) fully discovered the power of his line-breaks to charge the whole line, but here his early style of rebellious exclamations and take-it-or-leave-it unfinishedness finds its perfect subject.

But this belief that the poem could rearrange unpoetic material doesn't mean that Williams was a crusading poet of the poor – indeed, he was to run into trouble from the critics at *Partisan Review* in the 1930s for not being socially committed enough. That early statement about wanting the object's 'character by itself' is taken from a journal entry where Williams is arguing with Wallace Stevens, who had described him as having a passion for 'the anti-poetic'.²⁴ Stevens meant that Williams deliberately chose ugly subjects for his poems, and re-framed them in such a way as to bring out their poetic potential. Williams was angered by this interpretation, because he refused to recognise there was anything intrinsically anti-poetic in the first place, and thought Stevens's division betrayed a man who has 'taken to "society" in self-defense'.²⁵ To Williams, the imagination was not an enclave, but a space where everything could be itself and be in balance with everything else, the only place where the

reader could have the ‘oneness of experience’ denied equally by social divisions, Puritan repressions, market exchange-values and traditional forms.²⁶ ‘There is no use pretending that we live in a closed “poetic” world in which we do not need to know what is going on about us and then think we can invent poetry’, he once commented.²⁷ By incorporating adverts, real speech and ‘found’ texts, Williams’s poetry is not simply making art from everyday life, but revealing the latent and potential art in ordinary life, art where ‘all things and ages meet in fellowship. Thus only can they, peculiar and perfect, find their release.’²⁸ This democratic, open and directly involving relationship his poems sought would later become his model for American culture to renew itself; ‘the question of FORM is so important’, he claimed, ‘because it is the very matter itself of a culture.’²⁹

Spring and All (1923) was the first volume to announce this task, and its furious sequence of mixed-up chapter headings, angry replies to his critics, semi-automatic writings on art, and luminous, spaced-out poems remains one of the most radical volumes of modernist poetry ever published. Its basic theme is that the imagination must make things new, here and now, and as witness to this urgent pressure Williams doesn’t care to cross out any of the false starts or delete the variations on his theme that ‘there is a constant barrier between the reader and his consciousness of immediate contact with the world.’³⁰ The imagination is the only force that can break through this barrier, and every restriction which gets in the way of the impulse must be left for dead, as spring leaves winter behind. Second thoughts, coordinated argument and the set forms of traditional poetry are analogues of all *external* systems of coercion which divide us:

What I put down of value will have this value: an escape from crude symbolism, the annihilation of strained associations, complicated ritualistic forms designed to separate the work from ‘reality’ – such as rhyme, meter as meter and not as the essential of the work, one of its words. . . The word must be put down for itself, not as a symbol of nature but a part, cognizant of the whole – aware – civilised. (189)

This sounds like a recipe for *Spring and All*’s most famous poem, ‘The Red Wheelbarrow’, which depends on the tension between declaring that ‘so much depends’ and the innocuous barrow, tension mirrored in the frequent, steady line-breaks which give enormous emphasis to very simple words. Trying to name quite what depends on the red wheelbarrow would ruin it; the poem simply puts its finger on the pressure between something being just ‘for itself’ and ‘cognizant of the whole’. But that poem’s simplicity is unusual. Most of the volume contains complex interplays of three or four lines of thought – ‘a

multiplication of impulses that by their several flights, crossing at all eccentric angles, *might* enlighten', as Williams described Moore's verse – and the reader's task is to imagine herself into the 'whole – aware – civilized' plane on which they all spontaneously intersect, giving 'the feeling of completion by revealing the oneness of experience'.³¹ The poem which follows this statement lingers over Juan Gris's cubist picture 'Roses':

The rose is obsolete
but each petal ends in
an edge, the double facet
cementing the grooved
columns of air – The edge
cuts without cutting
meets – nothing – renews
itself in metal or porcelain –

whither? It ends –

The rose is one of the most hackneyed symbols available for any artist, but Gris's picture has escaped the 'obsolete' because it's a collage, painting an arrangement of roses and vases on layers of wallpaper which already have roses on them.³² Rather than trying to imitate a rose, Gris's picture gives you the layering of various representations of roses, and Williams's poem is talking through his experience of a visual whole made from layered fragments (he later described himself as here 'experimenting with the mode of the French painters – the fragmentation of Picasso').³³ What fascinates him is the way Gris's various overlapping layers of paper are like rose petals – the spaces of the rose within itself – and how this visual experience of borders that 'cut without cutting' reanimates the whole symbolic association of roses with love:

It is at the edge of the
petal that love waits

Crisp, worked to defeat
laboredness – fragile
plucked, moist, half-raised
cold, precise, touching

What

The place between the petal's
edge and the

Love is nothing like a rose if that rose is a cliché, because love has to mean appreciation of uniqueness. But love is like the way a rose's petals relate to

themselves, the ‘cold, precise, touching’ edges like intimacy with a shiver of distance, their casual delicacy like the emotional grace it takes to ‘defeat laboredness’. And Williams’s poem’s own sharp edges – all those sliced-off line-breaks – are rhythmically part of what he means; like keeping any relationship alive, reading involves letting the line be, suspending confirmation while hoping for more, and living with the unfinished. What looks like a string of broken thoughts becomes part of the delicate connection the poem wants to make between the physical experience of edges and layers and the meaning of love itself, a connection which would be impossible without the perceptual reorientations of modern art’s collage or Williams’s torn fragments.

While the poems are busy reassembling ordinary perceptions into a new holistic form, however, the prose is unable to decide whether art should be thought of as a reality independent of the everyday world, or something underlying that world. In just one of many instances:

—the illusion once dispensed with, painting has this problem before it:
replace not the forms but the reality of experience with its own—

is followed swiftly by:

now works of art cannot be left in this category of France’s ‘lie,’ they
must be real, not ‘realism’ but reality itself— (204)

Williams insists simultaneously that ‘the imagination’ is self-directed, because it can’t just be a copy of the world, and is also the world’s deepest structure, since it is ‘the imagination on which reality rides’ (225). What links these opposing views, of course, is that Williams can’t bear the idea of an art restricted by anything, and so he switches seamlessly between the notion that poetry is uniquely free from the pressure of reality to one where poetry is entirely co-extensive with deep reality, and so has nothing outside it which could pressure it. Since he also thought ‘a work of art is important only as evidence, in its structure, of a new world which it has been created to affirm’ (196), this paradox would come to have some important consequences for his dreams of what America should be. Believing that in poetry the ‘individual [can] raise to some approximate co-extension with the universe’, or that ‘the local is the only thing that is the universal’, Williams came to think of true democracy as the state in which every reader finds ‘the undiscovered language of yourself’, and yet by doing so connects immediately to everyone else without compromise, tension or intervening structures, a promise which would make him a grandfather of the individualist communism of the hippie generation (‘all suppressions . . . are confessions that the bomb has entered our lives’, as the late poem ‘Asphodel, that Greeny Flower’ puts it).³⁴ It also allows him to

occupy the modernists' typically ambivalent position towards 'the people'. Like Yeats as much as Whitman, Williams thought the poet's power derived from connecting with the folk, and he would later claim with great enthusiasm that his flexible forms had a natural American 'variable foot' whose stretchability derived from the latent poetry of ordinary immigrant American speech. On the other hand, he knew the citizens of Rutherford were not interested in understanding their true nature in his complex and individual poetry; as *Spring and All* notes rather sourly at the beginning of its experiment, 'if anything of moment results, so much the more likely that no one will want to see it'.³⁵ At once the nexus of popular feeling and a fierce individual, Williams the poet is often 'willing and then fearful of making contact with that which makes up the substance of the reality in which the poem is supposed to reside'.³⁶ Poem XXVI in *Spring and All* starts, for instance, by celebrating the crowd's enjoyment of sport as a model for art's 'play' or 'dance' (235), 'all to no end save beauty / the eternal'. In keeping with Williams's belief in universal beauty, team loyalties of different sports fans seem to play no part. But the beauty of the crowd is then 'to be warned against // saluted and defied', since in its unreflective immediacy, it is 'alive, venomous', the 'Inquisition, the / Revolution'. *The Embodiment of Knowledge*, Williams's harangue on the need for a holistic education, would even briefly lament 'the deceptive ideal of democracy with its attendant loss of human dignity', because democracy had come to mean mass-market conformity rather than local idiom, and only the local, the individual and the specific can be truly universal.³⁷ *In the American Grain* rewrites America's founding fathers as a series of pioneering Nietzschean heroes, living and fighting 'without resentment', 'free and independent, unyielding to the herd', and living in an authentic relationship to their particular soil, against the homogenising and polluting forces of Puritanism and capitalism whose effects were plain to see in the ruin of the Passaic Falls near his home.³⁸

These individualistic-folk politics point back to the central irony of *Spring and All*; that while its vision of 'a new world naked' ('By the road to the contagious hospital') is forged in furious rivalry with T. S. Eliot, it often ends up doubling him. Williams thought Eliot had led poetry down the wrong path, back to Europe and back to repression with his ideas of tradition. Alluding to Eliot's Sibil, *Spring and All* sneers that 'the voice of the Delphic Oracle itself, what was it? A poisonous gas from a rock's cleft', and calls Eliot and his ilk 'THE TRADITIONALISTS OF PLAGIARISM', who 'have had the governing of the mob through all the repetitious years' and who 'resent the new order' (185). But in his search for the truly new, Williams then restates some of the cornerstone ideas of 'Tradition and the Individual Talent': that Homer, cave-painting and the present are 'one piece' (189), the atomised lack of peasant tradition that

makes ‘the pure products of America / go crazy’ (‘To Elsie’, 217), and that the artist’s personal life has no importance to his compositions. And some of the poems seem to be replaying *The Waste Land* in Rutherford: the wind crosses the brown fields and shakes the dry leaves on the road to the contagious hospital; an old woman moans ‘I can’t die’, like the Sybil (216), a jazz band plays (and boasts, ironically, ‘you can’t copy it’ (216)), young men stand with lilacs in the doorways, someone laments ‘la la’ on a beach (222), and the whole thing is a mixed-up sequences of intertextual poems (there are quotations from ‘Prufrock’ and Pound) about ‘an approach with difficulty from / the dead – the winter casing of grief’ (193). Williams might reply that he’s updating Eliot into contemporary, ordinary American without the mythological complexities. But the impression remains that *Spring and All’s* democratic newness is driven by interpersonal rivalry as well as open-minded relations to objects, and that the imagination needs to address human conflict if its individualist politics are to be plausible.

Paterson is an epic built from thirty years’ worth of Williams’ work trying to do just that, to find an imaginative ‘radiant gist’ from the mental and physical wastelands of this industrial town and its correspondent minds. With Pound, Williams associated degradation and polluted squalor with Alexander Hamilton, whose economics had turned America into the property of corporations and banks, and whose politics had sacrificed local states’ devolved democracy into the domineering federalist government most Americans thought they had left behind in Europe. Like Pound, there is a strong connection in Williams’s mind between set forms of verse and the control of the many by the few in federal government and finance capitalism. However, alongside the various forms of ‘false credit’ diagnosed – artificial inflation, European verse forms, mistaken gender relations, bad taste – Williams includes a letter from a former friend, lover and patient, which accuses him of being part of the problem:

The very circumstance of your birth and social background provided you with an escape from life in the raw; and you confuse that protection from life with an *inability* to live – and are thus able to regard literature as nothing more than a desperate last extremity resulting from that illusionary inability to live.³⁹

The accusation is that *Paterson’s* search for the authentic, both in its content and its technique of incorporating found texts and direct speech, is itself a kind of middle-class aestheticisation of the raw – and never more so than in Williams’s use of this private letter in the poem itself. It’s an accusation which is never really answered, but it does open on to some of the conflicts embedded in Williams’s best-known, and seemingly innocuous poem, ‘This is

Just to Say'. Made from a fridge note, the cluster of meaning it draws into the few words depends on the reader filling in the background of a busy couple at cross-purposes, not eating or talking together, and the minor disappointments and resentments that build up so that a small act comes to stand, like the poetic word, for a complex of feelings and tensions accumulated over years. The short lines drag out the moment of guilty realisation ('and which / you were probably / saving / for breakfast') in order to make an apology which, by continuing at exactly the same pace, sounds secretly rather pleased with itself:

Forgive me
they were
so sweet
and so cold

The defiant pleasure suggests someone asserting a self as much as asking for forgiveness, knowing they will be forgiven (no stolen fruit in a marriage) and wanting nonetheless to provoke again by closing with that shudder of remembered pleasure, rather than the other person. The emotional tugs between independence and dependence in this tiny poem expand out into the marriage whose constraints Williams resented and whose security he wanted, and also the communism to which he was attracted and far too individualistic to adopt. They are also, perhaps, a delicate piece of poetic self-criticism. The writer of real imagination, he had written in *Spring and All*, would be able to 'enjoy, to taste, to engage the free world, not a world which he carries like a bag of food, always fearful lest he drop something or someone get more than he'. Such a world would be:

sufficient to itself, removed from him (as it most certainly is) with which he has bitter and delicious relations and from which he is independent – moving at will from one thing and another – as he pleases, unbound – complete. (207)

'This is Just to Say' suggests, on the other hand, how much this mutual independence of subject and object is the pioneer's fantasy: the world one has to deal with is already shared, or owned, by other people.

Marianne Moore

Williams's friend Marianne Moore also made poetry to scrutinise those appetites for possession. Virtue, for her, is found in an unselfish open-mindedness; vice in egoism and prejudice, in art and in social life alike. One

of her 'Labors of Hercules' (1921) is to persuade musical traditionalists 'that the piano is a free field for etching', a frustration one might expect from a modernist. But she swiftly moves to its social equivalent:

to convince snake-charming controversialists
that one keeps on knowing
'that the Negro is not brutal
that the Jew is not greedy
that the Oriental is not immoral
that the German is not a Hun.'

Moore's poetics of open-mindedness, however, have none of Williams's pressured, improvisatory feel. They leap from topic to topic without warning, and accumulate an intimidatingly wide range of references without making it clear what is actually quotation or why it matters. They use formal devices which experiment with fate and randomness, rather than shapes driven by flows of feeling. Though the diction is precise, the perspectives are multiple and the irony mobile. 'It is not easy to say what one of Miss Moore's longer poems is about', confessed R. P. Blackmur in 1935, because 'what it is about is what it does, and not at any one place but all along. The parts stir each other up.'⁴⁰ But though everything is in motion, all the parts orbit around a common cluster of principles, that 'snobbishness is a stupidity' ('The Labors of Hercules'), that 'unself-righteousness humbles inspection' ('Efforts of Affection'), and that 'unobtrusiveness is dazzling' ('Voracities and Verities').

The unobtrusive dazzles everywhere in the poems, not least in their bric-a-brac of sources (a leaflet on the speaking clock in 'Four Quartz Clocks', Walton's *Compleat Angler*, a jam-jar label in 'Camellia Sabina'). The hero in 'The Steeplejack' is the person able to enjoy the modest pleasures of a fishing town as if it were an exotic world tour, finding 'the tropics at first hand' in the small seaside flowers looming weirdly out of the fog, or Dürer's painting techniques in the purple-green tints of the sea. Her famous animal poems, such as 'The Pangolin', 'To a Snail', 'The Jerboa' or 'The Plumet Basilisk', all take pleasure and instruction from the creatures' modest and unaggressive manner of living. The exotic Malay Dragon of 'The Plumet Basilisk', for instance, lives humbly among 'unfragrant orchids, on the unnutritious nut-tree', yet, gliding from branch to branch, has the knack of 'conferring wings on what it grasps'. And that is also what the poems are trying to encourage in their own reader's attention: to widen what they notice, to value the unobtrusive, and to set free the imagination at the same time as it grasps each element of the poem.

But Moore was too smart a moralist not to realise that any poem made in loud and direct opposition to snobs, racists or swaggering egoists would simply reduplicate their self-righteous posturing. Lecturing her reader about

being humble would put her in the position of the human steam-roller she criticised for crushing ‘all the particles down / into close conformity’ with a single moral or artistic law (‘To a Steam-Roller’). ‘A poem is not a poem, surely, unless there is a margin of undidactic implication, – an area which the reader can make his own’, she remarked of her poems against war.⁴¹ The indirectness of modernist form was her way to dazzle and tease her readers instead into a unsuspecting sensation of playful self-discipline, or a deeply unselfish enjoyment. Like Williams, that meant poetry whose mix of highbrow and lowbrow is meant to upset our normal sense of importance, and, like Stevens, poetry which is constantly seeing things at unlikely angles in order to work round its reader’s defences. Like Pound, it also made her difficult, as Moore confessed to her brother:

I reckonise my trouble, as being too oblique & obscure, as a result of hating Crudeness (& Alvin E Magary condescension and insulting didacticism). Always what I learn to regret, I try to avoid in the next try, it is very hard to REarrange a thing that has fallen in to the mold already.⁴²

But though she promises to mend her ways, this paragraph actually justifies difficulty as a fear of being impolite, pushy or superior to her reader. Indeed, one might say for Moore that modernist aesthetics were always ethics, and her games with the reader a search for a better set of manners for American life.

‘The Jerboa’ is a good example of her manner of proceeding. Entitled ‘Too Much’, the first section is a slightly zany list of Roman and Egyptian aristocracy’s bad taste in architecture, zoo-keeping and interior decoration, all of which is a symptom of their rapacious desire to use the whole world as the stage-props for their empires. Animals are ‘looked on as theirs’, and put in displays, or stuffed and made into containers to hold remains of other animals. In this idealised garden scenery,

Dwarfs here and there, lent
to an evident
poetry of frog grays,
duck-egg greens and egg-plant blues, a fantasy
and a verisimilitude that were
right to those with, everywhere,
power over the poor.

By contrast, the section titled ‘Abundance’ shows how the Jerboa:

a small desert rat
and not famous, that

lives without water, has
happiness.⁴³

Despite living in a desert, the Jerboa lives in ‘abundance’ thanks to its happily unpossessive ease with its surroundings, its ‘shining silver house // of sand’, a contrast that has a political edge to it. The poem opens with a giant ‘fir-cone’ of bronze, which, though constructed by a ‘freedman’ of Rome, is so repulsive that the mental habits of slavery and empire-building are still unconsciously informing its pointless gigantism. The bad taste of ancient empires she enumerates is, then, a discreet warning about American super-sizing; on the contrary, the ‘free-born’ Jerboa is explicitly allied with Africa’s ‘untouched’ people, before they were brought as slaves to America. In other words, we cannot pride ourselves on leaving slavery behind, because the same *attitude* is still there in the modern consumerism which ransacks the world for decoration.

But in suggesting that the ‘verisimilitude’ of Roman, British or American art is in fact driven by its imperial self-image, then ‘The Jerboa’ is also a poem about the way that non-realist kinds of representation are trying to do something different. In fact, everything that Moore says about the Jerboa is also a hope for the way her own poems go about things. Whether ‘abroad’ or ‘at home’, the neat and nimble Jerboa is always within its element, moving with incredible speed as it feeds by gleaning (taking unwanted leftovers from harvest fields, like the biblical Ruth). Shyly cosmopolitan, Moore’s poems, too, are always self-consciously precise and carefully worked, moving from topic to topic ‘as if on wings’, and nourishing themselves on scraps of phrase and thought gleaned from an enormous array of inconspicuous sources – in this case, a series of articles in the *Illustrated London News*, a publishers’ catalogue and a book on zoology. Other poems happily absorb Puritan devotions, comics, newspapers, women’s magazines, pamphlets and junk mail, and when she writes that the Jerboa ‘honours the sand by assuming its color’, this is a perfect description of her own camouflage techniques with these sources. Working through her library of clippings, Moore would underline words that caught her imagination and would stitch the poem together by using them as a series of hints and prompts. Of course, other modernists made many poems from allusions and references. But Pound’s or Eliot’s quotations are meant to show the artist’s personality being fused into the Tradition or the Tao, whereas there is no such transtemporal law or power for Moore, and no drama of self-sacrifice or shamanic channelling. Her patchwork of unobtrusive sources emphasises instead ‘the secondary qua secondary, the pointedly unauthoritative’ – like the Jerboa itself, definitively ‘not famous’.⁴⁴

This fluid relationship with her verbal surroundings does not mean, however, that Moore simply eliminates herself for the sake of her sources. Marked quotations are so frequently cut up that the words are not memorable in themselves, but simply ‘flies in amber’, phrases haphazardly arrested in the slow-moving process of the poem’s genesis.⁴⁵ Others are made to serve purposes far different from their original author’s intentions. We learn in ‘To a Snail’, for instance, that what we admire in its self-withdrawing style is “a method of conclusions”; / “a knowledge of principles”. Patient work in the Moore archive has revealed that the original source of these quotations, Duns Scotus, actually opposed them as two different kinds of knowledge: the principles that come from theology and the conclusions of applied philosophy or science. But you would be hard put to know that from the poem, for Moore supplies only a vague reference, and that is omitted in later editions. Rather than a succinct allusion, the quotations become simply marked points in the process of thought, attention, statement and anticipation of others’ responses which makes the conversational performance of a Moore poem. Cristanne Miller has helpfully pointed out how much this continual turning-round of phrases resembles Moore’s family correspondence, where a word or phrase will be borrowed and adapted in successive letters between different members, so that its meaning is always being shaped by this communal process of interaction which no one person can claim to own.⁴⁶ As the Jerboa is unpossessively at one with its surroundings, so Moore’s quotations often minimise the distance between herself and others’ words, and imply how much she saw her own poems borne along in the stream of other people’s discourse. And as if to confirm all this self-reference, the Jerboa’s rapid movement proceeds

by fifths and sevenths,
in leaps of two lengths
like the uneven notes
of the Bedouin flute [. . .]

in a stanza pattern whose first two lines are five syllables long and whose last has seven.

But writing about the Jerboa’s happy camouflage in this highly self-referential way has a twist to it. For if Moore is proclaiming the virtues of a nearly invisible self – Jerboas were not filmed in the wild until a few years ago – she is doing so self-consciously, by drawing in an incredible array of unlikely historical sources, and making all sorts of playful comparisons to her own poem as you read it. This combination of withdrawal and spectacle runs through all her work, signalled early on by the reworking of Imagism in ‘To a Snail’:

If 'compression is the first grace of style,'
 you have it. Contractility is a virtue
 as modesty is a virtue.

Moore finds the ideal Imagist poem in the snail's ability to compress itself into its shell, so that substance and its formal housing are become one thing, as free verse poets wanted. Where Amy Lowell's and Richard Aldington's preface to *Some Imagist Poets* had declared that these cut-down poems signified 'individualism in literature, liberty of art, abandonment of existing forms', however, here we are meant to notice that the poem-snail could be longer and isn't.⁴⁷ Although that strategic absence is what Moore calls 'modesty', it is actually an invitation to look more closely, for like the snail's 'absence of feet' and lack of 'adornment', only looking will lead you to understand the firm 'principle that is hid'. Rather like Rembrandt's portraits of Dutch Calvinists, who are always dressed in very *expensive* black, or the 'faultless simplicity' of Baudelaire's Dandy, Moore's principle that 'omissions are not accidents' makes withdrawal itself a sign and a manoeuvre.⁴⁸ As the later poem 'Silence' puts it, 'The deepest feeling always shows itself in silence; / not in silence, but restraint.' One of the ways it is being restrained, in fact, is in not saying that this was actually not her father's phrase but her mother's, whose criticism of her poetry Moore sometimes found heavy-handed: the restraint in the act of quoting her mother on restraint becomes a unique comment on herself resisting and conforming at once.

This principle of reticence-as-display was also the pattern of Moore's life. When she was not shaping the course of modernism with New York's artistic and cultural elite as an editor at *The Dial*, she lived as a quiet, church-going spinster caring for her mother, dressing in second-hand black suits, reading her Bible and writing quantities of encouraging letters to friends, the great and the unknown. Yet those letters always describe with great attention what other people were wearing, and the photos she had taken in her carefully altered suits are posed like mannerist portraits.⁴⁹ This passion for clothing and style, as well as for the carefully assembled museum collections which her own poems resemble, is not a hypocritical denial of her insistence on the unobtrusive. Nor is it simply a coded nudge that behind all this stylised presentation some buried authentic lesbian or other self could be decoded. Certainly she had no prejudices against more overtly homosexual friends such as H. D., W. H. Auden or her protégée Elizabeth Bishop, and her great poem on 'Marriage', probably inspired by an unwelcome proposal from her publisher, is noticeably unenthralled by the idea. But it is unconvinced because the respectability of the marriage contract seems to enmesh its protagonists in the vain possessiveness and sexist self-admiration she wanted to discourage

in any kind of relationship.⁵⁰ The poem ends by borrowing Webster's famous statement about American democracy, 'Liberty and union / now and forever' as a motto for partners to remain committed but not identical: she pointedly omits Webster's third phrase, 'one and inseparable', because any real 'union' of states or lovers actually depends on their separability. And so 'Marriage' criticises domineering not only within its quotations about marriage, but by stacking them in dizzying irony against each other, so the reader can never be certain which side she is on – unlike her warring couple who never grasp that one is 'not rich but poor / when one can always seem so right'. Moore was so insistently aware of other people's wants and fears, and the counter-claim of her own feelings, that her theatrical modesties should be seen as a manner of deflecting and realigning these pressures into an arrangement which frees both parties – from the roles of detective and criminal in biographical sleuthing, and from 'authorities whose hopes / are shaped by mercenaries', as 'The Paper Nautilus' puts it, in order to bring them into the mood which can enjoy a poem or the person 'with nothing that ambition can buy or take away' ('The Steeplejack'). Celibacy itself is another kind of reticence-as-display, but to treat it as a coded invitation is to miss the point.

Sometimes Moore discouraged the interpretatively ambitious by being deliberately misleading. Her notes to 'Pedantic Literalist', for instance, send the reference-hunter to Richard Baxter's puritan devotional *The Saints' Everlasting Rest*, not because all the quotations are to be found there – some are in fact from Blake's *Milton* – but in order to frustrate any would-be pedantic literalist who misconceives his duty, and to lure him into reading a work about grace in the process. More often Moore's games with intentions are manifest in her choice of syllabic metre. Counting the line-lengths by syllable numbers is normal in French, but in English is rare: almost the whole of traditional verse-form arranges its rhythm by spacing the stresses at regular points. (If you read that sentence over again to yourself aloud, you will see what I mean by regular spacing of the natural speech stresses.) But syllabics organise lines by a set number of syllables, stressed or not, and there is nothing in the rhythm, syntax or word order to suggest that where they break is anything more than arbitrary. 'The Fish', for instance, describes an underwater crevasse in terms which could also apply to its own line-breaks:

All
 external
 marks of abuse are present on this
 defiant edifice –
 all the physical features of

ac-
 cident – lack
 of cornice, dynamite grooves, burns, and
 hatchet strokes, these things stand
 out on it; the chasm-side is
 dead. [. . .]

Having found her pattern, Moore would use these same syllable-counts for stanza after stanza, so that sentences which sound entirely unforced when read aloud will turn out to be perfectly destined, and the rhymes seem to be discovered as the sentence is broken open, like sixpences in a Christmas pudding. In an early essay, she had noted that ‘in the case of rhymed verse, a distinctive tone of voice is dependent on naturalistic effects, and naturalistic effects are so rare in rhyme as almost not to exist.’⁵¹ Drawing rhymes from unaccented syllables like ‘and’ or ‘this’ was Moore’s way of finding such rarities, and sounding ‘distinctive’ through not being not self-insistently ‘poetical’. ‘I have an objection to the reversed order of words and to using words for the sake of the rhythm that would be omitted if one were writing prose’, she told a correspondent in 1934.⁵² But although she added that ‘I value an effect of naturalness’, it is the word ‘effect’ which should be emphasised, because the fact that the rhyming words are not grammatically the most significant ones in the sentence also gives the poem the curious feeling that it might have been arranged differently. Just as her use of quotations has similarities with Williams or the avant-garde programmes to discover poetry latently present in ephemera, so the procedural artifice of Moore’s syllabics also charges her stanzas with the feeling that *any* word could, if set off aright, rhyme, and that what we perceive as intentional significance is also the way it just turned out. Although the poet is directing everything in deliberate display, by making *everything* potentially significant she is actually withdrawing from the scene, so that the quotations and formal coincidences create accidental or possible meanings beyond her initial calculation. Moore’s titles which turn out to be the first word of the poem (as here, with ‘The fish / Wade / Through black jade’, or ‘An Octopus / of ice’) work the same way; what apparently holds it all together turns out to be merely the initial word of a sentence, retrospectively promoted as the real substance develops in many other directions.

These experiments in non-domineering organisation are recreating in formal terms the open attentiveness she wanted in all public life:

Art which ‘cuts its facets from within’ can mitigate suffering, can even be an instrument of happiness; as also forgiveness . . . seems essential to happiness. Reinhold Niebuhr recently drew attention in *The Nation* to

the fact that the cure for international incompatibilities is not diplomacy but contrition.⁵³

It's quite a leap from poetic organisation to world peace, but in Moore's mind, they are one movement. That belief in the value of admitting one's failures may also explain why she was forever rewriting her poems. Naturally reticent, Moore was both horrified and gratified to receive a copy of her first volume of poems in 1921 when her well-meaning friends H. D. and Bryher brought it out without her knowledge. She had not finished working on them, she exclaimed, but she had still not finished working on them by 1935 when T. S. Eliot brought out a *Selected Poems*, nor by the time of *Collected Poems* of 1951. In fact, this idea of the poem always in process was so important to Moore that she built it in to her famous poem about 'Poetry' itself, which went through at least four different versions over her lifetime.⁵⁴ All of them begin, 'I, too, dislike it.' The much longer 1919 version reprinted in Moore's notes to the *Collected Poems* goes on to console poetry-lovers that real interest in poetry is shown by demanding both 'the genuine' and 'the raw material of poetry', as she herself would incorporate clippings and remarks from unpoetic sources. But in the last, three-line version of 'Poetry', all the famous ideas of poets being 'literalists of the imagination' creating 'imaginary gardens with real toads in them' have gone, as if her own best work, too, has become only raw material still to be used – and the clause 'there are things that are important beyond all this fiddle' has disappeared, as if the poet has realised that the line itself is fiddling. We are meant to see that the shorter form of 'Poetry' is itself a form found, that poetry is continually discovered from within something else rather than purely invented, and what might have looked like an arranged light rhyme between 'in' and 'genuine' turns out *not* to be predestined by the original scheme, and now seems all the more fortuitous. For all their dazzle and their firm opinions, Moore's poems are rarely final: their effects are discovered in the process of their making, rather than created, and like the ideal settings of 'People's Surroundings', 'we see the exterior and the fundamental structure' at once. Such reciprocal, ongoing mergers between accident and design, intentions and situation are Moore's way to find what 'His Shield' calls 'the power of relinquishing / what one would keep; that is freedom.'

Wallace Stevens

Democratically minded experiments with orders that emerge from 'inside' what they apparently frame are also at the core of Wallace Stevens's work.

Like Moore, his poetry can seem utterly impenetrable, and he resisted requests for paraphrase with a grimace. But Stevens was equally forthright about what he wanted the reader to get from reading it: a little experience of perfection, heaven, or God, in an age of general unbelief. 'The major poetic idea in the world is and always has been the idea of God' he declared late in life, and poetry's manner of being shared that divine perfection:

Our first proposition, that the style of a poem and the poem itself are one was a definition of perfection in poetry. In the presence of the gods, or of their images, we are in the presence of perfection in created beings . . . the style of the gods and the gods themselves are one.⁵⁵

Stevens, however, was also certain that 'one of the visible movements of the modern imagination is that movement away from the idea of God', and unlike Moore, he shared this modern lack of faith.⁵⁶ One of his first major poems, 'Sunday Morning', rewrites Keats's 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' and its longing for an art of fixed eternity, by claiming that 'death is the mother of beauty'; that time and change create poetic value, and so finitude must also be part of anything we could call heaven. Passing by the 'grave of Jesus, where he lay', and implying that is where Jesus remained, the poem's final stanza cuts up the six days of creation in Genesis into the contrary montage of our modern, sceptical state, whose freedom from order is inseparable from solitary confinement:

We live in an old chaos of the sun,
Or old dependency of day and night,
Or island solitude, unsponsored, free,
Of that wide water, inescapable.

To believe that poetry is about the idea of God and yet not to believe in an actual divine order – 'all gods are created in the image of their creators' – makes it sound like Stevens has set himself a hopeless task.⁵⁷ But Stevens's whole *oeuvre* is made out of following the twists of this problem: how to create a freely necessary unity or 'supreme fiction', borrowed from nowhere else, which we know we have created, but in which we can also believe. 'If one no longer believes in God (as truth), it is not possible merely to disbelieve', he thought; 'it becomes necessary to believe in something else', while knowing that 'one's final belief must be in a fiction'.⁵⁸

Stevens's sense that we must believe in our 'supreme fiction' in the way we used to believe in God implies more than just intellectual assent. Believing *in* such a unity must imply that the believer's own being is included in it, and yet the believer must remain aware that his or her beliefs are fallible. This dynamic of belonging within while remaining outside is a problem for any faith in a

pluralist society like America, and it is equally a problem for democratic culture. How can we really commit to one inclusive order or ideal while remaining sceptical enough to want to reform it? Throughout Stevens's work, however, the problem comes in two slightly different guises: a philosophical debate about whether reality or imagination has priority, and a political one about how art relates to social order. But Stevens always ends up saying that poetry, like the 'idea of God', is one of the 'powerful integrations of the imagination' in which we can sense how these inside–outside oppositions are being reconciled, in which unity can be imagined and felt without being held on to and so lost.⁵⁹ A late lecture adapts St Paul's idea of the cosmic Christ, by whom 'were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible', and by whom God would 'reconcile all things unto himself' (Colossians 1:16, 20) for poetry's 'mystical aesthetic':

A way of saying and of establishing that all things, whether below or above appearance, are one and that it is only through reality, in which they are reflected, or, it may be, joined together, that we can reach them . . . [As Klee wrote] 'what artist would not establish himself there where the organic center of all movement in time and space – which he calls the mind or heart of creation – determines every function.' Conceding that this sounds a bit like sacerdotal jargon, that is not too much to allow to those that have helped to create a new reality, a modern reality, since what has been created is nothing less.⁶⁰

To see what this unity of being might mean, take the heaven evoked in the late poem 'Solitaire Under the Oaks':

In the oblivion of cards
One exists among pure principles.

Neither the cards nor the trees nor the air
Persist as facts. This is an escape

To principium, to meditation.
One knows at last what to think about

And thinks about it without consciousness,
Under the oak trees, completely released.

Facts do not persist in this earthly paradise, because simply thinking of things as 'facts' implies an objective perspective contrasted to a 'subjective' one, and Stevens wants there to be no such split of self and world. So the person playing cards thinks 'without consciousness', as if such thinking were a way of being at one with the world, yet is still 'completely released', rather than being a

blank transcription of the world's processes. It is a poem which spans the oppositions of active and passive, subject and object, unconsciousness and self-consciousness ('knowing what to think'). It is also playing this out with the person reading it, for saying 'this is an escape' (rather than 'it is an escape') assumes that you are present in imagining the scene being evoked, and, like the solitaire player, are thinking about the poem in one way while your absorption in it means you are also not conscious of doing that thinking. Any unity of 'we' and 'all things', or appearance and reality, or heaven and earth, could not be something simple described to anyone outside it. Through the imagination, 'the world is no longer an extraneous object, full of other extraneous objects, but an image', 'a force, not a presence'.⁶¹ Nor can that presence be fixed in any given time; it is a process which happens anew in the reading of the poem, in which 'the partaker partakes of that which changes him'.⁶² If you are reading it over and over but cannot tell yourself what it is 'about', in short, you are doing what it is about: knowing what to think, but thinking it without consciousness. 'The poem must resist the intelligence / Almost successfully' ('Man Carrying Thing').

Incorporating the reader's process of interpretation as part of what the poem is talking about makes Stevens's poetry alarmingly abstract. It does not usually describe an object, or tell you about the inner lives of characters, or even make statements about the way things are through metaphor, because they would allow you a secure vista on a scene from which you are safely excluded, and which then could not be believed in. Far more often, what starts as description turns out to be a series of shifting metaphors where the observer and the observed switch places:

The mind is the great poem of winter, the man,
Who, to find what will suffice,
Destroys romantic tenements
Of rose and ice

In the land of war. ('Man and Bottle')

On first reading, it sounds like the 'great poem of winter' is a metaphor for what the mind does in wartime, tearing down its romantic tenements in a mental bombing campaign or slum-clearance programme. But it could be that 'winter, the man' is actually the subject and the mind is simply a poetic outworking of the warlike destruction winter generally wreaks, or that the poem itself is really the subject and the wintry, warlike mind is its best illustration. As the poem goes on, Stevens expands on what 'it' is ('a light at the centre of many lights', 'a manner of thinking, a mode / Of destroying') but all the while we

are never sure if 'it' *really* is the mind, a personified winter, or the poem itself. These simultaneous possibilities mean readers are also constantly constructing possible meanings and having to tear them down, as a process of getting the mind into any state which will let the poem say itself, without being able to give it a definite grounding in one, as if that were real and the rest were description or analogy. Like a 'tenement', any mental foundation you give it is leasehold rather than a permanent possession, a series of temporary findings of what will suffice. If it sounds strange to claim that the poem exists in the process of undoing the meanings you assign it, then it is only what Stevens himself implied when he wrote that 'poetry is essentially romantic, only the romantic of poetry must be something constantly new and, therefore, just the opposite of what is spoken of as the romantic.'⁶³ Rather than locating a basic scenario to be described by a second-order metaphor, Stevens's poetry lies in the movements of your mind constantly finding and refinding its footing, like a gymnast leaping through a series of obstacles, her movements becoming a dance in the process. If poetry is to be a real integration, the mind's own reading of it must be included, and yet if poetry is not to be an unwelcome imposition, your own mind must also be in the process of watching itself doing just that.

The poem encourages this movement of construction and dissolution when it repeats itself towards the end:

It is not the snow that is the quill, the page.
The poem lashes more fiercely than the wind,
As the mind, to find what will suffice, destroys
Romantic tenements of rose and ice.

It is still uncertain whether the snow is a metaphor or real, and whether 'the page' is made of paper or from *Good King Wenceslas*. But if you are wondering why the supposedly unromantic poet still writes with a 'quill' here, it is possibly because this stanza is a confection of repeated syllables, and 'quill' is there to pick up 'will', as 'wind' becomes 'mind' and 'find', 'is' reappears in 'fierce', 'suffice' and 'ice', and 'destroys' anticipates 'Romantic', 'ice' and 'rose' all at once. Stevens is full of passages like this, where the deepest philosophical speculation about the nature of being or consciousness suddenly foregrounds its constituent sound-clusters, as if to show how utterly dependent all the reader's imaginative constructions about what the words *mean* are on the arbitrary sounds that are making the words: the poetry reader must realise that 'above everything else, poetry is words; and that words, above everything else, are, in poetry, sounds'.⁶⁴ 'The Latest Freed Man' is an unusually direct evocation of the dream of unified being. It tells of a man 'tired of the old descriptions of the world' who finds freedom in allowing sunlight, or

oak-leaves, or himself to be 'being without description', without the self-conscious division of mind, language and body:

It was everything being more real, himself
 At the centre of reality, seeing it.
 It was everything bulging and blazing and big in itself,
 The blue of a rug, the portrait of Vidal,
Qui fait fi des jolieses banales, the chairs.

Yet just as you are wondering what Stevens's art-dealer friend Vidal signifies, or why the rug is particularly 'in itself', the images conjured up by these last lines dissolve into their pixels – the consonantal combinations of 'b', 'g' and 'l' ('bulging', 'blazing', 'blue', 'banales'), the inner 'i' rhymes of 'big', 'Vidal', 'Qui', 'fi', 'jolieses', the '-al' rhymes ('Vidal', 'banales') – and with them go some of the philosophically abstract words of the earlier lines: 'being', 'real', 'reality'. It is as if the poem is promising a revelation of 'being without description' and simultaneously pointing to what a word's being 'in itself' is when separated from its describing function. Keeping the sounds audible ensures that 'the style of the poem and the poem are one', and refuses to license any paraphrasable content (or meaning) detached from its 'form', with all the splits of mind and body or parts and whole that that implies.

If 'all gods are created in the image of their creators', though, the poem's perfections will also be in the image of their creator, and the idea that heaven or unity of being means playing *solitaire* or writing wintry poems is telling. During his lifetime, Stevens gained a reputation as a human iceberg: bulky, cold and intimidatingly remote, with nine-tenths of himself buried to view. After an early failed attempt at living by journalism or the law, he became an insurance executive and a very successful corporate executive. Earning about nine times a doctor's salary during the Depression, money enabled him to buy a large house, to furnish it with his collections of exotic curios, books, records and paintings (including the portrait of Vidal), and to write exactly the kind of poetry he wanted without having to care whether anyone bought it or not. But few people were ever invited into his home, and those who were spoke of the brittle and frozen atmosphere between the poet and his wife. They had courted for a long time while Stevens got himself financially secure, but the letters and poems betray how much he thought her rather like a beautiful doll, an idealistic trap she came to resent. Although careful forbearance helped them stay together, their frequent differences lend a rather bitter tinge to Stevens's later statement that for 'the style of the poem and the poem itself to be one there must be a mating and a marriage, not an arid love-song'.⁶⁵ It hints at how much Stevens's poetic heaven was a compensation for the inadequacies of the

real, rather than an actual reconciliation. 'Poetry is a purging of the world's poverty and change and evil and death' runs one of his *Adagia*; 'it is a present perfecting, a satisfaction in the irremediable poverty of life'.⁶⁶ While poetry is a perfecting, not a perfection – a perfection in the process of being made – it is the ambivalent nuances of that last phrase which have proved a central question about Stevens. Did he think his perfecting a satisfaction *despite* life's poverty, or a satisfaction in learning how to be disappointed? Is his poetic heaven made by ignoring the real poverty around the poet, as some Marxist critics were to charge, and whose snowy perfection is only an aesthetic withdrawal from real suffering? Or is life's misery so much the permanent background to his poems that he wanted their pleasure to depend on no circumstances but the mind itself?

The poem which first brought these questions to the fore is the astonishingly prescient 'The Snow Man'. Its single sentence winds down the five stanzas with so many temporizing descriptive clauses that the basic statement ('One must have a mind of winter . . . not to think / Of any misery in the sound of the wind') is almost forgotten in the effort to hold all the rest in suspension. That suspension of activity between the subject 'one' and object 'mind' is, of course, what the poem is describing and making happen at the same time, as its repetitions ('the sound', 'the same', 'the listener, who listens', 'nothing') suggest a mind becoming frozen by the winter it is describing, numbly coming back to the same words in the absence of any variation in the scene. In a shift that would become characteristic of Stevens's poetic, the description of something ('snow') turns out to be a description of the contours of the mind doing the describing, leaving the reader unsure of what is subject and what is object, her own mind suspended in the way the poem is talking about. The listener at the end of the poem, 'nothing himself', 'beholds / Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is', which means equally seeing winter's way of reducing everything to the barest of facts, and seeing his own absence, becoming the coldly empty 'mind of winter', which simply is the scene it sees. And yet the poem is predicated on this impossibility, of course: if you really could empty your mind into pure winter, you wouldn't notice pine trees 'crusted' with snow or junipers 'shagged' with ice, because these descriptions rely on transferring human associations from food or carpets onto blank nature, just as much as does thinking that the wind sounds miserable. In short, this is a poem which talks about reducing the mind to passivity, like Andy Warhol's camera, and yet knows that to imagine such emptiness relies on a notion of what presence, warmth or life is. 'The absence of the imagination had / Itself to be imagined', as 'The Plain Sense of Things' would put it later.

Behind this poem's idea of 'mind' and 'winter' is an older debate about the relationship between 'reality' and 'imagination' which busied Stevens and his commentators for a long time, and gave him the reputation of a loftily philosophical poet. Could we know objective reality (or the bare facts), without some measure of imagination, or was the imagination in fact essential to our grasp of 'fact', which would mean it could never be 'fact' in the usual sense of something independent of the person knowing it? Stevens himself made statements on either side of the question, but the critical consensus is now fairly well established that he believed, like Kant, that both depended on each other – that our understanding of reality's independence from our perception itself involved an act of imagination, without this meaning that reality was simply a sub-department of the imagination. The 'blessed rage for order' of the song in 'The Idea of Order at Key West' makes the sea part of itself *and* makes us imagine its wildness, independent of all order:

She sang beyond the genius of the sea.
 The water never formed to mind or voice,
 Like a body wholly body, fluttering
 Its empty sleeves; and yet its mimic motion
 Made constant cry, caused constantly a cry,
 That was not ours although we understood,
 Inhuman, of the veritable ocean.

It is carefully impossible to tell whether the 'constant cry' is the sea's unmeaning noise, or humans interpreting the sea's emptiness as a 'cry' (cf. 'The Course of a Particular'). Does the repetition of 'constant' and 'cry' transcribe the sea's own 'mimic motion', or is it just the poem's speaker turning the phrase over in his mind? Does 'inhuman' describe the sea's voice, or the 'we' who understand it by losing ourselves in the 'veritable ocean'? Or are we just imagining this, like the 'mind of winter' in 'The Snow Man', our self-consciousness still present in the need to assure ourselves this is the 'veritable' ocean? The mixed metaphor of full body and empty sleeves shows a mind struggling to find categories for something without an 'inner' opposed to an 'outer', as if all its ways of thinking depended on models of human consciousness or soul. Yet however egocentric it seems to make reality part of our imagination's song, the poem also shows we have no choice, for our attempts to imagine its indifference are just as self-centred. The 'meaningless plungings of water and the wind' are also 'theatrical distances' and 'bronze shadows' (bronze is a Stevens metonym for heroic monuments) because we cannot but see nature's 'reality' without mentally shedding a tear for ourselves, tragically orphaned in an uncaring universe. 'The world about us would be desolate except for the world within

us', Stevens once remarked, but it is equally true that the world about us is desolate *because* of the world within us.⁶⁷ This is the philosophical version of the fiction in which we have to believe: the sea is an independent reality whose independence, at the same time, is defined by the categories of our imagination and its emotions.

The inescapability of fiction, however, is not only a philosophical question about how we know objects, but a political question about the responsibility of art. Stevens had been experimenting with imaginary orders from the beginning: the extravagant whimsy, exotic vocabulary and nursery-rhyme sound-play of *Harmonium* (1924) foregrounds its conspicuous lack of interest in daily speech or social reflection. Unlike Williams's wheelbarrow or Frost's conversations, Stevens was interested not in importing the social existence of things into his poems, but in the process of making poetic images from them. At the time, he admitted, 'I liked the idea of images and images alone, or images and the music of verse together', and *Harmonium's* critics thought this self-contained world a return to the contradictions of art for art's sake and the 1890s, which talked about pure art, but ended up cultivating the market it supposedly scorned.⁶⁸ *The Dial* thought that his poems were a 'well-fed and well-booted dandyism of contentment', a self-conscious selection of rare words which actually approached composition like his mail-order shopping for luxury goods.⁶⁹ When *Ideas of Order* appeared in 1936, however, a Marxist critic called Stanley Burnshaw thought he detected a change:

Ideas of Order is the record of a man who, having suddenly lost his footing, now suddenly scrambles to stand up and keep his balance . . . Acutely conscious members of a class menaced by the clashes between capital and labor, these writers are in the throes of a struggle for philosophical adjustment.⁷⁰

Although Burnshaw was much more appreciative than earlier reviewers ('his poems have . . . deep importance for us') Stevens was surprisingly stung by his suggestion that the imaginative world of his poems could be explained in terms of their author's middle-class anxieties about strikes and the rise of working-class power:

It is simply a question of whether poetry is a thing in itself, or whether it is not. I think it is. I don't think it is if it is detached from reality, but it has a free choice, or should have. There is no obligation that it shall attach itself to political reality, social or sociological reality, etc.⁷¹

This gives a political edge to the philosophical speculations about the interrelation of imagination and reality of *The Necessary Angel*, because asserting

that our perception of reality is dependent on the imagination is also a way to resist Burnshaw's belief that class and economics are the real, unmetaphorical and unimaginative drivers of poetry. If everything, even money, requires imagination or faith to make it so, then there is no limit to art's role. In direct reply to Burnshaw, Stevens wrote an uncharacteristically urgent but characteristically knotty section of *Owl's Clover* called 'Mr Burnshaw and the Statue'. Through an ever-changing series of metaphors, it describes how one must 'live incessantly in change', whether it is 'chaos and archaic change' of nature or the 'abysmal migration' of men in revolution. Appearing to concede the necessity of social change, this actually takes the sting out of the demand for poets to commit themselves to a revolutionary cause, for if change is permanent and what art is always doing anyway, then revolution itself is quite normal. What is needed instead is public art whose being-in-itself, even in destruction, reflects the democratic hope of the public truly being their best selves, or, in Stevens's parlance, 'marble men / Serenely selves, transfigured by the selves / From which they came'.⁷² Difficult, modernist poetry is thus socially responsible, because the self-being which our imagination finds in true art is a clarifying of our best hopes for ourselves.

Stevens was not happy with the poem – it strains to blend its two basic metaphors about art, ones based on the changes of weather and climate, and ones based on the permanence of statues – but it was the first to outline the themes he went on to tackle more successfully in *The Man with the Blue Guitar* and 'Notes toward a Supreme Fiction', both extended answers to Burnshaw's question about the public role of poetry. Society and Mr Burnshaw demand 'a tune beyond us, yet ourselves . . . a tune upon the blue guitar / Of things exactly as they are'. Thirty-two sections later, the poem replies:

You as you are? You are yourself.
The blue guitar surprises you.

The leftist demand for realist art conceals the fact that the imagination is already at work, because no art is needed for people to be themselves – unless our very sense of the world and our place in it always involves an act of imagination, in which case it will be art in which our best, most united fictions happen. And since that unity has to involve the reader, it is art which also gives us the best practice in how we can go about believing in the fiction of a social order. Consequently, the three sections of 'Notes' – 'It Must Be Abstract', 'It Must Change' and 'It Must Give Pleasure' – are simultaneously definitions of what poetry must be, and what any kind of social order must be. Poetry must be abstract, because no particular content or person can claim to embody the social order in himself or herself. It must change, because any order is a fiction

which must allow itself to be recast; and it must give pleasure, because the social order must satisfy the people who live in it.

In other words, Stevens's very abstraction from specific commitments or social situations in his poetry was itself a political response to an era which had rejected religion only to make gods out of communist leaders or nationalist heroes, and brought about total world war from such misplaced faith. The artificiality or dandyism of Stevens's early poetry becomes his lesson in maintaining necessary fictions, how we can believe in any kind of leader-hero who 'is his nation, / In him made one', and yet 'in that saying / Destroy all references', all claims to identify the hero with anyone particular ('Examination of the Hero'). Charles Altieri puts it well:

He turned increasingly to interpreting his desires for certain kinds of interpretation. He saw that any particular rendering of specific images of heroism, any concrete projections he might offer, were pervaded by ideology and distorted by the very needs that called them forth. But if one could capture the structure producing the need, and if one could find positive energies in one's resistance to concrete images, one might construct an idea of the hero around which various social groups might rally.⁷³

This is probably Stevens's best defence against the criticism that his complex, self-referential poetry is constructed as a safe haven from any contamination by the turmoil of the 1930s and 1940s. It would indeed be a great help for any modern democracy if people could examine whether their dreams of the nation or the leader are based on fantasies which force politicians to lie in order to get elected. Yet it has to be said that there is a slightly sadder interpretation of the parallel between the democratic, pluralist imagination and Stevens's account of a poem. 'Of Modern Poetry' describes how modern poetry has no prepared stage for itself – no set forms, no formula, no approved setting:

It has
to construct a new stage. It has to be on that stage
And, like an insatiable actor, slowly and
With meditation, speak words that in the ear,
In the delicatest ear of the mind, repeat
Exactly, that which it wants to hear, at the sound
Of which, an invisible audience listens,
Not to the play, but to itself, expressed
In an emotion as of two people, as of two
Emotions becoming one.

It is carefully unclear in whose world these emotions happen, whether the 'it' hearing is the real audience's ear or the actor-poet's mind imagining the audience all along. 'The poem of the act of the mind', 'Of Modern Poetry' concludes verblessly, and the play between the 'doing' and 'pretending' senses of 'act' here could mean that the poem is what happens in the poet's process of acting, or in the reader's imaginary version of it. The optimistic reading is that Stevens had learned from his 1930s critics that modern poetry depends on a dynamic relation with its audience and circumstance. The less optimistic reading is that the truly modern poem has either already incorporated that audience, or that its audience simply hears whatever it wants. If our common sense of reality has to be imagined, then poetry can be a good way to sense the processes of fiction-making at work in all our organisations. But if there is no definable break between the poet's imagination and all our social constructions, then solo creation also counts as politics, though it may bypass others entirely. Perhaps this is why so many of Stevens's late poems enjoy the melancholy, everydayness of the suburbs, those places of imagined perfection and daily loneliness, where one is always imagining and being imagined by one's neighbours. Stevens's understanding of the dizzying demands of faith that belonging to a plural society makes of its members has sound democratic credentials. But his modernist vision of how the poem might enact such a unity embeds the potential for mutual isolation into its own framework – as, indeed, does America itself.

Recommended Further Reading

- Charles Altieri, *The Art of Twentieth-Century American Poetry: Modernism and After* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2009).
- David Frail, *The Early Politics and Poetics of William Carlos Williams* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1987).
- Frank Lentricchia, *Modernist Quartet* (Cambridge University Press, 1994).
- Cristanne Miller, *Marianne Moore: Questions of Authority* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).
- Wallace Stevens: The Poetics of Modernism*, ed. by Albert Gelpi (Cambridge University Press, 1985).

Chapter 6

Avant-gardisms

Mina Loy, Gertrude Stein, H. D.

The culture of the avant-gardes 141

The minority, the masses and the manifesto 142

Mina Loy and Futurism 147

Gertrude Stein 153

H. D. 158

The culture of the avant-gardes

If the names of the modernist avant-gardes are exotic – Futurists, Vorticists, Dadaists, Surrealists, Simultaneists, Constructivists – then their ways of making poetry happen were even more so. The Futurists put on music-hall shows in which poems without syntax were screamed at the audience through a megaphone, with the audience encouraged to fight back. At the original Dadaist Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich, Hugo Ball, dressed in a cylinder of shiny blue cardboard, had to be carried off stage after becoming intoxicated by bellowing his poetry made of abstract sounds, the audience joining in. His wife Emmy Hennings would mix poetry with demonic puppet shows, while Ball's own sound-poems were often accompanied by Sophie Taüber's abstract, masked, robotic dances. Later Dadaists made Apollinaire's 'simultaneist' verse into a performance by reading overlapping lines of texts in different voices at the same time. Another avant-garde technique was to combine poetry with objects. Blaise Cendrars layered a semi-delirious travelogue of his semi-imaginary journey from Moscow to Manchuria against Sonia Delaunay's abstract curves and swoops to create a poem which is a two-metre-long fold-out-book and painting as well, the *Prose du Transsibérien* (1913). The Constructivist Kurt Schwitters would paste words and sentences together into drawings, and then drive nails into them to make objects which were simultaneously pictures, sculptures and poems. Later he would develop the sound-cluster 'fmsbw' by Raoul Hausmann into the forty-minute *Ursonate*, scoring phonemes like musical notes in themes, variations and repeats. The avant-gardes also experimented with random or

automatic processes of composition: the Dadaist Tzara made a poem-recipe from cutting up newspaper fragments, shaking them in a bag, and reading out the results. The Surrealists played 'exquisite corpse', where poems are composed one word at a time by different people unawares. Compared to these relentlessly anti-personal, multimedia performances, slim modernist pamphlets in free verse look rather tame.

But despite the amazing diversity of their experiments – and their general scorn for each other – there are certain patterns to the modernist avant-gardes' approach to art. Rather than thinking of the creations of individual genius, their model is usually small groups of guerrillas assaulting a corrupt art establishment. They produce manifestos denouncing its present corruption and announcing the entire reorganisation of thought and politics, typically by demolishing the past or reorganising it on lines demanded by the present, and they cultivate technologies and political systems alike which promise this. Their work refuses boundaries; between genres (hence the fusions of poetry, music, painting and theatre), between nations (hence their transnational personnel) and between art and the social world in which it is heard, broadcast and discussed. They tend to think of poetry not as the record of a finished thought, but an ongoing event of co-creation between artist, world and audience, a process they cultivate with those chance-based processes of construction or theatrical performance. And of course, they constantly aim for the shocking, difficult or just unthinkable to force uncensored, immediate participation from that audience.

Such aims point in two directions: an art without limitations, and an art made by a minority, and a good deal of the culture of the avant-garde is defined by wanting both at once. Despite their hostility to the mainstream, however, avant-gardes have been enormously fruitful sources of ideas for artists beyond their inner circles, and the culture of avant-gardism is an important framework for the English-language work of Mina Loy, Gertrude Stein and H. D., modernist poets who overlapped with several of the avant-gardes without being contained by any of them.

The minority, the masses and the manifesto

The form that crystallises the avant-garde's aims is the manifesto, although it was not an invention of twentieth-century artists. Manifestos first surface in the English Civil War, when radical Puritan groups like the Diggers and the Levellers issued declarations and demands for the common people. Both opposed the monarchy and inherited power, but their demands went much

further than supporting Cromwell's Parliamentarians in a representative system of democracy: they wanted an end to the aristocracy itself, and the right either to have their own parliaments, decide their own community's laws, or for everyone to be able to vote. Manifestos were also a feature of the French Revolution from groups with similar politics: among these manifestos was the first feminist one, Olympe de Gouges's *Declaration of the Rights of Woman* (1791), which was a rewriting of the Declaration of the Rights of Man pointing out its sexist bias. When the avant-garde take up the manifesto as a form, that history of radically levelling, anti-hierarchical politics becomes the project of art. Art must refuse the oppressive inheritance of the past, and so the Dadaists insisted on 'the immediate product of spontaneity', the Imagists in creating new rhythms, and the Vorticists on 'the Reality of the Present', for 'the moment a man feels or realizes himself as an artist, he ceases to belong to any milieu or time'.¹ Art must also refuse the divisions of life the inherited order places between high art and low art, upper class and working class, or mind and body. So the Futurists fused poetry with circus performers and industrial machinery, while the Dadaists made it from obscene jokes or the chants which hypnotised both audience and performers at their homemade cabarets. Poetry's expanded range and ambit also brought it into the design of everyday life and politics. As the Dadaist, Constructivist and future Bauhaus designer Moholy-Nagy put it:

In Constructivism form and substance are one . . . Constructivism is pure substance – not the property of one artist alone who drags along under the yoke of individualism. Constructivism is not confined to the picture frame and the pedestal. It expands into industrial designs, into houses, objects, forms. It is the socialism of vision – the common property of all men.²

In asserting 'form and substance are one', the principles which originally defined high art's difference from the divisions of ordinary life now expand seamlessly into modern manufacturing, architecture and the very shape of socialist government, where formal order and the citizens it orders are one. In the same way, the 1914 Vorticist manifesto praises the new Anglo-Saxon world of 'machinery, trains, steam-ships' and then proclaims 'art that is an organism of this new Order and Will of Man'.³ Art is no longer representing something, it is one being with the proliferation of industrial 'machinery' and so 'sweeps away the doctrines of a narrow and pedantic Realism at one stroke'.⁴ Yet precisely because it is art which expands into working life, it would also be familiar to everyone. Art, claims the Vorticist magazine *Blast*, appeals to the 'fundamental and popular instincts in every class and description of people'.⁵ The manifesto proclaims a common art, rather than an art owned by the

rich or the gallery, and an art which would be everywhere present, whether intentionally created or not.

Nonetheless, manifestos are conspicuously the work of a minority. The term 'avant-garde' is originally a military one: the avant-garde are the troops who march in before the majority and carry out the initial attack. In the nineteenth century it was taken up by the proto-communist Saint-Simonians, before being adopted by the Symbolist and naturalist artists following the massacre of the Paris Commune in 1870, when republican Paris had come under siege from royalist France. To call oneself 'avant-garde' implies, therefore, that artistic life *is* war, and that the enemy's defences must initially be breached by surprise attack and shock tactics. But the term's civil war history also implies that this battle is taking place in the congested spaces of daily life, where you are closely related to your worst enemies. So the Vorticists' manifesto takes great pains to distinguish their art from the Futurists, and the Dadaists distance themselves from the Cubists, because to anyone outside their small circles, they are easily confused. Seeing art as cultural combat, avant-gardes reserve particular hatred for any mainstream artist whose work appears to betray the cause by meeting bourgeois taste half-way: 'Goodness is lucid, clear and resolute, and ruthless towards compromise and politics.'⁶ In many ways, avant-garde groups are the secular inheritors of those radical Protestant sects, whose demand for total commitment among the righteous few meant there was no room for compromise or disagreement. Like sects, they declare a radical equality among believers and are then perpetually anxious about who's in and who's out, and prone to painful schisms. If they persist, they often rely for periods of discipline on the domination of charismatic individuals such as Ezra Pound or André Breton.

What the minority group and its universalising art have in common, though, is to refuse any control by an outside force. By scorning compromise with the enemy – the historical tradition and the institutions that have made art private property – the avant-garde group declares its independence. But in order to guarantee art's freedom to operate, it can allow no social space bracketing it off from the rest of life. Nothing can act as a frame to distance art, or a buffer to resist it, for art can have no limits. 'DADA intended to make poetry a way of life rather than a subsidiary manifestation of intelligence and will';⁷ remarked Tzara in later years. This is why so much avant-garde art is destined to be 'the symbol of an impossible consensus and . . . the symptom of an inevitable dissension'.⁸ It breaks down barriers between art's makers and receivers by cultivating art as an event-between-people – the 'unique fraternity' which 'comes to existence at the intense moment when beauty and life itself, brought into high tension on a wire, ascend towards a flash point', rather than being the

property of a given object.⁹ The situation and reception of the poem must be part of the poem's happening, as with the compulsory audience-participation in Dadaist cabaret. But this breakdown requires the shocking or weird in order to bypass conscious, rational and institutional reactions which make art the property of a particular tribe, the world of the galleries and publishers and academics writing textbooks. 'The artist is uneducated, is seeing IT for the first time', said Mina Loy when asked to explain why avant-garde work was hard to grasp, implying that the problem is not high concepts but too much training in what to expect.¹⁰ In other words, the tactics by which the avant-garde break down the frames around art simultaneously make us find art happening in the here-and-now of life, *and* reinforce the gulf between the avant-garde and the ordinary. Avant-gardism, you might say, is structured by a consciously different minority proclaiming an art which opens itself to *everything*.

Holding both positions would stretch the historical avant-gardes to breaking-point. Fearing to be ignored, their manifestos often made grandiose claims for limitless revolution which then align them to totalitarian politics, particularly in the case of Filippo Marinetti's Futurists. Fearing to become licensed jesters to the system, on the other hand, their shock tactics became ideal fodder for the burgeoning advertising and publicity networks eager for the latest novelty, as with the fawning interview of Loy as 'the modern woman', subtitled 'Her Clothes Suggest the Smartest Shops, but Her Poems Would Have Puzzled Grandma', or the later career of Salvador Dalí.¹¹ Avant-garde objects such as Marinetti's metal book or Blaise Cendrars's *Prose du Transsibérien* were meant to shatter the restrictions of genre, but their extreme rarity makes them now cult items for rich collectors at auction-houses. Yet though the modernist avant-gardes had largely collapsed by the Second World War (the Situationists were a late flourish), their influence was enormous. It was crucial to the counter-cultures of the 1960s and 1970s, which also sought to break the links between leaders and led, artists and audience through the happening, the punk concert or the DIY festival. It was also vital to more mainstream poetry which the avant-gardes generally ignored or disliked. The membership of the Surrealist groups in the 1930s was tiny, for instance, but the range of poets showing surreal transitions of imagery in the years after the Second World War is astonishing.¹² And no matter how weird the work of a Schwitters or a Tzara, it is surprisingly difficult to find a formal principle in it which the English-language modernist poets weren't, in some way, also trying to achieve. Peter Bürger has influentially claimed that avant-gardism is distinct from modernism because it makes art which is uninterested in individual creativity, like Duchamp exhibiting his mass-produced snow shovel.¹³ But the removal of borders between creativity and anonymous production is a principle of all modernist poetry

recycling found material, like Rukeyser's use of legal documents or Williams using restaurant menus. Adapting Bürger's other principle that avant-gardism means the removal of boundaries separating art and artists from life and its processes, Andreas Huyssen distinguished between avant-garde shock tactics aiming to break through institutional barriers to art, and a modernism which accepts those borders by leaving its pictures and plays, however experimental, safely in the galleries and theatres.¹⁴ But refusing divisions between artist and audience was also essential to Eliot's and Yeats's conception of art founded on ritual, or to Stevens's principle that our imagination is the frame on which 'ordinary life' depends.¹⁵ Of course, the avant-gardes often went much further to fuse art and life, and were more upfront about doing it. But it was precisely their example which reawakened readers to these qualities in the mainstream writers themselves.

Though their actual involvement with the avant-gardes varied, and their poems were printed, written and circulated in a fairly orthodox manner, the all-levelling unrestrictedness I am calling 'avant-gardism' is also palpable in the work of Mina Loy, Gertrude Stein and H. D. Pound baptised H. D. the first Imagist in 1912 and then used her writing to encapsulate Vorticist poetry, but she privately disliked his brand identity for the first, and the violent aesthetics of the second.¹⁶ Mina Loy was closely associated with the Italian Futurists in 1913 but broke with their sexist militarism and moved on to the New York Dadaists and later the Parisian Surrealists, publishing her poetry in a variety of *outré* little magazines without belonging to one inner circle. Though Stein is now seen as an exemplary avant-gardist in technique, she worked out her style quite independently during the first years of the twentieth century, and became an icon of Parisian art by inviting modernists to come to her, rather than joining any group. As well as being artistically unorthodox, all three found themselves at odds with patriarchy's sexual norms: Stein enjoyed a lifelong marriage with Alice Toklas, H. D. was bisexual, and Mina Loy simply an independent spirit. But rather than making poetry the free expression of an oppressed gender or sexuality, their art is more interested in a state beyond the limits of any defined identity at all.¹⁷ Stein creates a poetic 'writing' which has 'nothing to do with human nature or identity'; H. D. a poetic androgyny beyond gender polarities, and Loy an unrestricted 'psycho-democracy'. Of course, breaking and reassembling syntax and verse-form was essential to their split with corseted femininity. But instead of expressing a buried inner self to an outer world, they pursue the more avant-gardist tactic of creating works where the borders between inner and outer, creation and reception are constantly dissolving, and where there are no marginalised because there are no majorities either.

Mina Loy and Futurism

The Futurism which fascinated and repelled Mina Loy ‘belongs to all the avant-gardes and not only to the one named for it’, as Renato Poggioli claims.¹⁸ It was a movement across the arts, embracing poets, sculptors, painters, theatre producers and musicians, as well as Futurist clothes and a *Manifesto of Futurist Cooking* (1930). As the name implies, Futurists were committed to an art and life-practice which would eradicate the past and all its residues, and celebrate speed, mechanism and non-human technology. ‘Museums: cemeteries!’ declares the ‘Founding and Manifesto of Futurism’ (1909), and in order to take art *out of* the museum, Marinetti invented his ‘Variety Theatre’, which involved burning things, a fruit and vegetable battle, dancing, acrobatic stunts, a rain of cigarettes, poetry, marionettes, nonsense prose, projections of mathematical equations, music, declamations of manifestos, and a deafening barrage of noise music made from propellers, electric bells and other homemade instruments.¹⁹ It frequently turned into pitched battles between Marinetti’s band and members of the audience, battles which were, of course, all part of the Futurist aesthetic of speed, violence and the immediate. Like the Russian Velimir Khlebnikov and the Dadaists, Marinetti also experimented with sound poetry – poetry made of sounds rather than words, so it could only *be* what it was about – and with typography, poems spread across the page in different fonts, rather than in lines or stanzas. He advocated the destruction of traditional grammar; poems were to have no adverbs or adjectives, or syntax at all, in order to break down any barrier the reader could put up between himself and the words. The Variety Theatre, in short, was as unstoppable as the hyperbole. The drama wouldn’t stay on the stage; the noise music was the sound of the city brought paralysingly straight inside your head, and the poetry abandoned grammar, line and form to connect everything:

Syntax was a kind of interpreter or monotonous cicerone. This intermediary must be suppressed, in order that literature may enter directly into the universe and become one body with it . . . We make use, instead, of every ugly sound, every expressive cry from the violent life that surrounds us. We bravely create the ‘ugly’ in literature, and everywhere we murder solemnity . . . each day we must spit on the Altar of Art. We are entering the unbounded domain of free intuition. After free verse, here finally are words-in-freedom . . . through intuition we will conquer the seemingly unconquerable hostility that separates our human flesh from the metal of motors.²⁰

The Futurists' desire for limitless being made a religion of speed. 'Time and Space died yesterday. We already live in the absolute, because we have created eternal, omnipresent speed.'²¹ Speed here is given the attributes of God: a being not limited by time or space; everywhere and 'absolute', something which depends on nothing but itself. Speed is the way that human beings will attain this permanent, total freedom, and of course, if speed means you are not limited by time or space, then there are effectively no barriers between places and people for the speeder. En route, Marinetti smashes barriers of high and low art – mixing the entertainment world of circus jugglers and acrobats with poetry and painting – and between art and non-art, creating poems which are the last word in aesthetic sophistication *and* sonically fused with the drills and engines which the workers heard every day. There is no difference between record-breaking stunts, poems and industrial clamour, for everything in the Futurist event must be founded on amazement, fear and shock. Associating art with speed, Marinetti also disallows any rest for the body, or the mental brake-pedal of *reflection*: his Variety Theatre is 'naturally anti-academic, primitive and naive'.²² There is to be no 'framing' of art, no way of setting it at one remove, for Futurism 'destroys the Solemn, the Sacred, the Serious and the Sublime', as well as 'all our conceptions of perspective, proportion, time and space'.²³ With perspective goes the distance between art and the audience:

The variety theatre is alone in seeking the audience's collaboration. It doesn't remain static like a stupid voyeur, but joins noisily in the action, in the singing, accompanying the orchestra, communicating with the actors in surprising actions and bizarre dialogues. . . . The action develops simultaneously on the stage, in the boxes, and in the orchestra. It continues to the end of the performance, among the battalions of fans who crowd the stage door.²⁴

Of course, there was a darker side to this popular mobilisation. The Futurists' desire to 'set fire to the library shelves' and 'flood the museums' also led Marinetti to long for war as 'the world's only hygiene', and to cultivate violence as another pure unhindered force, because it does not debate consequences, or make any calculation of means and ends.²⁵ 'Art, in fact, can be nothing but violence, cruelty and injustice.'²⁶ Violence, speed, electricity or individual will are all kinds of the life-force, so that it doesn't matter in the end *who* wins, so long as force prevails: at one point Marinetti fantasised about being attacked by the next generation of Futurists, for what must be shown is not individuals but 'the omnipotence of a methodical will that modifies human powers'.²⁷ And his literary technique of placing isolated nouns alongside infinitive verbs cultivated violence in its abrupt levelling of bodies, actions, selves and others on an equal plane. 'The traditional narrative proportions (romantic, sentimental

and Christian) are abolished, according to which a battle wound would have a greatly exaggerated importance in respect to the instruments of destruction, the strategic positions and atmospheric conditions', Marinetti explained to readers unfamiliar with his poetry.²⁸ Without stories or feelings, personal trauma is level with the weather: 'we systematically destroy the literary *I* in order to scatter it into the universal vibration', so that 'the poetry of cosmic forces supplants the poetry of the human'.²⁹ Unsurprisingly, Marinetti was a keen supporter of Mussolini twenty years later, for despite his ethos of unlimited freedom with 'no master, no dogma', his artistic storm-troopers also resemble *marionetta*, puppets.

What, then, did Loy see in all this? In some speeches, Marinetti supported feminism, because he thought it would destroy the sentimental sexism of family life and its inherited ties. But women are more usually impediments, linked to animals, curves, earth and weight rather than straight lines and speed. 'We will glorify war – the world's only hygiene . . . and scorn for women', hymns article 9 of the 1909 Manifesto; women are 'a symbol of the earth that we ought to abandon' in Futurist aeroplanes, dreaming instead of creating 'a mechanical son'.³⁰ Rather than endorse their politics, though, Loy adopted Futurist assault tactics to demand the same unrestricted living for everyone as Marinetti reserved for men. Using confrontational typography, her 1914 Feminist Manifesto claims that moderate reform is useless, and the 'only method is Absolute Demolition'.³¹ 'Women must destroy in themselves, the desire to be loved' and the state should ensure 'the unconditional surgical destruction of virginity' in teenage girls, so that virginity cannot be used as a bargaining chip to maintain patriarchy's mother / mistress dichotomy.³² This destruction is the only way to grasp women's perfect autonomy: 'Nature has endowed the complete woman with a faculty for expressing herself through all her functions – there are no restrictions'.³³ Motherhood is a 'right' (not a relationship with the child), relationships should come and go as the parents evolve individually, and 'honour, grief, sentimentality, pride & consequently jealousy must be detached' from love itself.³⁴

Some of this is an attack on her own entrapment in a lifeless marriage, and rather more was aimed at the sexism of Marinetti himself and Giovanni Papini, with whom she had failed affairs dissected in 'Lion's Jaws' and 'The Effectual Marriage'. But her demolition of all inherited forms and attachments, the refusal to divide public and private spaces, and the unwillingness to make coalitions in the interests of a total solution continue the male Futurists' avant-gardist politics in a nutshell. So limitless are the new humans predicted by the 'Aphorisms on Futurism' that they can also have nothing hidden. 'Love the hideous in order to find the sublime core of it', she demands, adding later that 'we shout the obscenities, we scream the blasphemies, that you,

being weak, whisper alone in the dark'. 'Songs to Joannes' would make all this happen in poetry:

Spawn of Fantasies
 Silting the appraisable
 Pig Cupid his rosy snout
 Rooting erotic garbage
 'Once upon a time'
 Pulls a weed white star-topped
 Among wild oats sown in mucous-membrane.³⁵

Derisive, shocking and shame-free, Loy's tone is characteristically both intense and ironic. The unfixed relations between the phrase-clusters enact the dizzying merger of bodies and mouths in the moment of love-making, while the precise, alienated diction dissects the fantasies behind sex. The fairy-story or the boys-will-be-boys shrug of 'wild oats' are all one with its slippery, amphibious 'spawn'. Like much of Loy's poetry, it is deliberately unbeautiful, perhaps because she sensed with the assurance of the very beautiful how much beauty in women and art reinforced the marriage-markets and art-markets which commodified them. Loy's American backer Alfred Kreymborg recalled the outrage Loy's 'utter nonchalance about the secrets of sex' produced in her first readers: 'to reduce eroticism to the sty was an outrage, and to do so without verbs, sentence structure, punctuation, even more offensive'.³⁶ Yet focusing on Loy's cynicism alone misses just how serious this poem is about sex. 'The smallest person, potentially, is as great as the Universe', one of her Futurist aphorisms runs, and so the lines which follow this opening – 'Eternity in a sky-rocket / Constellations in an ocean / Whose rivers run no fresher / Than a trickle of saliva' – are not merely bathetic comparison between stars and semen. In fact, the poem shifts scale all the time between the minute and the cosmic to defy a distanced perspective, because sex is total participation, where the present moment becomes every reality, and where future life itself bursts through the restrictions of the ego. Sex, in other words, is another futurist experience:

Today
 Everlasting passing apparent imperceptible
 To you
 I bring the nascent virginity of
 —Myself for the moment
 No love or the other thing
 Only the impact of lighted bodies
 Knocking sparks off each other
 In chaos (XIV)

The spaced-out oxymorons and the middle lines' distracted syntax make her own phrases like those 'lighted bodies', radiating several meanings in potential as sparks of connection jump between them. It may be the pure present which is everlasting and passing, or the 'nascent virginity' of the self, or the impact of the bodies, or it may be the self which is the impact of lighted bodies with 'no love', but as sexual contact is multiple openness, we're not asked to choose. Sex folds various times and selves together: the intensity and self-distrust of her need for a new start ('nascent virginity') after the failure of her first marriage; the 'sparks' of pleasure, anger and potentially new children or the passion and disappointment of her affairs; the sense of 'Myself' as the product of the impact of her own angry parents' 'lighted bodies', and the involuntary desire of a self evacuated of emotion ('for the moment / No love'). Lacking coordinating verbs, the stop-start rhythms and the taut swivels in diction between simple intensity ('no love') and alienated distance give Loy's poem its characteristically prickly feel, charged with what she elsewhere calls the 'interim of / star from star / the nascent / static' (XVII).

'Lighted bodies' floated through Loy's imagination across her writing career. She had sensed the forces of the stars moving through her early on in her poem about giving birth, a feminist re-grounding of artistic 'creation' in a mind and body split and dislocated by the rending pain of labour:

Mother I am
Identical
With infinite Maternity
Indivisible
Acutely
I am absorbed
Into
The was-is-ever-shall-be
Of cosmic reproductivity
(*'Parturition'*)

The Byronic double rhymes undercut her apparent earnestness, but not the strange feeling of cosmic motherhood 'precipitating into me / the contents of the universe'. Marinetti's desire to replace the 'I' with cosmic forces in war-experience is here feminised, for since creativity requires the agonising 'negation of myself' in order that the work might be born, every artist, it seems, must become part of universal motherhood. These are the 'feminine politics but in a cosmic way' which she described in a letter to her friend Carl Van Vechten in 1915,³⁷ and which re-emerged in her manifesto

'Psycho-Democracy' of 1920. In the revolution heralded by art, we can realise how desires need not compete:

This thing called *Life* which seems to be the impact of luminous bodies, knocking sparks off one another in chaos, will be transformed through Psycho-Democratic evolution from a war between good and evil, i.e. (between beneficent and painful chance) to a competition between different kinds of good: (beneficent spontaneities).³⁸

As Loy has just been discussing how to alter people's desires for military conquest and the influence of the press, the sparks thrown off by the 'luminous bodies' are now political and sexual, public ambitions and private longings. Art, it is implied, must span all this terrain to show how 'Self is the covered entrance to infinity',³⁹ a realm where there can be no competition and no losers:

There is no First or Last
Only equality
And who would rule
Joins the majority.
(*'There is no Life or Death'*)

Loy's later poems of life among the addicts and tramps of the Bowery would maintain this avant-garde levelling, as did the lampshades she made from discarded maps, papers and materials. These, too, are luminous bodies which cross borders between art and junk, craft and concept, as if to say that unimportant, ugly or discarded material could become marvellously irradiated again if we saw it differently. The verse above is from an early poem about spiritual reality but its ethos accords well with the provocations her friend Marcel Duchamp would later make by exhibiting ready-made urinals and snow shovels. Gertrude Stein, she thought, was the 'Curie / Of the laboratory / Of vocabulary' because her style crushed banal sentences into newly radiant meaning. The luminous appealed to her because it was ultimately the symbol of the 'intuitive psychology of matter' that Marinetti wanted for his poems to connect forces, bodies and thoughts on a single plane, or the spiritual matter which Loy, who had adopted Christian Science, described as a 'radio-television broadcast in 3 dimensions, issuant from the Deific designer'.⁴⁰ 'Brancusi's Golden Bird' is another luminous object, enacting the miracle that the 'absolute act' of art can be contained in an object. It is not merely a perfectly self-contained piece of modernist sculpture, for its surface reflects light that seems to glow from hidden depths, making interior and exterior, the object and the setting it reflects into itself, become interchangeable:

an incandescent curve
licked by chromatic flames
in labyrinths of reflections

This gong
of polished hyperaesthesia
shrills with brass
as the aggressive light
strikes
its significance

Art is not a thing to be looked at, but an absorbing, participative experience in which the object, the gazer and the meaning all simultaneously interact. Its whole mode of being, she concludes, is an 'immaculate conception', not only because Brancusi had an absolutely perfect idea, but because real art-experience is continual present, another 'nascent virginity'.

Gertrude Stein

According to Stein's *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, Mina Loy was 'among the very earliest to be interested in the work of Gertrude Stein'. When Loy's first husband objected to Stein's lack of commas in her early writing, 'Mina Loy equally interested was able to understand without the commas. She has always been able to understand.'⁴¹ Given that Stein's poems are uniquely resistant to being 'understood' in any traditional sense, this is quite a compliment. Stein called the work in *Tender Buttons* poems to distinguish them from her earlier narratives, but her experimental writing is really testing the limits of genre rather than fulfilling it, and the prose poems are sliced-up sentences whose pattern and meaning seem to be generated spontaneously in the writing:

A WAIST

A star glide, a single frantic sullenness, a single financial grass greediness.
Object that is in wood. Hold the pine, hold the dark, hold in the rush,
make the bottom.

A piece of crystal. A change, in a change that is remarkable there is no
reason to say that there was a time.

A woolen object gilded. A country climb is the best disgrace, a couple of
practices any of them in order is so left.⁴²

This is not in any traditional sense a poem, or about anyone's waist. 'Wood', 'pine', 'rush' and 'bottom' in the second sentence suggest a chair, and some

chairs have waists, but what of the other sentences? In early notebooks she often associates her lover, Alice B Toklas, with greed, so there may be an unspoken link between Toklas's cooking, Stein's own distinct lack of a waist and the many poems involving eating or bodies elsewhere in *Tender Buttons*. But the poem does not decode itself into the one person's thoughts about something else: instead, it makes a single plane where objects, fragments of worn argument ('there is no reason to say that'), commands and emotions simultaneously coexist, and their connections may be as acoustic (glide/gilded, grass/disgrace) or visual (star/crystal) as conceptual. There is no central concept which would connect all the parts if only it could be grasped. In fact, many of the titles in *Tender Buttons* were added after the writing was done, emerging from the poetic thing that Stein found she had already made, rather than from any object she was apparently looking at:

I became more and more excited about how words which were the words that made whatever I looked at look like itself were not the words that had in them any quality of description. This excited me very much at that time . . . [They were] words that to me very exactly related themselves to that thing the thing at which I was looking, but as often as not had as I say nothing whatever to do with what any words would do that described the thing.⁴³

What did Mina Loy understand? Fundamentally, that Stein's art had its being in the state of consciousness it induced, rather than in what it describes. 'By the intervaried rhythm of this monotone mechanism she uses for inducing a continuity of awareness of her subject', remarked Loy on reading some of Stein's early prose, 'I was connected up with the very pulse of duration.'⁴⁴ 'Duration' was Bergson's term for our true inward sense of life as a 'mutual penetration, an interconnexion and organization of elements, each one of which represents the whole'.⁴⁵ Stein's style, then, attunes the reader's mind to a special poetic type of organic awareness, in which life 'spreads tenuous and vibrational between each of its human exteriorizations and the other'.⁴⁶ We find ourself thinking not about one individual or another, active subjects or passive objects, but in step and time with the interspace in which they are all connected, and in which none takes priority over another. Through the later, jumpier style which culminates in *Tender Buttons*, Loy thought Stein reached a similar aesthetic region:

She ignores duration and telescopes time and space and the subjective and objective in a way that obviates interval and interposition. She stages strange triangles between the nominative and his verb and irruptive co-respondents.⁴⁷

Irruptive means that a phrase or a word from some quite different circumstance may insert itself in the middle of what looks like a noun phrase: 'financial' may be a word irrupting into thought about another kind of greediness. By splicing together words and phrases from irreconcilable planes and scales, Stein aimed to recalibrate the reader's mind into a newly simultaneous awareness:

Unexpectedly time and space crash into chaos of dislocate ideas, while conversation would seem to proceed from the radiophonic exchange of the universe. Yet you come up for air with the impression that you have experienced something more extensively than you have before . . . but what? The everything, the everywhere, the simultaneity of function.⁴⁸

Reading Stein, for Loy, is like drowning – where the self merges into its surroundings – and also a rebirth into a new awareness without the limitation of being a single consciousness, distanced from a world, and mastering it by the framing of grammar, sequence or description. After years of being ridiculed for writing nonsense, no wonder Stein was enthusiastic.

It must be said, though, that Stein's explanations of her own art give the reader less encouragement. After her research on automatic consciousness under William James at Harvard, Stein had moved to Paris with her brother Leo to form their astonishing private modern art gallery of post-Impressionist painting. Though she was great friends with members of the Parisian art world (including Picasso, Matisse and Apollinaire), her own writing was done alone and in private, and she had problems getting any of it published. In the face of a hostile public, she emphasised her own indifference:

I was not interested in what people would think when they read this poetry; I was entirely taken up with my problems and if it did not tell my story it would tell some story. They might have another conception which would be their affair. It is not necessarily attached to the original idea I had when I wrote it.⁴⁹

In fact, poetry could never be written *for* anyone else, because the essence of genius was to be one's own audience:

One may really indeed say that that is the essence of genius, of being most intensely alive, that is being one who is at the same time talking and listening . . . I say I never repeat while I am writing because while I am writing I am most completely, and that is if you like being a genius, I am most entirely and completely listening and talking, the two in one and the one in two and that is having completely its own time and it has in it no element of remembering.⁵⁰

How are we to bring these two sides of Stein together, then: her own description of art as uninterrupted self-communication of genius, and Loy's description of her transforming reading from an act of interpretation into a new state of heightened consciousness? The answer perhaps comes in Stein's description of why the 'masterpiece' had to be so different from the ordinary. A masterpiece has 'nothing to do with human nature or with identity, it has to do with the human mind and the entity that is with a thing in itself and not in relation'.⁵¹ Great artworks 'came to be as something that is an end in itself and in that respect it is opposed to the business of living which is relation and necessity'.⁵² In other words, art has to be utterly unlike anything else because then it would be conditioned by rules or needs outside itself. It can't copy the world, or aim to appeal to a particular segment of market taste. Stein's work has constantly to be unrecognisable, in order not to depend on describing anything you could recognise by other means, or identifying with any patterns of meaning in previous poems. Instead, its constant unpredictability makes every reading exist in a permanent present, constantly creating new collisions in its reader's mind; a masterpiece, she maintained, 'does not begin and end'.⁵³

For the same reason, this writing can't express Gertrude Stein's inner identity either. 'Identity is recognition', but 'the master-piece has nothing to do with human nature or with identity'.⁵⁴ A great poem can only happen, when its author is writing without any consciousness of being a self at all. 'At any moment when you are you you are you without the memory of yourself because if you remember yourself while you are you you are not for purposes of creating you.'⁵⁵ Memory and identity are ways of self-splitting, harbouring a mental reserve, or thinking of yourself in relation to an audience or other pre-existing definitions. Really free creation, on the other hand, can exist only in an instant present: 'any of you when you write you try to remember what you are about to write and you will see immediately how lifeless the writing becomes that is why expository writing is so dull because it is all remembered'.⁵⁶ She once advised a young writer to write 'without thinking of the result in terms of a result, but think of the writing in terms of discovery, which is to say that creation must take place between the pen and the paper, not before in a thought or afterwards in a recasting'.⁵⁷

The 'continuous present' of the masterpiece, then, eliminates the past to perform the radical equalisation avant-gardist manifestos demand in politics. 'If there was no identity no one could be governed, but everybody is governed by everybody and that is why they make no master-pieces'.⁵⁸ Through the trance-like manner of composition that grew from her experiments in automatic writing at Harvard, her writing escapes all governing identities: genius is also anonymous, as with her later memoir, *Everybody's Autobiography*. Its

unresolvable syntax refuses distinctions we want to make between means and end, figure and ground or important and trivial. 'After all, to me one human being is as important as another human being, and you might say that the landscape has the same values, a blade of grass has the same value as a tree.'⁵⁹

Perhaps this is why the visual artist Stein associates with the writing of *Tender Buttons* was not her friend and fellow-genius Picasso but the Dadaist Francis Picabia. In making her poetic experiments, Stein recalled, she was chiefly 'tormented by the problem of the internal and the external'.⁶⁰ In the same manner, she claimed, Picabia was 'struggling with the problem that a line should have the vibration of a musical sound and that this vibration should be the result of conceiving the human form and the human face in so tenuous a fashion that would induce such vibration in the line forming it'.⁶¹ The line which in a picture creates the boundary of the human form it depicts by separating inside from outside should also resonate like a guitar string, twanged or shivered by the very conception it depicts. Outer form becomes content, or the frame becomes the art: when he wasn't painting, Picabia was fascinated by the uncanny 'interior' life of mechanical contraptions and robots, as well as being a co-provocateur with Duchamp of the institutions deciding what could and couldn't be displayed as art. *Tender Buttons* reverses inside and outside in a more domestic setting, although the feminine and private realm suggested by my word 'domestic' relies on a constrasting masculine, public outside, which Stein's style of course works against.⁶² The sections on 'Objects', 'Rooms' and 'Food' are all prose poems gravitating round actions which cross between interior and exterior: sex and eating ('This is This Dress, Aider'), or the wrappings of fabric and buildings which project or protect an interior ('A Shawl', 'A Cushion'), or just daily items fused with memory and habit ('A Little Bit of a Tumbler'). In the book's title itself, tender suggests the inward pressing outward (sore or excited skin, or emotions) while buttons connotes the outward way to reach the inward (fastenings on clothes or doors, knobs to activate machines). Together, 'tender buttons' gives us flowerbuds, or the clitoris, or well-cooked mushrooms, all aspects of Stein's and Toklas's domestic life, but all equally suggestive of the poems' own manner of moving inside and outside the body which holds them. Here is 'Asparagus':

Asparagus in a lean in a lean to hot. This makes it art and it is wet wet
weather wet weather wet.

At first, this evokes slender asparagus stalks boiling in an upright holder so the tips don't cook first. Leaning on the side, they resemble a bunch of flowers in a vase, which 'makes it art'. However, it could also be that the asparagus has wet lower stems, as it would if it were still growing and the weather is

wet. The phrase 'lean to', moreover, suggests a 'lean-to', a glass cold-frame in which the asparagus may be glimpsed sheltering from winter. By not giving you the grammatical markers of which to prefer, the phrase makes the asparagus both inside and outside. In the same way, its framing by the vase / kettle / glass frame 'makes it art', but the frame won't stay in place: the asparagus is being sized up for eating, the prose-poem is busy breaking all the frames of 'poetry', and the words that began with the asparagus are provoking new concepts from their own sounds. 'Wet wet weather wet weather wet' has a babytalk element, as if Stein were mouthing word-sounds not yet fully interiorised (she once said that in wartime 'children themselves are poetry' because they are the only thing that is 'spontaneously poetic').⁶³ And the sounds themselves mix to connote new concepts: 'it is wet' evokes the 'sweat' of condensing steam, while 'asparagus' itself may echo 'asperges', the sprinkling with water in the Easter rituals when asparagus comes into season. And if you think *that* reading has put some meaning in the poem which isn't 'there', then you are insisting on exactly the distinction of inside and outside which the poem, and the manner of its composing, is supposed to trouble.

Although her experimentation has generally inspired avant-gardists on the left, Stein was politically a Republican who deplored paternalistic socialist government, Roosevelt and the New Deal, and mistakenly thought Spain would find freedom and order in Franco, much to the anguish of her friend Picasso. Her 1934 comments that Hitler should get the Nobel peace prize for removing all democratic, Jewish and leftist struggle in Germany are surely ironic, but her friendship with the murky collaborationist fixer Bernard Faÿ was not, though it probably ensured her survival as a Jewish lesbian in Nazi-occupied France.⁶⁴ If Stein's dislike for generalities subsuming particulars is the link between her non-metaphorical writing of unrepeatable moments and her individualist politics, it may also account for her willingness not to read too much into what was happening day by day. The poems of *Tender Buttons*, on the other hand, celebrate a well-heeled domestic life whose pleasures anyone could understand.

H. D.

Hilda Doolittle was rather a reluctant poster girl for the avant-garde. Recalling the famous moment when Ezra Pound took a sheaf of her poems in the tea-room of the British Museum, slashed through various lines and signed it 'H. D., Imagiste', her memoir written to forgive him, *End to Torment*, begins the next paragraph with the telling phrase, 'I was hiding.'⁶⁵ Though it was

Imagism which brought her fame, H. D. was often embarrassed by Pound's use of the term to fight his own battles with the poetry establishments in England and America, and only a year later asked not to be called an *Imagiste* because it implied her poetry was merely an illustration of his principles rather than the work of an individual.⁶⁶ This process of freeing herself from a powerful man's control and finding out who she really was would be a leitmotif for much of her later work. Much of her poetry rewrites myths from a perspective sympathetic to their women ('Eurydice', *Helen in Egypt*), while the experimental narrative technique of her novel-autobiographies searches for an underlying symbolic pattern for the traumatic years 1915–22: the pain of a stillborn child in 1915, the loss of her brother Gilbert in the First World War, the breakdown of her Imagist marriage to a shell-shocked Richard Aldington after her agonised attempts to accommodate his affairs, her betrayed friendships with D. H. Lawrence and Cecil Gray and, not least, the complicated, painful bisexual love-triangles, first with Frances Gregg and Ezra Pound while students at Pennsylvania, then with Gray and Bryher and, later on, with Bryher and the film-maker Kenneth MacDonald. These repeated attempts to find and understand her unacknowledged self in a fragmented, intense and elusive style again made her a figurehead for early feminist critics, who saw in her modernist syntax resistance to the fixed identities and sexualities demarcated by patriarchal order.⁶⁷ Their efforts to recover the Hilda Doolittle hiding behind Pound's initials brought to light a great deal of unpublished work (some still unpublished), and made the intensity of her Imagist period seem much less detached and impersonal. But to see all her later poems as fundamentally resurgent self-proclamation would miss the genuinely avant-gardist elements in H. D., the poet whose radically cut-down verse became a way to visualise more universal kinds of human being, and whose interest in film and mythology creates a poetic where life and art are more or less continuous.

Perhaps the best way to counter the idea that H. D. remained an *Imagiste* is her own finest poem, *Trilogy* (1944–6), which opens with the poet walking through the bombed-out wreck of the London square where she used to live, and being reminded of the Egyptian temples she had visited at Karnak with her lover Bryher (Winifred Ellerman) twenty years previously:

there, as here, ruin opens
the tomb, the temple; enter,
there as here, there are no doors:

the shrine lies open to the sky,
the rain falls, here, there
sand drifts; eternity endures:

ruin everywhere, yet as the fallen roof
 leaves the sealed room
 open to the air,
 so, through our desolation,
 thoughts stir, inspiration stalks us
 through gloom⁶⁸

Time seems to have stopped: while her past visit is present in memory, the present sight of exposed basements and sheared-off kitchen walls seems to belong to the past, as their ‘poor utensils show / like rare objects in a museum’. A sense of violation and despair links both places, as the sudden glimpses into what was someone’s home, and perhaps their tomb, bring the poet’s mind back to her wandering among ancient graves and shrines, though here the sand spills from broken sandbags rather than the desert. But H. D. insists throughout that wreckage is always the beginning of another renewal. Like the Freudian therapy she had undergone a few years earlier, *Trilogy* is a poem about re-encountering the past in order to free up the future, and part of the past here are the forms of those early poems written in London with Pound and Richard Aldington. The ‘sand drifts’ of 1942 pick up her ‘Sea Rose’ of 1916:

Rose, harsh rose,
 marred and with stint of petals,
 meagre flower, thin,
 sparse of leaf,
 more precious
 than a wet rose
 single on a stem—
 you are caught in the drift
 . . . in the crisp sand
 that drives in the wind.

The poems of her first volume *Sea-Garden* celebrated wild and bitter fruit, roots and windfalls rather than cultivated roses and melons, because H. D. loathed all the tropes of women as enclosed orchards or fruit ripe for male plucking. ‘Smothered in straw’, their ‘beauty without strength, / chokes out life’ (‘Sheltered Garden’). ‘It is better to taste of frost’, she decides, ‘than of wadding and dead grass.’ But her sea-roses and sea-poppies are not merely a metaphor for female independence. Partly they were an attempt to free flowers associated with each ancient and now lost poet in Meleager’s proem to the *Greek Anthology* from an over-cultivated aura of academic Hellenism, and restore them to the fresh air and vivid emotions of her own childhood

holidays. Partly, their battered state acknowledges the pain of her own erotic feelings for men and women; the rose-poet Sappho's famous description of desire as 'bittersweet' becomes here the sea-rose's 'acrid fragrance'. But H. D.'s 'wind-tortured' poem-plants were also exploring how real poetry was to be made by endless, conflicting and destructive forces which made their forms, like the 'Sea-Lily', 'slashed and torn / but doubly rich'. The 'sea-rose' is a self-description of the new, minimalist beauty H. D. was discovering in the static, timeless quality of her torn-off fragment. Its diction is 'thin' and 'sparse' and, without regular rhythm, each line holds no expectation of fullness or resolution. The simple words are left to be bare and uncultivated as they are, ends in themselves. Yet the same bareness also concentrates the reader's attention, making every syllable 'precious' (too precious, sometimes) and pulling them together internally rather than through some exterior formal frame. By not rewarding attention to the end of the line rhythmically or audibly, the poem, like the sea-rose, feels uncultivated *and* inwardly more united; the 'r' of 'rose' moving through 'harsh', 'marred', 'meagre', 'flower' and 'sparse' would be inaudible were the words embedded in a longer line.

The same curious mixture of the intensely shaped and pre-given also stems from the volume's feel of being a translation, an effect amplified by appeals to various Greek gods and allusions to the fragments of the *Greek Anthology* or Sappho. Although we have these ancient poets in fragments by accident, H. D., Pound and many modern poets afterwards wanted to recreate a *feeling* of fragmentariness, because of the quality of attention that the feeling of being a remainder or survival from a lost world gives. Like objects in a museum, each fragment speaks far more evocatively than if it were safely put back into the sentence it came from, or into a context we know about. As a fragment, it becomes a nodal point through which a lost culture's way of life is revealed, rather than simply part of the ordinary transactions of ordinary people. Writing in fragments also makes the poem feel like a discovery or found object, as if your poem were actually someone else's words suddenly, vividly present across time and space. Torn and exposed like the fragments of Sappho recovered from Egyptian rubbish-dumps a few years earlier, the sea-rose's shy, tough, lucky survival makes the poem feel like a gift from another realm. It was a feeling which it would take H. D. decades to explore, as the emotional betrayals and mishaps of her life made her choice of a stunted and weathered rose-form ever more appropriate; by 1942, she is left 'shivering' with 'inspiration' at the sight of the smashed houses of Lowndes Square, because she senses she is walking into a scenario mystically concordant with her own sheared-off, damaged, resilient art.

The correspondence between violence and creation continues when, a moment later, she shudders at the fire-bomb's 'crack of volcanic fissure / slow flow of terrible lava / pressure on heart, lungs, the brain / about to burst its brittle case' (510). This is a frightening evocation of the way the incendiaries' superheated air kills people from inside as well as from without. But the volcano analogy also updates another earlier poem, 'The Master', about her treatment with Freud, where it signifies the terrifying inner pressures of her emotional life, torn between lovers and ideals of herself:

I did not know how to differentiate
 between volcanic desire,
 anemones like embers
 and purple fire
 of violets
 like red heat,
 and the cold
 silver
 of her feet (453)

The rhymes crossing between 'feet' and 'heat', 'ember' and 'silver' confirm the confusion. But H. D. seems to have found some healing with Freud because his analysis enabled her to believe that her switches between homo- and heterosexual relations, her 'two loves separate', all had their part in her life. As heat and cold were two movements of a single desire (Sappho's bittersweet poem had described it as fire and ice), so Freud's techniques allowed her to re-read her whole life as an improvised free-associating dance-poem, where 'each word led to another word, / and the whole made a rhythm / in the air / till now unguessed at, unknown' (454). Surprisingly, however, the poem describes this discovery of inward, psychic freedom as making real the 'unbearable' possibility of 'God-in-all' (459). The phrase has a personal meaning: Freud is not God any more, and in her dance, she is no longer his dutiful disciple. But it also has a social one, for the improvised dance-poem signifies equal relations between men and women, bodies and souls, humans and nature, rather than possession and domination of the one by the other:

for she needs no man
 herself
 is that dart and pulse of the male
 hands, feet, thighs,
 herself perfect. (456)

The first 'herself' is a reflexive pronoun, as if her dancer were being the male and being the object of her own male impulses, and it is possible to read the last

line as saying both 'she is perfect' and 'male hands, feet and thighs perfect her'. Bisexual femaleness is not degenerate failure, but a capacity to love without the losses and dependencies of either sex alone. Like the avant-garde, her sexually marginal position turns out to be as all-inclusive as possible.

It's also a corroboration of the position of the avant-garde artist. Picking up ideas from her friend Havelock Ellis and from Edward Carpenter's 'The Intermediate Sex' which link the homosexual's position *between* the sexes to the artist's marginalised-but-pivotal role in modern society, H. D.'s earlier *Notes on Thought and Vision* had visualised an artistic 'overmind consciousness', present to artists of both sexes in the act of creation, which is female and male combined in a 'universal mind'.⁶⁹ During the 1930s, however, her search for that 'universal' in poetry took on a new formal aspect from the analogy she began to develop between poetry, dream and film. With some of Bryher's considerable inheritance, H. D. and her circle had begun the first art-cinema journal, *Close Up*, and formed the POOL film-making collective. In a pamphlet about their first substantial production, the anti-racist dreamscape *Borderline*, she suggested that film would bring together 'the ultra-modern and the ultra-classic' into an avant-garde synthesis of the arts.⁷⁰ Not only is it sculpture with light and rhythm with pictures, its fusions of inward and outward, character and setting, move it out of the realm of 'art' alone:

Film and life are or should be indis-severable terms. In this modern attempt to synchronize thought and action, the inner turmoil and the other, the static physical passivity and the acute psychic activity, there is hardly one moment, one dramatic 'sentence' that outweighs another.⁷¹

It's not just that in a film an audience sees images in which a character's inner life is somehow harmonised with or played off against his social situation in balanced irresolution. Like an avant-garde production, film engulfs the viewer, too, because watching it is like a dream:

Step into your dream and everything evolves, simplifies; the conglomerate experience of a day, or an hour, of a lifetime meet, rehearse some little scene of life or death or mimicry . . . It does not surprise us to greet an incarnation of our tailor or our *modiste* in a little college class room struggling with us, in past anxiety, over a page of logarithms long ago 'forgotten'. Nothing in a dream is forgotten. The film as Macpherson directs it, seems almost just some such process of 'remembering'.⁷²

'Nothing is lost', Freud had said to her at the beginning of their analysis, and she had found release in understanding her life to be a latent poem, with all its moments weighing equally with each other, and herself to be making and being made by it. 'I was content', she says of her analysis, meaning both 'I was

happy' and 'I was the material for a new poem' ('The Master'). In the same way, her ideas on film point towards the complex opening scenes of *Trilogy* in which she is watching herself walking through the ruins, and noticing as if from outside herself the correspondences between past and present, inner and outer life. Just as the avant-garde of *Blast* had seen art in the ships and cranes of industrial life and wanted their own art to pulsate with the same power, H. D. believed art and life had once been fused in Greece, and could be again:

The conscious mind of man had achieved kinship with unconscious forces of most subtle definition. Columns wrought with delicate fluting, whorls of capitals, fold of marble garment, the heel of an athlete or the curl of a god or hero, the head-band of a high-priest or a goddess . . . no matter how dissimilar, had yet one fundamental inner force that framed them, projected them, as (we repeat) a certain genus of deep-sea fish may project its shell.⁷³

Trilogy, then, becomes a mystical search for that fundamental inner force or spirit, manifest in the patterns of her own past and world history, myths and natural events, for 'neither one outweighs another'. Its patterns are visible at all scales of life; the opening image of the broken houses / open tombs, for example, reappears in various gods who die and rise under new names, in the shells of molluscs surviving a flood and the pupae of butterflies, in the graphic cartouches encircling hieroglyphs and the sound-clusters which break through discrete words to thread the poem together: Ammon and the 'Amen' of her Moravian upbringing, say, or Osiris and the bomb's 'zrr-hiss'. In the midst of it all is the poet's own walk through the bomb-site:

we crossed the charred portico
passed through a frame – doorless –

entered a shrine; like a ghost
we entered a house through a wall

then still not knowing
whether (like the wall)

we were there or not-there
we saw the tree flowering;

it was an ordinary tree
in an old garden-square.

This passage about survival amid destruction alchemically fuses memory, myth and self-description. It is a real memory of seeing a 'half burnt-out apple-tree / blossoming', which seemed meant for her. It is the myth of the 'flowering of

the rood', and reworks the story H. D. tells in *Ion* of the green shoot surviving in the charred olive tree of the Acropolis after its sack by the Persians. It is a self-portrait drawing on the memory of walking into a bomb-damaged house with her then-husband Richard Aldington during the First World War, who found an abandoned volume of Browning and kicked it, furiously asking what the use of poetry was in the middle of such destruction. But it remains unsure whether 'we were there or not-there' because the poem does not assign priority to any of those orders of reality; like avant-garde readymades, it is art discerning the art which is already there in any life. For those concerned just with ordinary survival, poetry will be 'useless' and 'pathetic'. But poems, like dying gods, 'have done their worm-cycle', and constantly reappear in the middle of life, not as external commentary on it: 'in the trivial or / the real dream; insignia // in the heron's crest, / the asp's back'. As if to prove H. D.'s intuitions about poetry's survival and return, sections of 'The Walls Do Not Fall' from *Trilogy* appeared as graffiti in the ruins of the World Trade Center after 9/11.

Recommended Further Reading

- Janet Lyon, *Manifestoes: Provocations of the Modern* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999).
- Adalaide Morris, *How To Live / What To Do: H. D.'s Cultural Poetics* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003).
- Martin Puchner, *Poetry of the Revolution: Marx, Manifestoes and the Avant-Gardes* (Princeton University Press, 2006).
- The Salt Companion to Mina Loy*, ed. by Rachel Potter (Cambridge: Salt, 2008).
- Richard Sheppard, *Modernism – Dada – Postmodernism* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2000).

Chapter 7

Why is it so difficult?

Modernism and difficulty	166
... because ordinary life is wrong	170
... because difficulty does art's job	171
... because it's good for you	173
... because it's a way into the elite	176
Adorno's argument	180
Difficulty and diversity	183

Modernism and difficulty

When I tell people that I teach poetry for a living, it is rarely long before someone says, half-guiltily and half-defiantly, 'I don't understand poetry.' If pressed, they will admit that they don't have a problem with nursery rhymes or Wordsworth's 'I wandered lonely as a cloud,' but it's modern poetry that's so difficult. If I decide to ruin the chances of making a lasting friendship and ask what's wrong with difficult poetry, the language of discrimination swiftly follows. Modern poetry is 'inaccessible,' as if it put its would-be reader in a wheelchair and unfairly denied her access up the steps of culture. It is 'exclusive,' as if poetry were a universal right which the poets were deliberately keeping away from entitled citizens. And it is 'elitist,' a poetry deliberately designed to keep ordinary people from gaining cultural authority. As well as telling me just how deeply embedded Schiller's idea that art should be democratic is, these responses viscerally connect difficulty with the feeling of being shut out.

Yet the poems which first created this alienation were meant to make reading it an absorbing experience. Stevens's dizzying switches between literal and metaphoric, or the floating syntax of *The Cantos*, or the hypnotising stop-start chatter of Gertrude Stein are all ways to immerse the reader's attention, and draw the reader's mind into its whole way of thinking. When we talk about difficulty, then, the paradox is that the language which makes poems difficult is both inviting and off-putting. It immerses you in a flow of words and signs, but

if they can't begin to connect in your mind, the stream becomes an ice sheet which leaves you scrambling for a foothold. Presenting a welter of unresolvable points of view can make the poem seem absolutely indifferent to what its reader thinks, and yet it can also clear a space within the reader's mind for the poem to work in an unexpected and highly personal manner. Understanding why modernist poetry is difficult is understanding how difficulty can be inclusive and exclusive at the same time.

Modernist poetry is not the first poetry to be difficult, of course. Horace's poetry involves deliberate gaps in its syntax. Provençal troubadour poetry is a '*trobar clus*', a form closed in obscurity and understood only by an initiated elite, one reason for Pound's attraction to it.¹ Wordsworth and Coleridge had to write the preface to *Lyrical Ballads* to explain the apparent lack of point to their works, while Shelley and Browning were fond of referring back to Milton's touchy admission that *Paradise Lost* would 'fit audience find, though few', to justify their own difficulty.² And Shakespeare's sonnets are endlessly difficult to interpret, not only because we know so little about whom Shakespeare was writing for, but because 'words, lines, and clauses often give a multitude of meanings – of which none fits a single "basic" statement to which the others can be called auxiliary'.³

Nevertheless, difficulty is part of the DNA of modernist poetry in a way that it isn't in Romantic poetry or the sonnet as a form. In a famous essay on difficulty in poetry across the ages, George Steiner distinguished between (i) poems that are difficult because they refer to things we are unfamiliar with in our particular situation, but which we might learn by research; (ii) poems that are difficult because we can't see why we should find what's being said artistic; (iii) poems that are difficult because they tactically present interpretative possibilities which we cannot choose between; and (iv) poems which are difficult because they cultivate language's innate failure ever to stop signifying, and so make any 'understanding', including the poet's, inadequate.⁴ If it's not inherent in Steiner's second category, I'd want to add a further one: poems which are difficult because they are aesthetically unpleasant to read, because their rhythms are spasmodic or clotted, or because they go on much too long – difficulty that isn't merely interpretative, in other words, but a difficulty of giving the poem due attention. Of course, it's easy to find modernist poetic examples of each category. More significant is that canonical modernist poems have all four kinds of difficulty in them. Works such as *The Waste Land* or J. H. Prynne's *The White Stones* have references that are hard to find, but even when found still leave you wondering how to interpret them. Their range of reference is so wide that it spreads well beyond the accepted bounds of what we find poetic: Eliot includes ornithological notes, Prynne erudite references

or at least not Burne-Jones
and Beardsley knew he was dying and had to
make his hit quickly

hence no more B-J in his product.⁷

In other words, the experience of difficulty is intrinsic to some of the meaning, beauty and truth modernist poems want to discover, because it is based on their writers' sense of where non-poetic life has something missing to it.

But allowing difficulty to have some artistic point to it should not stop us from noticing how it alters the social network within which art tends to move, and from which some of its meaning comes. The rise of difficult poetry promoted certain kinds of professional writers and readers. It made the University an almost unavoidable gateway to the cultured life, and made the critic a desirable companion to art, as the fact that you are reading this book perhaps shows. Difficulty made many of modernism's first readers anxious and angry, as Leonard Diepeveen shows, because it demanded a new kind of artistic contract between author and reader, in which the amateur author or the reader for pleasure came off badly.⁸ Sensing the change in artistic culture modernism was bringing about, early satirists such as J. C. Squire in Britain or Don Marquis in America dismissed it as a hoax or a fashion, meaningless poems that were merely a tool to get publicity. As modernism became more institutionalised, doubters like Philip Larkin thought it was a means to gain academic clout and oppress the ordinary reader. For its opponents, in other words, difficulty was a means to gain cultural prestige, not a new sense of art. 'Difficulty', Diepeveen summarises, 'was the early twentieth-century's central tool for arguing about what literature is and who should control it.'⁹ Much of the argument about modernist difficulty turns on how much these changes to poetry's audience were unintended consequences, and how much they were a calculated effort by the poets. Whatever the cause, it's certain that publicity, in-groups and academic endorsement were real effects, which then fed back into modernist poetry through the poets' altered sense of their role and audience. Late modernists such as Charles Olson wanted to make modernism an affair of shamans, not professors, while Basil Bunting or George Oppen thought it had to deflate itself to remain poetry. But difficulty originally stemmed from a hope that art should promise a realm where nothing can simply be a tool for something else, the life without the oppositions of ends and means, part and whole discussed in [Chapter 1](#). The real puzzle about modernist difficulty is how it grows from this aesthetic dream of a more united way of life, and yet dovetails so neatly with the cultural institutions which work to make the opposite happen.

For all their usefulness, Steiner's distinctions between kinds of difficulty can be summed up by the idea that difficulty is a 'resistance to swift and confident interpretation'.¹⁰ Asking what's wrong with being swift or confident readers opens up some of the reasons the modernists themselves gave to the question 'why is it so difficult?'

... because ordinary life is wrong

The first and still one of the most influential arguments for difficulty comes in a book review Eliot wrote about the metaphysical poets, which sketches out why so many people today find their sudden mental jumps and unexpected transitions to be bad poetry. If we feel Donne to be artificial or intellectual, Eliot suggests, it may be because our own culture has got its aesthetic standards wrong. Modern life suffers from a 'dissociation of sensibility', a split of thought from feeling, and consequently what it wants from art is distorted.¹¹ Tacitly following Schiller's arguments of a century before but putting more of the blame on the English Civil War, Eliot suggests that older art 'could devour any kind of experience', but modern poetry has split thought from feeling, the poetic from the non-poetic (as, he implies, has modern life). Only in 'the mind of the poet are the experiences of cooking or typewriters or falling in love 'always forming new wholes' (64), wholes incomprehensible to the mindset of a divided society. To make poetry in which science and art and economics and love all fuse together, we will have to bend or force language into our meaning, and this means:

Poets in our civilisation, as it appears at present, must be difficult. Our civilisation comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing on a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results. The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning. (65)

Modernist poetry is to be allusive, indirect and dislocated *in order* that it may be 'comprehensive', and have no split-off realms of human experience. Difficulty is a kind of integrity: 'it is not a vice; it is a fidelity to thought and feeling' (62). The techniques that put people off modernism or Donne – the disparate references, the unspoken connections, the abrupt jumps in form – are the only way for the poet to circumvent the current consensus which relies on such splits. It is not modern poetry that is fragmented, in other words, it is modern living. As William Carlos Williams put it:

The difficulty of modern styles is made by the fragmentary stupidity of modern life, its lacunae of sense, lumps, perversions of instinct, blankets, amputations, fulsomeness of instruction and multiplications of inanity. To avoid this, accuracy is driven to a hard road. To be plain is to be subverted since every term must be forged anew, every word tricked out of meaning, hanging with as many cheap traps as an altar.¹²

Plain speaking or 'easy poetry' will slot into the grooves of a sentimental culture; it will not be real communication, but a complicated culture's fantasy of plain speaking, which actually reinforces sentimental ideas about being in touch with the real or the democratic. It will be flattery or narcotic. W. H. Auden also thought the alienated style of modernist poetry really a piece of social realism:

We have heard much in the last twenty years of the separation of the modern artist from the crowd, of how modern art is unintelligible to the average man, and it is commonly but falsely supposed that this is because the artist is a special case. In my opinion, on the contrary, the lack of communication between artist and audience proves the lack of communication between all men; a work of art only unmasks the lack which is common to us all, but which we normally manage to gloss over with every trick and convention of conversation; men are now only individuals who can form collective masses but not communities.¹³

Or as Williams put it more forcefully elsewhere, 'when our manner of action becomes imbecilic we breed dada, Gertrude Stein, surrealism', whose artistic madness is actually 'continents of security for the pestered and bedeviled spirit of man, bedeviled by the deadly, lying repetitiousness of doctrinaire formula worship which is the standard work of the day'.¹⁴ But Williams and Auden also illuminate a basic problem behind Eliot's original formulation. The disjointed forms of modernist poetry are remedies for modern ills, and yet they seem to reproduce the unfree, lonely and broken conditions of modernity they deplore. How can modernist form, then, be a solution?

... because difficulty does art's job

In [Chapter 1](#), I suggested that modernist forms try to incorporate the experience of a balanced society into the formal structures of the poem itself. They create poems where ends do not dominate means, where thought and sense are evenly balanced, or where there is no subordination of parts to wholes. Difficulty is a modernist contribution to these formal structures. In a poet such as Wallace

Stevens, the difficulty of knowing where metaphor starts and ends baffles active interpretative thought and ensures it cannot dissolve the poem into a single 'meaning' expressed in prose; every reading is kept precariously aware of how much its thought depends on the sensory sound of the words. Marianne Moore's poems embed quotations and scraps of phrase whose import and origin are hard to gauge in order to keep the same balance between deliberate authorial intention and a modest sense of how much her own thinking depends on others, and how the poem is growing into a life independent of its maker. In works of great length and complexity, like *The Cantos* or *The Waste Land*, the impossibility of maintaining a single interpretative schema ensures none of its parts can be merely examples for a central thesis, and so ends cannot dominate means. Although Williams disliked Eliot's mythological apparatus, his own very simple poems have the same effect, because their sheer obviousness resists turning the poem into a vehicle for a moral lesson or didactic statement. (Needless to say, this has not stopped critics of either Williams or Eliot.)

Modernist difficulty, in other words, is part of those formal structures which aim to join without subordinating or suppressing across the normal boundaries of thought. People should not need 'to think in terms of monolinear logic, the sentence structure, subject, predicate, objects, etc.', claimed Pound, because in modernist art 'we are as capable or almost as capable as the biologist of thinking thoughts that join like spokes in a wheel-hub and that fuse in hyper-geometric amalgams'.¹⁵ For Wallace Stevens, the poem had to resist explanation because that would turn it into something it wasn't:

Sometimes, when I am writing a thing, it is complete in my own mind; I write it in my own way and don't care what happens . . . after all, if the thing is really there, the reader gets it. He may not get it at once, but, if he is sufficiently interested, he invariably gets it. A man who wrote with the idea of being deliberately obscure would be an imposter. But that is not the same thing as a man who allows a difficult thing to remain difficult because, if he explained it, it would, to his way of thinking, destroy it.¹⁶

The problem here, however, is that the difficulty which is supposed to support the balance of means and ends becomes, ultimately, a means to another end: education. For the great difficulty with the Schillerian tradition of art in which modernism stands is that it makes art both perfect freedom and an 'aesthetic education' in that freedom, which means it is being used as an example and a standard, and so will not be experienced as perfectly free.¹⁷ In the same way that 'art for art's sake' is a moral argument against interference from morals, the difficulty which is meant to guard against the dominance of particular kinds of understanding always has a *didactic* element to it. Difficulty is an

aesthetic strategy which links modernist art to social reforms designed to produce a better kind of citizen; more sophisticated, more critical, but also better trained.

... because it's good for you

As we saw in [Chapter 1](#), many modernist poets felt they were defending an individual art against the clichés of a homogenised society. This rather disguises just how much the free individuality they cultivated is itself deeply indebted to a long tradition of reform *within* Western society, a tradition beginning in the religious reforms of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and continuing into secular disciplines inculcating a new self-control, transparency and order, and opposing themselves to the repressive hierarchies of the past.¹⁸ The affiliation between style and social reform is particularly obvious in modernist design, whether in the rationally planned cities where no space is wasted and no traffic chokes the streets, or in modernist flats with no attics in which to accumulate memories of the past. But it is equally present in poetry, as a spur to the poems' style, and in the poetic reformers' sense of separation from the sluggish mass of the unreformed.

Like the manifesto, modernist little magazines intertwined social reform and non-mainstream writing. The *Egoist* and the *New Age*, two journals essential to promoting modernist work, were publications substantially devoted to articles about how to create a freer society, on feminist-individualist or socialist principles respectively. Under their influence, Pound would fuse economic and poetic principles in the ideal of 'efficiency' or 'hygiene', dreaming of cutting out the unnecessary in art and banking. Conservative thinkers such as Eliot or Yeats tended to scorn such optimistic agendas, but were just as much reformists in their own way. Yeats entangled eugenic theories about race-improvement with occult theories about art in *On the Boiler* (1936), while Eliot's programme for a 'classical' art was all about rediscovering tradition as a means for better self-knowledge and stricter self-discipline. For all their hostility to institutions and programmes, D. H. Lawrence's and Mina Loy's demands for the demolition of sexual taboos inside and outside art were continuous with the programmes of sex reform by Havelock Ellis or Magnus Hirschfeld, which insisted sexual desires need to be brought out into the open to be healthy – an argument later useful to justify Surrealism as well.¹⁹ Indeed, the key argument for free verse – that the true form of the poem can only emerge from within – exactly parallels the sex-reformers' demands that the quality of personal relationships should trump the formal commitment of marriage. Like the arguments for

free love with which free verse was associated in America, or like the move from Victorian corsets to swimming pools and public exercise programmes, modernist art also thought the discipline to hold things in place now had to be internal to be authentic.

Difficulty is deeply entwined with these reformist aims, because it is part of modernism's assault on all unconsciously inherited and accumulated assumptions about what poetry is and should do. The 'ideogrammic method' was, to Pound, a kind of reprogramming, 'presenting one facet and then another until at some point one gets off the dead and desensitized surface of the reader's mind, onto a part that will register'.²⁰ The short lines of an Imagist poem, or the syllable-counting and ear for cliché in Marianne Moore, leaves no syllable untested. For the Russian Formalist critics like Viktor Shklovsky, modernism's formal difficulty was a revolutionary act because it was a means of estrangement from bourgeois habits of thought.²¹ From his American perspective, Williams also saw Moore's poems wiping the reader's mind clean of unexamined assumptions:

If one come with Miss Moore's work to some wary friend . . . will he see anything, if he be at all well-read, but destruction? From my experience he will be shocked and bewildered. He will perceive absolutely nothing except that his whole preconceived scheme of values has been ruined. And this is exactly what he should see, a break through all preconceived perceptions of poetic form and mood and pace, a flaw, a crack in the bowl. It is that one means when he says that destruction and creation are simultaneous.²²

And the style of a Gertrude Stein composition or a Dadaist sound poem offers the reader the truly head-spinning experience of a continuous present, where cultural background, expertise or previous experience do not help because they are exactly what's being challenged. This level of abstraction levels the interpretative playing-field, for every reader is rendered equal by being equally lost; it is, paradoxically, a kind of universalising. As Thierry de Duve comments about Duchamp's deliberate refusal to make art that can be understood as art (Steiner's second kind of difficulty):

The more a work forbids you to call it art in peaceful agreement with yourself, the more it invites you to increase the plausibility that it be compared with the works that other times, other peoples, nations, races, social classes and the other gender might call art. And the more it upsets your idea of art and arouses in you the feeling that the unexpected has arrived, the more you will sense that it is has precisely expected you to broaden your expectations. With this reflexive test, whose signal is the

sentiment of dis-sentiment, you are being pulled out of yourself and your judgement is made so much more anonymous.²³

Any difficulty which *guarantees* discomfort and disagreement ('dis-sentiment') ensures no particular cultural background can claim it for its own; we sense a universal through being made aware of our own limitations, though it is a universal defined by our individual failure to reach it.

As well as clearing away unexamined cultural inheritances, difficulty is also akin to reform because it requires a more active participation from its reader. The new order of American democracy, Whitman had insisted, required a new kind of writing:

Books are to be call'd for, and supplied, on the assumption that the process of reading is not a half-sleep, but in the highest sense, an exercise, a gymnast's struggle; that the reader is to do something for himself, must be on the alert, must himself or herself construct the poem, argument, history, metaphysical essay – the text furnishing the hints, the clue, the start or framework. Not the book needs so much to be the complete thing, but the reader of the book does. That were to make a nation of supple and athletic minds, well train'd, intuitive, used to depend on themselves, and not on a few coteries of writers.²⁴

Here, difficulty resists literary in-groups by cultivating independent, 'complete' citizens with active minds. Whitman's principle that 'to have great poetry, there must be great audiences too' was the motto of Harriet Monro's *Poetry* and, despite Pound's objections, the idea was picked up by other modernists.²⁵ In 1924, Richard Aldington described how Eliot possessed 'a subtlety of mind which makes necessary an effort for full comprehension', and compared him to Donne – aptly enough, since Eliot himself had recently described with approval how Donne's poetry was 'a development by rapid association of thought which requires a considerable agility on the part of the reader'.²⁶ Vigour, effort and agility: this is reading as gymnastics or rock-climbing, a virtuous pleasure and, in this period, an all-boys-together one. Williams's suggestion that modernism makes a music out of the words themselves, rather than a detachable meaning decorated by a 'patent music', also makes difficulty a man-to-man showdown:

This blasts out of existence forever all the puerilities of the dum de dum versifiers and puts it up to the reader to be a man – if possible. There are not many things to believe, but the trouble is no one believes them. Modern verse forces belief. It is music to that, in every sense, when if ever and in whoever it does or may exist.²⁷

Andreas Huyssen has interrogated the sexist assumptions behind modernism's opposing a 'hard', active male poetry to a passive, easy, 'feminine' popular culture.²⁸ But these metaphors of manliness, compulsory participation and games also reveal the core problem of any education in freedom. How can a form make its readers both 'well-trained' *and* 'intuitive', in Whitman's words, or independent *and* compelled to believe, in Williams's? Poems which require hard work or active participation from the reader may indeed be training in independence, but they are inseparable from the disciplinary culture doing that training – a culture of reformist clarity which defines itself through its difference from the habitual, unexamined lifestyle of the people it wants to reform. The would-be independent or 'complete' reader looks neither independent nor complete if she belongs to an elite. This is a classic difficulty with reform in general, from the Puritans of Milton's time to the modernist avant-gardes: the search for a more equal society requires more individually capable citizens, but the disciplinary technique required to produce them gives the reformers a minority identity which isolates and opposes them to the unreformed. The literature meant to encourage Whitman's readers away from dependence on a coterie actually becomes the product of a new kind of coterie. Hence the irony of Eliot's demonstration in 'The Metaphysical Poets' that really 'obscure' passages of the then almost unknown Jules Laforgue actually show a 'more comprehensive' sensibility – more inclusive, more universal – than the work of Tennyson, whom all his readers knew.

... because it's a way into the elite

Difficulty, then, has the same problem as aesthetic education in general: originally about improving our capacity for self-rule by increasing participation and independent thinking, it divides by demanding a higher level of commitment than most readers are willing to give. Difficulty makes reading a challenge to the audience to prove themselves sufficiently motivated and independent, a 'talking-up' to one's readership.²⁹ For Riding and Graves's *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* (1927), most readers failed the challenge: 'poetry obviously demands a more vigorous imaginative effort than the plain reader has been willing apply to it'.³⁰ But perhaps the 'plain reader' was just tired after a hard day's work.

Nevertheless, that idea of reading as a full-time challenge made modernism the ideal stylistic partner for the historic change in the idea of a cultural education which took place within universities between 1900 and 1940, away from the idea that culture is the product of leisure and towards the principle that it should be acquired as a moral discipline (an idea particularly dear to the

Scrutiny circle around F. R. Leavis at Cambridge) or as a professional discipline requiring specialist training and only capable of evaluation by experts (an idea more common in the United States):

In the academy, expansion and professionalisation meant that teachers of poetry, too, were required to dissociate themselves from suspicion that the study of literature was for mama's boys. Challenged by an emerging 'culture of professionalism', to use Burton Bledstein's phrase, poets and teachers devised new identities by adopting new vocabularies to describe their work.³¹

Those vocabularies were of rigour, self-awareness and dedication to the work, rather than the feminine and mass culture of emotional self-indulgence. The British love of the amateur is a 'dodging of standards', remarked Eliot, while 'surely professionalism in art is hard work on style with singleness of purpose'.³² And readers of those professionals were required to notice this hard work by doing some of their own. Surveying the rise of English degrees, the British government's 1921 report *The Teaching of English in England* insisted that while 'the literature of England belongs to all England, not to the Universities or to any coterie of the literary or the learned', studying it at university must never be a 'soft option', because Shakespeare, Milton and Wordsworth were intrinsically 'hard and difficult to learn':

The man who enters an English 'School' hoping for an idle and easy time should at once find that he has deceived himself. The University will ask much more of him than can as a rule be attempted by the ordinary reader.³³

Modernist poetry was neatly placed to undeceive this unfortunate student, but at the price of becoming inextricable from institutional authority and its divisions between the trained and the untrained, or what *The Teaching of English* calls the 'open and universal' 'easy delight' of literature for all and the 'prolonged and laborious study' necessary for degree courses.³⁴

Jonathan Rose has argued that Bloomsbury modernists such as E. M. Forster were frightened not by the masses so much as by the rise of a working class who could now read, thanks to mass education, and who read well and widely.³⁵ Modernism, he concludes, encouraged texts designed to raise the bar of culture too high for anyone who had not the leisure or the time to study them – in other words, working people who had to support themselves. While Rose's point that modernism was as troubled by the middle ground of culture as it was by mass culture is incisive, his argument has to assume modernist style works hand in glove with social division. But this growing culture of professional specialisation and academic authority in which modernist artists worked sorely

conflicted with modernism's primary artistic mission, to preserve wholeness of experience in an increasingly specialised world:

Professionalism is democracy's elitism; emphasizing expertise, it creates an aristocracy of talent, training and labour. This is the situation Pound and Eliot spoke from when they characterized poetry as the hard work of men.³⁶

And, of course, many of the poets themselves were not professional artists when they wrote their best work; Stevens was an insurance executive, Williams a doctor, and Eliot a bank executive, while the independent wealth of H. D. or Stein made them more akin to the old aristocracy. One reason for the modernist interest in the ritual art of tribal societies was that the modern division between professional artists and amateur spectators was unknown to it. Nor was it necessarily the poets' aim to be taught on syllabuses and discussed in exams. 'The experience of poetry, like any other experience, is only partially translateable into words,' remarked Eliot, just as he began to become a fixture on English exam papers, and 'some people who are inarticulate, and cannot say why they like a poem, may have deeper and more discriminating sensibility than some others who can talk glibly about it; we must remember too that poetry is not written simply to provide material for conversation.'³⁷ Pound thought modern universities part of the capitalist 'bureaucracy of letters' that interfered with genuine reading, and scorned 'the ridiculous dialect of the present Cambridge school of "critics" who believe that their books about books about writing will breed a "better taste" than would a familiarity with the great poets.'³⁸ Indeed, the didactic works culminating in the *Guide to Kulchur* were designed to give the general reader a remedy for the educational deficiencies of the fact-dominated, professionally specialised American universities he loathed. And Pound had a point, for when the poetry in which intellectual thought and sensory experience were supposed to be beautifully balanced became principally circulated in university seminars, its reception was automatically dominated by the need to explain it in intellectualising terms, and in a setting which rarely acknowledged its participation in the economic hustle and shove Pound was talking about.

But whatever the poets' feelings, Richards and Leavis at Cambridge, or poet-critics such as Allen Tate, John Crowe Ransom and Robert Penn Warren in the United States, had made Eliot enormously influential among those who did get to university, not only by putting *The Waste Land* on the syllabus as the summation of modern poetry, but by making the values they extracted from his essays a litmus-test for all the other poetry being taught. This combination of cultural authority and a mould-breaking style would make

Eliot irresistible to a generation of undergraduates after the First World War, because he signified both rebellion against their parents' kind of poetry, success in examinations, and a cultural sensibility apparently capable of knowing what to do with anything it encountered. In these circumstances, the difficulty which excluded so many also created the intense loyalty of the included, just as bands who play 'difficult' music today – industrial noise, experimental jazz or anything defiantly uncommercial – have evangelical fan clubs who will happily tell you about their conversion experiences. As Yeats's magicians or Pound's troubadours knew, secrets create group loyalty, and poems putting the cult back into difficult encourage this feeling of being a small band of initiates rediscovering lost traditions which give them an exhilarating power to criticise every aspect of ordinary life.

It was Eliot's link between difficulty and cultural power, however, which the opponents of modernism couldn't stand. In a piece originally written about modern jazz but actually an attack on modernism in general, the anti-modernist poet Philip Larkin noticed the jargon of a '*new language* that was more *difficult*, more *complex*, that required you to work *hard at appreciating it*', and was scornful:

Basically the message is: Don't trust your eyes, or ears, or understanding. They'll tell you this is ridiculous, ugly, or meaningless. Don't believe them. You've got to work at this: after all, you don't expect to understand anything as important as art straight off, do you? I mean, this is a pretty complex stuff: if you want to know how complex, I'm giving a course of ninety-six lectures at the local college, starting next week, and you'd be more than welcome. The whole thing's on the rates, you won't have to pay. After all, think what asses people have made of themselves in the past by not understanding art – you don't want to be like that, do you? And so on, and so forth. Keep the suckers spending.³⁹

Difficulty is a piece of cultural intimidation by poets who require the 'subsidized acceptance of art' in universities rather than being able to sell directly to the public. Not only does it falsify the genuine taste which a free market would imply, Larkin would say elsewhere, the academy only likes the poets it can prove its own cleverness with, and so skews the canon to exclude 'simple' poets like Robert Frost or Thomas Hardy.

By this stage of the argument, though, any sense of the different kinds of difficulty or their intrinsic artistic value has disappeared. It is simply a code signifying access to elite culture, an explanation which tacitly appeals to the populist sentiment that there is an oppressive 'They' out there humiliating a

put-upon 'Us', a sentiment which may well feel true for undergraduates forced to simulate appreciation of modernist poems in competitive examinations. University examiners rarely let on, however, that the poets found each other difficult to understand. Pound admitted in 1918 that:

If the sinuosities and mental quirks of Misses Moore and Loy are difficult to follow I do not know what is to be said for some of Mr Williams's ramifications and abruptnesses. I do not pretend to follow all of his volts, jerks, sulks, balks, outbursts and jump-overs; but for all his roughness there remains with me the conviction that there is nothing meaningless in his book, not a line.⁴⁰

Thirty-four years later, Marianne Moore replied rather slyly that, 'the poet has a right to expect the reader, at least in a measure, to be able to complete the poetic statement; and Ezra Pound never spoils his effects by over-exposition.'⁴¹ Nevertheless, alongside the dig in the ribs is a sincere belief in what Pound is doing: both thought the technique which makes poetry hard to understand, and to talk about, was also essential to the artistic involvement of the reader. To the poets, modernist difficulty simply meant poetry and understanding could not be the same thing; if David Jones's *'In Parenthesis'* does not excite us before we have understood it, no commentary will reveal to us its secret', Eliot noted in his introduction to the poem.⁴² To the universities, that meant you had to prove your non-understanding at a very sophisticated level, calling it 'ambiguity' or 'tension', or for a later generation, 'aporia'.

Adorno's argument

Curiously, however, Larkin's sense of difficulty as cultural oppression is not unrelated to one of the foremost arguments *for* difficult art in the twentieth century by the Frankfurt School critic Theodor Adorno. Adorno began his career as a composer in Germany, a student of the atonal modernism of Schoenberg and Webern and a man acutely aware that this dissonant, international style would be banned under the totalitarian regime of the Nazi party and its desire to control all the kinds of allowable art. When he escaped to America in the 1930s, however, he claimed to find some of the same patterns of total control in capitalist culture, an 'administered society' which was as hostile to modernism as the Fascists. Borrowing some of Weber's analysis of modern disenchantment (discussed in [Chapter 1](#)), Adorno saw in liberal capitalism a

system in which nothing could be valued unless it could be identified, classified and put to use in the service of profit. Claiming to protect the freedom of the individual, this system could only really value *commodities*, things which could be sized up and exchanged. Despite its tireless promotion of the new and the unique, then, America's 'culture industry' was really pumping out an endless stream of identical, processed hits. Even classical music was packaged as emotional reassurance that to listen to it was to be truly cultured, rather than allowing its listeners to hear anything in it that acknowledged the disasters of modern life. So modernist art had to be hard work to appreciate in order to tell the truth; as Pound himself had said, 'Literature is not a commodity . . . it emphatically does not lie on a counter where it can be snatched up at once by a straw-hatted young man in a hurry.'⁴³ Adorno recognised that art was exchanged as a commodity like any other in the bourgeois world, but by rejecting harmony, beauty and comprehensible order, he thought it could offer some resistance to the role the culture industry allotted to art, a continuation-by-distraction from the workaday world of exploitation and violence. Williams saw the same logic in Pound's rejection of conventional beauty too:

Pound's 'faults' as a poet all center around his rancor against the malignant stupidity of a generation which polluted our rivers and would then, brightly, give ten or twenty or any imaginable number of millions of dollars as a fund toward the perpetuation of *Beauty* – in the form of a bequest to the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art.⁴⁴

To Adorno's ears, harmony and clarity had become the trademarks of the Disneyfied, administered society which could not tolerate anything or anyone which does not fit:

If today nothing is harmonious, this is because harmony was false from the beginning . . . the dubiousness of the ideal of a closed society applies equally to that of the closed artwork . . . in the ideal of harmony, art senses acquiescence to the administered world.⁴⁵

In other words, difficulty is one of art's *ethical* requirements, because it stops you mentally processing it with ready-made categories. Art has to contain something permanently enigmatic in order to remain uncapturable:

Artworks that unfold to contemplation and thought without any remainder are not artworks . . . every artwork is a picture puzzle, a puzzle to be solved, but this puzzle is constituted in such a fashion that it remains a vexation, the preestablished routing of its observer.⁴⁶

And Adorno adds that modernist difficulty forces the reader to wonder whether older art was that easy, either. Can one really oppose difficult modernist art to the easiness of Shakespeare's *King Lear* or Blake's *Milton*? 'The much derided incomprehensibility of hermetic artworks amounts to the admission of the enigmaticalness of all art.'⁴⁷ Difficult modernism simply emphasises what remains resistant in older works too; it arrests their fossilisation into triumphs of culture, and keeps them as present challenges to every age.

For Adorno, then, only difficult art preserves a remainder resistant to the threat of incorporation by a dominant system, desperate to neutralise and homogenise it. The fact that this also describes the situation of Jews in the Germany from which Adorno had escaped gave his account a tremendous ethical charge.⁴⁸ But the genocidal eradication of a minority is not necessarily the best model by which to understand mass culture's relationship with 'high' culture. For one thing, difficulty can be helpful for niche marketing; when it becomes associated with a particular artistic group or style, it helps to differentiate the product as intellectual luxury goods, rather than resisting commodification entirely.⁴⁹ For another, Adorno's either/or dynamic severely truncates what counts as resistant art. If modern art must always be the work of a difficult minority resistant to a militantly dumbed-down culture industry, then the two can never coalesce. But there is a great deal of high-quality modern art which is neither mindless corporate pap nor unremittingly difficult, and the price Adorno paid for maintaining consistency about modernist music was to remain deaf to Gershwin, Stravinsky or Duke Ellington, and to miss the resistances to corporate anaesthesia they also offered.

To be fair, Adorno did not insist that true art would always have to be difficult and modernist: modernism is as damaged by its divorce from popular art as popular art is from modernism, he thought, calling them 'torn halves of an integral freedom'. But then came the killer aside: 'to which however they do not add up'.⁵⁰ Culture will not be mended by the contemporary solution of having Schoenberg and Stevie Wonder side by side on your ipod: both are damaged goods, but the painfulness of Schoenberg's music recognises it. We must await a society where free individuals have a real common life to find art where beauty is not the sign of false harmonisation. Yet to describe culture as an affair of 'torn halves' again insists there is no middle. For all their differences of politics and culture, both Adorno and Larkin tend to treat pleasure and difficulty as if they were mutually exclusive and their accounts of art's social situation follow suit (poems are either for the few *or* for the many). Ironically, this makes difficulty all too easy to understand: the whole point of Steiner's third and fourth category, difficulty as multiple signification, was to make poetry a less binary way of thinking.

Difficulty and diversity

Difficulty has proved a two-edged weapon for modernist poetry. Meant to free poetic thinking from domination by the habitual or the accustomed, it often left work securely pigeonholed as 'difficult' and unread by all except in-groups who already know what to expect. Meant to create a new, free and active participation between poem and reader, it has been felt to be an unpoetic domination of the reader, an end to art as play and the beginning of art as work (though an educative purpose is inherent in Schiller's play from the start). Evading these tones of authority has been a central strategy for poets ever since, through painful self-exposure in Ginsberg or Lowell, for instance, or through techniques of casual chattiness in Frost, Auden or Larkin himself. This appearance of openness does not mean, of course, that an unmodernist confessional or conversational poem has any fewer designs on the reader than a difficult one. Difficult poems, in fact, may be unwelcome because they tell you upfront that they will not seduce or flatter you, though that can be another seduction in itself. But my suspicion is that people dislike difficult poetry less because of the difficulty itself than from the overtones of social failure it brings. There are many widely shared cultural activities which are difficult, baffling or exhausting but which are not thought to be elitist: learning to play the guitar or remembering Pokémon characters, say. Your social status will not be diminished by doing badly at these, although your credibility with six-year-olds may suffer. But difficult poetry rankles because at a deep level we still want to hold to Schiller's promise that art's high status as a democratic form requires it to be as inclusive as possible.

There is a final twist, however, to the tangled story of difficulty, exclusiveness and cultural reform. Few nowadays believe that difficulty in art is a route to a more democratic society. Difficulty seems so obviously the work of an elite clinging to prestige, while social togetherness will surely be better served by liking non-elite forms and the cultures behind them. As it happens, sociologists have tracked this significant change in artistic taste among well-off Americans over the course of the twentieth century.⁵¹ In Eliot's and Pound's time, appreciation of the fine arts meant listening to classical music and opera, not the musical forms of low-status or black Americans such as gospel or bluegrass. But high-status consumers today like many traditionally low-status forms, and cultural criticism has expanded to take genres like country and western or cowboy films as seriously as *The Cantos*. The snobbery of a hundred years ago does not apply to the modernist poets, of course; in fact, they are the vanguard of today's cultural omnivorousness, and much of their difficulty comes from trying to

include so *wide* a cultural range in a rapid-fire burst of allusions. But the real sting in the sociologists' tale is that today's omnivores are still an elite, for it is the poor and disadvantaged who listen to only one type of music or watch one type of television. If we pride ourselves on the diversity and inclusivity of the taste that can like Eliot and Eminem, we are still inheritors of modernists' culture-as-reform programme, only it is reform in the direction of breadth, diversity and equality. Though difficulty is no longer the means, diversity may be yet another cultural accomplishment which cannot be acquired without excluding someone.

Recommended Further Reading

Leonard Diepeveen, *The Difficulties of Modernism* (London: Routledge, 2002).

John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (University of Chicago Press, 2003).

Simon Jarvis, *Adorno: A Critical Introduction* (Oxford: Polity, 1998).

George Steiner, *On Difficulty, and Other Essays* (Oxford University Press, 1978).

Chapter 8

Inside and outside modernism

The changing cast of modernism	185
Inside and outside modernism	188
When modernism is impossible	191
Modernism and the left	197
When did modernism end?	214

The changing cast of modernism

The history of who matters to modernist poetry is shaped like an hour-glass. It begins wide, when no one was sure what this new movement would become, and its artists found common ground where they could. If you are only used to the selection of modernists in well-trimmed compilations, it is an eye-opening experience to follow the long list of now-forgotten contributors to the various Imagist anthologies, or to magazines like Alfred Kreymborg's *Others*. By the time of Marianne Moore's 1926 survey 'New Poetry since 1912', on the other hand, modernism as we know it is beginning to take shape. As she attempts to summarise the new direction poetry has taken, Moore puts Stevens, Loy, Pound, H. D., Williams and Eliot now well to the fore, though her radar has a still wider sweep, picking up well-known not-quite modernists such as Robert Frost and Carl Sandburg, and writers now almost forgotten such as Witter Bynner or Marjorie A. Sieffert.¹ It was when academic critics tried to put together the really distinctive features of 'modernism' in the 1930s and 1940s, however, that the range began to contract more sharply, and to centre on Eliot and Pound as the poets most alive to their time. Part of the reason for this intense focus was the sheer quality of their poetry, certainly. Another was the growing conservative turn in American Cold War culture, which was suspicious of the left-wing tendencies widespread in 1930s poetry, and ignored many poets with socialist commitments.² And a third was the story critics needed to tell about modernism to make it admirable in such a climate, which has been adroitly summarised as 'the legend of the free creative spirit at war

with the bourgeoisie.³ Modernism was a heroic revolution against the Romantic self-deceptions of middle-class taste, the story went, which wanted art to be soothing or decorative, but not to tell the truth about its own hypocritical values of 'civilisation'; values which the war or industrial degradation or aimless consumerism had shown to be bankrupt. So the 'men of 1914' were tellers of unwelcome truths, and their stylistic difficulty was the necessary result of being fully alive in a half-dead world. Unfortunately, this sidelined the poets who were not the 'men of 1914', or who had other enemies than middle-class taste, or other aims than heroic individual resistance.⁴ But the heroic story persisted, not least because of the subtle flattery it offered to the critics and their student readers. For it implied that working your way through the complexity of a modernist poem was an education in learning to think authentically and heroically, at the very time that 'modernism' was becoming an institution protected by the academy. It also suggested that the teacher helping his students see how the poem worked was closing the very gap between the modernist writer and the public which the poets had despaired of, making the university seminar or creative writing class a precious enclave of cultural unity. With so much culture at stake – but also so much culture on offer – it is hardly surprising that the poets whose writing seemed to reward the critics' model got the lion's share of attention.

Over the last thirty years, the story of the heroic individual has been comprehensively revised, and the Eliot-centred version of what modernism was has expanded outwards again. Frank Kermode's perception that Eliot's anti-Romantic stance was a smokescreen led many others to notice the deep continuities between his cultural programme and the generations before it, and made more overt Romantics like Yeats and Stevens essential. By dint of putting Pound centre-stage, Hugh Kenner's *The Pound Era* also opened new connections to the European avant-gardes, Williams and Zukofsky. Feminist critics pointed out that the story of the 'men of 1914' and their heroic triumph over insipid gentility had written out modernist women like H. D. or Mina Loy, and ignored the essential role women editors such as Harriet Monroe at *Poetry* (Chicago) or Jane Heap and Margaret Anderson at *The Little Review* played in shaping public taste for modernism in general.⁵ More historically minded critics were suspicious of the way that the 'New Critics', chief proponents of heroic individualism, tended to praise compressed modernist poetry for achieving a unique tension or balance of ideas and feelings, a complexity resistant to the one-sided, instrumentalist thinking of its time. But such praise meant thinking of poetic form as a freedom wrested from social pressure, rather than a defensive reaction to social pressure. Houston A. Baker, Jr., thought modernist abstraction had more to do with the closed politics of white elites than with resistance to homogenisation or holistic thinking:

One means of shoring up one's self under perceived threats of 'democratization' and a 'rising tide' of color is to resort to elitism – to adopt a style that refuses to represent anything other than the stylist's refusal to represent . . . Another strategy is to claim that one's artistic presentations and performances are quintessential renderings of the unrepresentable – human subconsciousness, for example, or primitively structural underpinnings of a putatively civilized mankind, or the simultaneity of a space-time continuum.⁶

If it could be shown that Eliot cultivated his complexity as a 'strategy' – a means to appear superior within a given cultural marketplace, rather than to free himself from it – then the question came to be about which other kinds of poetry were demoted by assuming him to be the top of the pyramid.⁷ For some, that meant questioning the priority of Eliot's and Pound's style of poetry at all. Baker's aim was to clear a space for poets of the Harlem Renaissance to get a hearing; Cary Nelson's *Repression and Recovery* argued that making them the ultimate standard of early-to-mid-twentieth-century poetry had been a covert means to squeeze other styles of working-class, African-American and left-wing poetry off the syllabus, and that our sense of 'modernism' should cover them all.⁸ On the other hand, poets and critics committed to contemporary experimental work looked back to neglected modernists for a democratic ethos uncontaminated by Fascist politics or mainstream orthodoxy, and found it in the European avant-gardes of the 1920s, or the anti-representational work of Stein, or the left-wing modernism of the Objectivists.⁹ All this has dramatically expanded what 'modernism' means; instead of letting one or two poets define an era, surveys of the modernist *period* are now a patchwork of different poets, styles and groupings around places and publications. All of them are linked, many of them overlap, but none of them has priority, as if poetic history itself resembled the non-linear structure of one of Eliot's poems.

But the other great weakness of heroic-individual modernism was how much of Eliot it sidelined as well. Assuming modern poetry's mission was to create a balanced whole opposed to contemporary civilisation's 'immense panorama of futility and anarchy', Eliot's early supporters were unwilling to concede how much he sought such balance in the poem's dynamic relationship *with* its society.¹⁰ His poet is both shaper and shaped, the prophet and the medium, the scholar and the journalist; his free verse scorns clockwork and the 'dead stroke of nine', but it also flows with the crowd over London Bridge and cracks apart with the ruins of post-war Europe. Neither artist nor critic, he declared flatly in 1932, can 'isolate the permanent "Beauty" of the work of art from its time and place'.¹¹ In finding forms that fuse subjects acting and objects acted upon, the poet's mind and the world it lives in, Eliot was part of a decisive outward shift in modernist poetry. Sampling, looping and

reassembling documents, like Rukeyser or Zukofsky, mixes the poet's creative intentions with the unpoetic minds of others, or with the habits of entire cultures. Avant-gardist procedures cultivate co-creation between artists and their audience, while the occult metaphysics of a Yeats and the speculative philosophy of Wallace Stevens are both ways to demonstrate how imagination partly creates the reality it apparently comments on. Like Marianne Moore's titles which turn out to be the first word of the poem itself, or Williams's poems incorporating the interruptions of the moment, a good deal of modernist technique makes poetry from scenarios in which the non-poetic life which apparently frames it is brought into a poetic relation with the poem – which is why it frequently does not look like poetry at all. The modernist interest in 'primitive' cultures which do not split their art from their social life, or the spiritual reservoir of a collective unconscious seeping into all our dreams, come from the same desire. 'DADA', recalled Tristan Tzara in later years, tried to recreate 'the art of primitive peoples, with its overlap of social and religious functions, [which] appeared as the direct expression of their life.'¹²

Paradoxically, this move outwards grows from the same doctrine of organic form which the New Critics used to separate Eliot from his world. Organic form means form which grows from the nature of the material, and it is the basis of free verse. If arrangements and sound-patterns are *really* to interact with the meaning, though, what is 'within' the poem must itself not be pre-assembled as intellectual data before it goes 'in' either. Automatic writing, found material, syllabics or procedural poetics are all ways to stop this happening. But as the avant-garde saw first, if the poem is to have a truly organic relation between its meanings and their arrangement, you cannot stop with the poet's mind, for *all* the things which act as formal 'frames' to the poem's meaning need to be brought into its play. Hence experiments making the visual look of the poem on the page part of what it says (as with Marinetti, e. e. cummings and Concrete Poetry); with books whose design is part of the poem (like Cendrars's *Prose du Transsibérien* or Gael Turnbull's experiments with *Migrant*); with audience participation; and, of course, with the syntax and fragmentation devices that refuse the reader any coordinated, distanced mental perspective. To be organic, the poem must have nothing *outside* it which shapes it. Withdrawal is one way, endless expansion is another.

Inside and outside modernism

If modernist 'form' signifies a more intricate exchange between poet and world than ordinary syntax allows, however, this may also be why so many important modern poets did not adopt it wholesale. Fusing the poet's voice and other

people's, or making intentions indistinguishable from lucky discoveries *en route*, is meant to weld design and lived process into an organic unity. But some poets thought that the experimental techniques for rediscovering this balance of forces were themselves contributing to an imbalanced relation with the reader and, intentionally or not, had become the sign of bullying, showing off or just self-consciousness. W. H. Auden moved from his zany diagnosis of English psycho-sexual-financial corruption in *The Orators* (including diaries and diagrams) to the torch-songs and ballads of the late 1930s because, he felt, his earlier outlook and technique were more interested in attacking the enemy than encouraging democracy or fellow-feeling.¹³ In an early review of the Imagists, Robert Frost's friend Edward Thomas remarked that their efforts to remove so much clutter and ornament from their verse had the unwanted side-effect of drawing attention away from what they were writing about and focusing it on their difference from everyone else: the book 'sticks out of the crowd like a tall marble monument', he commented, 'whether it is real marble is unimportant except to posterity; the point is that it is conspicuous'.¹⁴ Imagist verse wanted everything in it to look carefully chosen, but Thomas was preoccupied by the unpredictable mesh of chance and circumstance which was leading him to the trenches, and so preferred sentences that unemphatically meander across lines and verses to give the feel of someone thinking and talking as he goes, and the forms coming together by accident.

Thomas's and Frost's experiments in capturing the tones of a speaking voice in an unassuming, conversational style encouraged a good number of later twentieth-century poets away from modernist verse. But it is important to add that 'voice' for both Thomas and Frost meant a dynamic relation with one's audience rather than a return to simplicity. When he first came to live in England in 1913, Frost suggested that 'the living part of a poem is the intonation entangled somehow in the syntax idiom and meaning of a sentence', and this living part 'is only there for those who have heard it previously in conversation'.¹⁵ Poems should have the sound of someone talking because conversations are dramatic situations, with tension, reaction and uncertain outcomes that stop the listener bracketing poetry as high and noble thoughts. 'Everything written . . . is drama or nothing', he would remark later, and that drama includes the reader:

I should like to be so subtle at this game as to seem to the casual person altogether obvious. The casual person would assume that I meant nothing or else that I came near enough meaning something he was familiar with to mean it for all practical purposes. Well well well.¹⁶

As famous an aphorism as 'Good fences make good neighbors' ('Mending Wall') is a provocation to the reader too: realising the aphorism isn't going

to let you find out which way to take it (wisdom? irritating stubbornness?) is to find yourself in the same edgy situation as Frost's wall-mending farmer to his neighbour, veering between amusement and annoyance that he says what he says and can't be reasoned with. By making the shifting boundaries between poem and reader part of what the internal drama is commenting on, Frost's many poems about undecidable conflicts sometimes come close to a modernism like that of Wallace Stevens. His objections to modernism were not because it refused clear meanings, or because it wasn't optimistic enough, but because its complexity had slackened the 'repartee' essential to lyric.¹⁷ Free verse, he was fond of saying, was like playing tennis with the net down, and the metaphor was not accidental:

Poetry is play. Even King Lear is called 'a play', isn't it? I'd even rather have you think of it as a sport. For instance, like football – than as some kind of academic solemnity.¹⁸

'Play' suggests that Frost isn't a million miles from art as the dynamic, unfinished balance of forces; it was more the methods than the aims of modernist style which he felt were mistaken.¹⁹

As the example of Frost and Thomas suggests, modernism did not require a membership card for its poets, and many other twentieth-century poets owe something to its aesthetics without adopting Eliot's or Pound's style wholesale. Dylan Thomas, for instance, was an avid reader of Eugene Jolas's *transition*, which introduced Surrealism and other continental avant-gardisms (including parts of *Finnegans Wake*) to English-speaking readers. Thomas's poetry shows surreal transitions of imagery, but he did not experiment with their procedures, and insisted to interviewers that he carefully designed everything in his work, a claim which his multiple drafts back up.²⁰ D. H. Lawrence is another case; his free-verse poems have the 'inconclusiveness, immediacy, the quality of life itself' that he admired in Whitman and the Imagists, but their sensuous present involves a self-narrating style which draws the attention back to the poet's continual readjustments of what he sees and feels. 'Elemental', for example, says baldly that 'I wish men would get back their balance among the elements / And be a bit more fiery, as incapable of telling lies / As fire is', and yet the rather whiney way it says it ('a bit more') is just as unelemental. When these thoughts become part of the dramatic movement of the poem, as when 'Snake' stretches and slows its lines to suggest the poet's horrified, hypnotised fascination with the snake's gliding movement in and out of holes, and all the subconscious and mythic connotations of sex, defecation and burial it awakes in him, Lawrence's style really comes into its own. But unlike Eliot or Pound, such running commentary is never impersonal or allusive and Lawrence's greatest impact on modernist poetry would really come as a cultural guru for the Olson

generation. One could make an enormously long list of poets with one foot in modernism and one foot outside it: Eliot's wayward protégé George Barker, together with Weldon Kees, Laura Riding, Louise Bogan and Auden himself would all be prime candidates. But the very existence of so many poets with modernist aspects to them is also testimony to modernism's dominance of the mid-century poetic terrain. As Basil Bunting said of Pound's *Cantos*, there they are, like the Alps, and 'you will have to go a long way round / if you want to avoid them'.²¹

When modernism is impossible

For some twentieth-century poets, however, not adopting modernist style reflected a political situation as much as an individual choice. For the more the poet uses the uncertain and dispersed agencies of modernist syntax, the less she can mark a division of herself from her circumstances, and the more she moves away from set genres or forms, the less she is able to employ terms in which to be recognised at all. Eliot and Pound felt that such freedom from the 'too well pigeonholed' was a necessity for modern art.²² But for African-American poets addressing a culture which refused to believe they were properly human, using inherited forms of high culture drew attention to the disparity between the 'universal' such forms represented and the lack of recognition they actually enjoyed, culturally or at the ballot box. For the War Poets struggling to hang on to their sanity, recognition and self-definition were fundamental imaginative needs, and so their syntax also tends to preserve a much clearer distance between the I and the world which threatens it. For left-wing writers, poetry whose modes of address seemed remote from the ordinary world could never really help those struggling for a living. To all these situations, modernism would take some time to find an answer.

Harlem Renaissance

In her introduction to *Tendencies in Modernist Poetry* (1917), Amy Lowell claimed the growing surge of Imagist-style free verse in America stemmed from a renewed sense of national and cosmic unity, not the individualism she had earlier stressed in her anthology series *Some Imagist Poets*. In 'this country of enormous spaces and heterogeneous population', modern poets 'see in the universe a huge symbol', she claimed, and they now understand 'nature is not now something separate from man, man and nature are recognized as part of a whole, man being a part of nature, and all falling into a place in a vast plan'.²³ This fusion of the individual poet and the 'cosmic whole' is a long-standing theme in American poetry, going back to Emerson and

continuing through Whitman. But precisely because the appeal to ‘nature’ and the ‘universe’ erases all social differences, it also became an implausible gesture for poets whose every experience has reinforced those differences, and who must always be conscious of representing their race to white readers who already think they are universal. Consequently, the fundamental conflict about form between the poets of the ‘Harlem Renaissance’ was not about free verse or syntactic coherence, but about what kind of poetry would give African-American writers the respect they deserved, a difference Langston Hughes’s changing position perhaps illustrates. His 1925 ‘America’ is a Whitmanesque free-verse call to recognise the common struggle in tones which Amy Lowell might have approved of:

Who am I?
 I am the ghetto child,
 I am the dark baby,
 I am you
 And the blond tomorrow
 And yet
 I am my one sole self,
 America seeking the stars.²⁴

The prophetic tones and abrupt line-breaks lend a heavy sincerity to their pauses for impact. But even as he wrote it, Hughes began to fear that even this poem was a tacit bid for white approval, and that the new generation of educated African-American writers like himself, collectively known as ‘Harlem’, were the only members of the audience taking it seriously. ‘The mountain standing in the way of any true Negro art in America’, he wrote in ‘The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain’, published the same year, is black artists’ secret desire ‘to be as little Negro and as much American as possible’.²⁵ Desperate for respectability, they ape the approved forms of white gentility, and ignore the real culture of spirituals, blues or the snap and crackle of street talk; the ‘common people’, he adds, ‘furnish a wealth of colorful, distinctive material in the face of American standardizations’.²⁶ It is a salvo aimed partly at his immediate Harlem rivals – Countee Cullen, whose urbane sonnets and mellifluous vocabulary rather smooth over his sentiments of protest, and Claude McKay, whose diction is as cumbersome and ornate as his sentiments are revolutionary. But as the unfortunate ‘colorful’ betrays, it is also aimed at his own sense of already being cut off, evident in his Whitmanism. Like that of his contemporary Sterling Brown, Hughes’s verse then turned more to blues forms, vernacular speech-patterns and direct argument in his quest to dramatise racist injustice. To Cullen, on the other hand, ‘nebulous atavistic yearnings towards an African

inheritance' were misplaced, and it was the 'rich background of English and American poetry' which would be the best defence against pandering to black *and* white desires for authentically 'primitive' poetry.²⁷ This stand-off between 'white' and 'black' cultures did produce some sparky verse playing both audiences' desires off each other with the black poet an unwilling creation of both, as with Hughes's 'Theme for English B' or Gwendolyn Brooks's games with the European art-word 'baroque' to describe her zoot-suited anti-hero in the 'Ballad of Satin-Legs Smith'. But it also confirmed a division that (with the odd exception like Jean Toomer) would become pervasive in mid-twentieth-century American verse, between black poetry rooted in 'authentic' speech and a white modernism experimenting with artifice and cultural pick-and-mix.

Ironically, the modernists had long been fascinated with Harlem or Africa as cultural fantasy or from a more anthropological interest in rituals. But as Michael North remarks, white modernist writing 'proved ill prepared to include within its conception of the new American writing any examples that actually stretched the old categories of race and identity'.²⁸ That deadlock lies behind the subtle reversal of Zora Neale Hurston's article on the 'Characteristics of Negro Expression', written for Nancy Cunard's huge *Negro Anthology*, a compendium of articles on African-American life, African art and the cultural politics of global emancipation which includes contributions by William Carlos Williams, French Surrealists and translations by a young Samuel Beckett. On the surface, Hurston's piece is an anthropologist's explanation of black habits of thought and speech to the volume's wealthy, artistic and liberal peruser. But in the company of the white avant-gardes, it also quietly replies to the unasked question – why is there so little black modernist art? – by choosing terms which suggest black folk culture is *already* what the avant-garde was seeking. From dancing to furniture arrangement, Hurston claims, black culture prefers the asymmetrical and angular; it pursues originality by recycling everything for its own use; its 'absence of the concept of privacy' overrides individual boundaries of thought and feeling, and the poses and retorts of its street life and brothels already *are* a theatre where artist and audience are one.

It wasn't until Melvin B. Tolson's remarkable *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia* (1953) that African-American verse really took on the dizzying cross-cultural allusions and montage perspectives of modernism, because for Tolson, too, Liberia already was a modernist state. Founded as a nation for freed slaves, Tolson saw its chequered history as an 'imperial quilt' in which the experience of empire's domination across different histories and times could be cut up and stitched together into the cosmopolitan Afro-nationalism Tolson had first

glimpsed in Harlem, a process of rejuvenation the poem calls a ‘Black Lazarus risen from White Man’s grave’.²⁹ The poem’s extensive references and footnotes are a retort both to vernacular blackness and to Eliot’s interest in the ‘mind of Europe’, telling in seven sections the tangled history of the colonial attitudes that have made Liberia. Tolson’s satire on the fear of democracy among the colonialists, on the other hand, has an eye on Pound in its compressed multiculturalism:

Today the mass,
 The Beast with a Maginot line in its Brain,
 the staircase Avengers of based alloy
 the vile canaille – Gorii! – the Bastard-rasse,
 the uomo qualyque, the hoi barbaroi,
 the raya in the *Oeil de Boeuf*,
 the *vsechelovek*, the descamisados, the hoi polloi,
 the Raw from the Coliseum of the Cooked,
 Il Duce’s Whore, Vardaman’s Hound –
 unparadised nobodies with maps of Nowhere
 ride the merry-go-round.

Tolson’s notes translate most of these abusive terms for ‘the people’ across different cultures, and through their covert links suggest the common metaphors at work in anti-democratic and racist thinking: ‘Beast’ connects to ‘raw’, to ‘raya’ meaning ‘cattle’ and to ‘gorii’, Hannibal’s term for Liberian aborigines, which becomes the word ‘gorilla’. As the strict rhymes of this stanza suggest, though, Tolson is always a rather didactic poet: the poem claims Liberia’s traditional travelling poet-singers, the *griots*, form an ‘avant garde in oral literature’ by being ‘living encyclopedias’, whose dense layers of allusion apparently challenge the political simple-mindedness of the courts they sang to.³⁰ But Tolson is also self-satirising about writing such a ferociously erudite and allusive poem about a country with near-total illiteracy: ‘all cultures’, he notes, eventually ‘castle divorcee Art in a blue-blood moat’ and ‘write Culture’s epitaph in *Notes upstairs / O Cordon Sanitaire, / thy brain’s tapeworm, extract, thy eyeball’s mote!*’³¹ Wise to the way his own technique of ‘extracts’ and ‘notes’ blinds its erudite author to the living culture it celebrates – Tolson never visited Liberia, and was poet laureate at a distance – the poem finishes with another tremendous irony. ‘Liberia reaches her destination’, say its notes, as the poem imagines in the syrupy tones of advertorials the smooth progress of the Futurafrique limousine (running on Firestone tires, no doubt) as it moves smoothly round the ‘soapy blue harbor crossroads of Waldorf Astorias at anchor’ and ‘escalades the Mount Sinai of Tubman University, the vistas of

which bloom with coeds from seven times seven lands'.³² The limousine then metamorphoses into the United Nations Limited aeroplane, which, 'stream-phrased and air-chamoised and sponge-cushioned, telescopes the polygenetic metropolises polychromatic between Casablanca and Mafeking, Freetown and Addis Ababa!'³³ Watching it glide noiselessly over the skulls of 'pygmy and Britisher, Boer and Arab', Tolson accurately limns the diplomatic elites' dream that Africa's past will be easily erased in the name of progress, a dream whose legacy is the continent's post-Independence architecture of modernist flyovers and towerblocks which mostly leave ordinary people in the shantytowns below. It's as if Tolson doesn't quite believe his own dreams of a reconciliation between the indigenous and the international, a struggle which would also be visible in reactions to the work of Christopher Okigbo, the Nigerian modernist whose *Heavensgate* (1962) melds real Igbo ritual with the techniques of Pound and Yeats.³⁴

War poetry

As I suggested in [Chapter 1](#), modernist artistic form is saturated with the derangements of First-World-War experience. Yet the poetry of serving soldiers such as Wilfred Owen, Isaac Rosenberg or Siegfried does not sound particularly modernist. It sometimes experiments with free forms (as with Sassoon's 'Repression of War Experience' or Owen's 'Insensibility') and Owen once compared his experiments with 'what the advanced Composers are doing in music', but it tends to buckle known forms with uncontainable material rather than break them entirely.³⁵ It's sometimes said that Owen and Sassoon are a transition to a modernism which really flowered later, as if they would have been modernists if they could. But their adherence to sonnets and quatrains makes sense in its own terms as a means to mark themselves out from the omnivorous, threatening trauma of their memories. For Eliot's idea that the progress of the artist is a 'continual self-sacrifice' draws on a religious-military metaphor whose consequences Owen had been really living out in the trenches, and his aim was less impersonality than simply staying alive and sane.³⁶ In that sense, we might see that Owen's hyper-formal pararhyme and intensely wrought sound textures are a way to keep an inner distance from the war while being hypnotically drawn back to it, sensitive and self-protective at the same time.

Modernist style and war poetry came together more successfully when the pressures of survival were less immediate. David Jones's memoir *In Parenthesis* (1937) assimilates Eliot's *The Waste Land* and returns it, in a way Eliot himself found deeply moving, to one of the primal roots of its horror, the Western

Front. Jones's preface refuses to separate the soldiers' experience, the mythic terrain of Arthur's knights and the forms of Eliot's poetry:

I think the day by day in the Waste Land, the sudden violences and the long stillnesses, the sharp contours and unformed voids of that mysterious existence, profoundly affected the imaginations of those who suffered it. It was a place of enchantment. It is perhaps best described in Malory, book iv, chapter 15 – that landscape spoke 'with a grimly voice'.³⁷

Beginning in prose, its narrative gradually rises into a fusion of cockney voices, mythic patterns and phrases from ancient Welsh and medieval poets as it moves towards the climax of the botched attack on Mametz Wood. Here, modernist style mimes the attack's panicky confusion, as comrades vanish, and unknown voices and commands intrude without warning. At the same time, *In Parenthesis* is constantly stitching the experiences of 1916 into a densely woven tapestry of other battles. Counting down the agonised wait for an attack signal, Jones thinks of his platoon lying in their chalk cleft as Vikings in the gunwales of their longship, faces only a plank's width from destruction, bodies soaked in their own bilge-water. When one of Jones's mates is killed, the ship image metamorphoses:

The First Field Dressing is as futile as frantic seaman's shift bunged to stoved bulwark, so soon the darking flood percolates and he dies in your arms.

And get back to that digging can't yer—
this aint a bloody Wake

for those dead, who soon will have their dead
for burial clods heaped over.

Nor time for halsing
nor to clip green wounds
nor weeping Maries bringing anointments [. . .]

No one sings: Lully, lully
for the mate whose blood runs down.³⁸

'Those dead' could be 'those dead over there', or 'those who are dead', and the confusion allows the suggestion that those frantically digging the foxhole or the grave – it is the same thing – are to be buried themselves, mentally or physically as the next shell hits. Unable to mourn, the soldiers also deny a feminine role to themselves as the ladies who 'halse' (embrace) their knights in Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*, Mary weeping for Christ or the mothers of Bethlehem who cry 'Lully' in the Coventry Carol lamenting the infants massacred by Herod, and so prolong the sexually traumatising, infertile effects of the war within their own psyches as well as in the landscape. Jones saw art as a kind of gathering-in of

public reason condemned modernism to an asocial and unrealistic ‘trance’ of self-protective, inward-looking technique:

We think it is entirely true that great poetry will never be written by anyone who has spent his life burrowing in an extensive and complicated literature . . . it will be written by persons who are innocent of the smell of old books . . . the smoke and glory of living reality in his own time: let him learn to love that.⁴⁵

Quite what ‘real experience’ was Eastman never defined, but as the Depression hit, and the right-wing politics of Yeats and Eliot grew more obvious, the irony of experimenting with new artistic freedoms in an exploitative culture became acute for leftists. Only ‘when the workers are free, and only then, can we have real culture and real civilisation’, claims the introduction to the *Anthology of Revolutionary Poetry*, and so in order to achieve real freedom, poetry had to become a direct means for their emancipation.⁴⁶ This did not imply leftist poetry could only be hymns of revolutionary sentiment: Sol Funaroff’s ode ‘What The Thunder Said: A Fire Sermon’ uses Eliot’s paratactic forms to proclaim that the rumblings in the clouds were actually ‘The Communards . . . storming heaven’, while John Beeching’s uninflected, unpunctuated free verse catches the indifference of the factory system to its workers.⁴⁷ But many modernists felt that poetry could not adapt its uniqueness to an external cause without ceasing to be poetry, and the conflict only hardened when Eastman’s protégé Mike Gold issued a manifesto for a new ‘proletarian realism’ for his revived *New Masses*. This realism would deal ‘with the real conflicts of men and women who work for a living’ and have ‘nothing to do with the sickly mental states of the idle Bohemians’, epitomised by ‘Proust, master-masturbator’, or his successors the Surrealists.⁴⁸ Committed writing required:

As few words as possible. We are not interested in the verbal acrobats – this is only another form for bourgeois idleness . . . swift action, clear form, the direct line, cinema in words.⁴⁹

Gold’s more Trotskyite-anarchist rivals at *Partisan Review* felt that experimental style and socialist commitment could be reconciled in attacks on the System. It supported Kenneth Fearing’s satires on the comic-strip ambitions capitalism allows its hard-working salaryman:

And wow he died as he lived wow he
going whop to the office and blooie home to sleep and
biff got married and bam had children and oof got
fired
zowie did he live and zowie did he die (‘Dirge’)

The sudden silence round ‘fired’ emphasises where the fantasy of righteous superheroes dealing out firm-fisted thwackings meets the unheroic, uncompensated violence of capitalist economies. *Partisan Review* also backed e. e. cummings’s typographical pyrotechnics, with their lower-case child-like ‘I’, gasping half-brackets and displaced adjectives manifesting all the simultaneous feelings divorced by the ‘soggy nouns whose agglomeration constitutes the mechanism of Normality’.⁵⁰

Little
 ness be
 (ing)
 comes ex
 -pert-
 Ly expand:grO
 w
 i
 ?n
 g
 Is poet iS
 (childlost
 so;ul
)foundclown a
 -live a
 ,bird⁵¹

But Cummings’s overriding presumption of his own innocence grated on other left-wing consciences, and Gold’s basic opposition of bourgeois subjectivity to leftist ‘objective’ writing remained firmly in place for many modernists coming to poetry in the 1930s.

Documentary modernism

One answer was to turn to the anti-subjective form of the documentary itself. Pound, Moore and Williams had already incorporated non-poetic material into their writing, and Gold himself appealed for ‘worker correspondents’ to provide poetic testimony to *New Masses*, though he usually had to edit out their rhetorical flourishes to achieve a suitably plain style.⁵² From here it was a short step for Charles Reznikoff to assemble an entire prose-poem from the law reports that he’d seen as a lawyer in training. *Testimony* aimed to tell the story of American oppression, ‘not from the standpoint of an individual, as in diaries, nor merely from the angle of the unusual, as in newspapers, but from

every standpoint, the author's hand evident only in the editorial selection, rather than the interpretation of its series of snapshots.⁵³ While Surrealism would eventually find fulfilment of its revolutionary aims in Aimé Césaire or Pablo Neruda more than the English-language modernists, it did play a part in the anti-subjective Mass Observation experiments of Charles Madge and Tom Harrison. A junior member of Herbert Read's English surrealist group, Madge came into his own with the idea of recruiting a nationwide network of observers who would report objectively on the behaviour they witnessed, wherever they were, at key points in the national calendar. He claimed the resulting reports, *May 12th* (1937) and *Britain by Mass Observation* (1939) as a resource for sociologists, but methodologically their unemphatic and bizarre juxtapositions of perspective, events, emotions and even dreams make more sense as an experiment in collective automatic poetry, making the entire nation appear as Eliot's 'simultaneous present'. While claiming the data for science, Madge admitted:

Poetically, the statements are also useful. They produce a poetry which is not, as at present, restricted to a handful of esoteric performers. The immediate effect of Mass-Observation is to de-value considerably the status of the 'poet'. It makes the term 'poet' apply, not to his performance, but to his profession, like 'footballer' . . . The process of observing raises him from subjectivity to objectivity. What has become unnoticed through familiarity is raised into consciousness again.⁵⁴

Perhaps the most sophisticated documentary poem, however, is Muriel Rukeyser's 'The Book of the Dead' (1938), which fuses modernist lyric with witness transcripts from one of America's worst industrial injury cases to bring home how much our clean, civilised comfort relies on hidden exploitation. In 1930, the New Kanawha Power Company, a shell company for Union Carbide, drove a tunnel underneath Gauley mountain, West Virginia, to provide water for a hydroelectric power scheme and also extract valuable quantities of silica from the rocks to make glass. Relying on desperate, largely black, imported labour rather than unionised local coal-miners, the company exposed inexperienced tunnellers to lethal amounts of dust, causing slow asphyxiation by silicosis after the project ended. Rather than simply rely on the pathos of the witnesses' testimony in the subsequent congressional hearings, however, Rukeyser interweaves their accounts with reflections on the neutrality of documentary itself. 'Gauley Bridge' reads at first like flat, prosy observation of the poor little town close to the miner's camp, until you realise the amount of glass at work:

The bus station and the great pale buses stopping for food;
April-glass-tinted, the yellow-aproned waitress;
coast-to-coast schedule on the plateglass window.

The man on the street and the camera eye
he leaves the doctor's office, slammed door, doom,
any town looks like this one-street town.

Glass, wood and naked eye: the movie-house
closed for the afternoon frames posters streaked with rain . . .

Not just Gauley Bridge, but the imaginary camera and the documentary ideal of the poem's style, depend on glass dug by men like these. A later poem called 'The Dam' has the poet hypnotised by the continuous power provided by falling water, her images flowing, like the syntax, into two images for documentary, the photograph and the bird's-eye view:

Rivers are turning inside their mountain
streams line the stone, rest at the overflow
lake and in lines of pliant color lie.
Blessing of this innumerable silver,
printed in silver, images of stone
walk on a screen of falling water
in film-silver in continual change
recurring colored, plunging with the wave.

Constellations of light, abundance of many rivers.
The sheeted island cities, the white surf filling west . . .

This 'perfect fluid, having no age nor hours' later connects with the endless flows of capital in rising Union Carbide stocks (whose stock-market figures are reprinted directly in the poem) and images of the smoothly sliding blank glass windows of the company limousines. Apparently frictionless corporate power, and the watery metaphors of capital 'liquidity' on which Wall Street's values rely, actually depend on the physical reality of the dam, and the dead and dying men who made it flow. But as the poet gazes hypnotised by the power of falling water, the lyrical images, the emotions they stir and the means she will use to represent their role in the national life are also inseparable from their labour. There is no inner realm independent of material life, and the poet will be political when she shows how they all connect. 'I don't know what political is', Rukeyser once remarked, 'it seems to me it's the thick of life . . . and it's the references and associations of life . . . I think it means the network of our lives, the ways in which we depend on one another and love and hate each other.'⁵⁵

Zukofsky and the Objectivists

Louis Zukofsky's response was rather different. Brought up on the same street as Mike Gold in New York's overcrowded Yiddish-speaking Lower East Side, he shared Gold's distaste for the escapist and subjectivist tendencies of Surrealist verse. His solution, however, was to find new conjunctions between left-wing 'objectivity' and the construction of modernist poetic forms themselves. Zukofsky moved far beyond his parents' social world by gaining a scholarship to Columbia, where he was electrified when he encountered Pound's and Eliot's work. Aged 22, he wrote his first major poem, 'Poem beginning "The"' (1926) which splices together quotations and references from a self-chosen canon of recent modernism, Shakespeare, Heine and Yiddish authors to ask that other poem beginning 'The' – *The Waste Land* – why it was so pessimistic about the spiritual health of contemporary culture, when its own method opened so many doors for people like himself.⁵⁶ *The Waste Land* discreetly numbered every five lines; loudly putting its numbers at the beginning of every line, Zukofsky's poem announces itself as another instantly canonical work, out-Elioting Eliot's rapid takeover of poetry in the name of 'tradition', and making its scholarly apparatus already part of the texture of the poem. As you might expect from an upstart from the wrong side of town, 'Poem' has a certain defensiveness: 'not by art have we lived', the first section ends doubtfully, echoing Pound's jibes about bad art and false values, and expressing some anxiety about the perceived cultural myopia of his own Jewish background. But then his lengthy quotations from Yiddish poetry or canonical representations of Jews (Heine's lyrics, Shylock, a sly allusion to Eliot's anti-Semitic 'Burbank with a Baedeker') all give the phrase another, ironical slant. Jewish people have not been allowed to live at all in so much art about them, and the fact that his own poem can say so through a series of grafted-in excerpts suggests that Eliot's fragmentary style and its sense of universal catastrophe were more naturally the province of uprooted immigrants than of the Eurocentric, Catholic tradition Eliot was hoping for. *The Waste Land* ends with fragments 'shored against my ruin'; Zukofsky with an adaptation of Yehoash's vigorous and optimistic Yiddish poem 'On the Ruins', as if to emphasise that Eliot's tradition had no copyright on ruin or what it meant for modern culture.⁵⁷

Zukofsky sent Pound a copy and soon became a friend and an important American contact for the elder poet, who had increasingly buried himself away in Rapallo, Italy, to compose *The Cantos*. As well as publishing the poem in *The Exile*, Pound pushed the editor of *Poetry*, Harriet Monroe, to give Zukofsky a whole issue of the magazine to fill with new poets he liked. Eventually she agreed, and the 'Objectivist' issue came out in 1931, followed by

An “Objectivists” *Anthology* in 1932. The issue included Zukofsky’s ‘Sincerity and Objectification’, a statement of now legendary difficulty which few of the anthologised poets agreed with and which Zukofsky rather regretted writing, though its terms became touchstones for later friendly disagreements. The first complication of ‘Objectivist’ is that it did not just mean what it has come to mean now, a small group of left-wing modernists including George Oppen, Basil Bunting, Carl Rakosi, Charles Reznikoff and, later, Lorine Niedecker. In Zukofsky’s introduction, ‘Program: “Objectivists” 1931’, ‘Objectivist’ sums up a general direction of modernist poetry Zukofsky had found in Marianne Moore, Wallace Stevens, Eliot, Pound and William Carlos Williams, as well as in his friends like Reznikoff.⁵⁸ The second problem was that the ‘Objectivist’ quality he detected in this older generation’s work did not mean a straightforward way of seeing things objectively, either. The term had to solve the problem which had preoccupied Zukofsky since conceiving the first movement of “A”, the poem which would become his lifetime’s work: how do the social and formal dimensions of art intersect? “A”-1 wonders about the difference between the first performance of Bach’s St Matthew Passion at Easter in 1729, where a local congregation heard music dramatising their common faith, and the Easter performance at Carnegie Hall in 1928, in a secularised, urban milieu where the music signifies membership of a snobbish high culture remote from the honking car horns and unemployment on the streets. It’s not that Bach himself has become outdated – sections of the libretto about Jesus’s all-night vigil gain new relevance by being juxtaposed with New York’s tired nightshift workers – but it’s a question of how Bach’s beautiful harmonies and rhythms can pulsate in the poet’s bloodstream, and yet also move with, against or into the traffic-stream. ‘Objectivist’, then, twists between the Marxist demand for art to be part of social life and Zukofsky’s sense that it also had to be a form in its own right. Correspondingly, Zukofsky’s definition of the word focuses as much on the functioning of the good poem as its degree of social realism. The objective poem is a lens ‘*bringing the rays from an object to a focus*’, but it is also itself ‘*that which is aimed at*’, a ‘*Desire for what is objectively perfect*’ and, finally, ‘*inextricably the direction of historic and contemporary particulars*’.⁵⁹ The poem, that is, focuses historical reality and is its culmination; it is where the thing aimed at and the manner of its aiming are one. This makes some sense of Zukofsky’s rather opaque tests for recognising ‘sincerity’ and ‘objectification’. In a sincere poem, ‘shapes appear concomitants of word combinations, precursors of (if there is continuance) completed sound or structure, melody or form’.⁶⁰ Feeling a poem’s sincerity means feeling how it lives with the things it senses, being allowed to find its own form, rather than fitting things to a template: seeing the poet’s mind being opened to new insights and ways of perception by the

words themselves. ‘Objectification’ is where the reader joins in this process of discovery, supplying a feeling of ‘rested totality’ to the writing as her mind engages with the poem now in the world.⁶¹ The objectivist nature of the poem isn’t defined by the objects it describes, then, nor in its formal polish as a discrete object. Objectivism is where the poem is itself an ‘object in process’ and what its readers sense is ‘the poem as a job’, *working* its material to make ‘everything aptly, perfectly, belonging within, one with, a context’.⁶²

Zukofsky would expand the idea in ‘“Mantis,” An Interpretation’, his superb poem on the making of his own sestina, ‘Mantis’. Originally, ‘Mantis’ had begun in a free-verse image of bumping into a stray mantis on the subway, and suddenly thinking of the blind struggles of the city’s poor, buffeted by alien cross-winds and never finding any green place in which to land. It became a sestina not because Zukofsky wanted to adorn or complicate the mantis, but because the process of him thinking (‘is this too strained an image?’; ‘can this form really be appropriate to the poor?’), and then feeling the back-and-forth of those thoughts, suggested to him that his thought’s ‘torsion / is really a sestina’. The form’s turns and returns around the same phrases grow of their own accord from the thoughts of the poet about the mantis, reading, testing and puzzling themselves, and then become one movement with the insect bobbing to and fro and the hapless, baffled poor:

The mantis, then
Is a small incident of one’s physical vision
Which is the poor’s helplessness
The poor’s separateness
Bringing self-disgust

The syntax blurs whether the self-disgust is the feeling of the poor about themselves or whether it is the poet’s emotional reaction, stung by the helplessness of his own vision and the difference between that poem and the poor themselves. But as a form which makes the movement of the mantis, the poor and himself into one thing, the sestina is not an unreal or show-off imposition on the material. Music itself, in fact, means a kind of arrangement without domination:

The order of all poetry is to approach a state of music wherein the ideas present themselves sensuously and intelligently and are of no predatory intention.⁶³

In other words, the problem with the apparent objectivity of proletarian realism is that it is not Marxist enough. Lacking any interest in musical arrangement, it ends up predatorily *using* the poor’s unhappiness to make a conceptual

or allegorical point, and so de-materialises both its own art and the life it apparently renders. Gold had insisted ‘proletarian realism’ meant:

No straining or melodrama or other effects; life itself is the supreme melodrama. Feel this intensely, and everything becomes poetry – the new poetry of materials, of the so-called ‘common man’, the Worker molding his real world.⁶⁴

Thinking of life as a melodrama betrays a certain aestheticised spectatorship already at work, for all the praise of direct and transparent writing. To Zukofsky, on the other hand, musical form was essential to a poetry of materials, because music *enacts* the democratic principle that ‘substance’ should evolve its own organisation without coercion, and Marx’s belief that a non-exploitative world will require the fusion of mind and body. In response to criticisms that ‘Objectivist’ was insufficiently leftist, “A”-8 incorporates Lenin’s reading of Marx, which explains that a communist state will not falsely equalise our differences of personality or different qualities, ‘but the *exploitation* of one man by many, will have become impossible’ for ‘the opposition between brain and manual work will have disappeared’.⁶⁵

So, when the sections of “A”-7 published in the Objectivist anthology discover sonnets in men mending the street, it is hard to tell where music and labour begin and end. Taking the basic elements of a scene – sawhorses, air, a laundry sign, moments of Bach – Zukofsky repeats and rearranges his phrases against one another like a fugue repeating its tune at different levels, pulling the various semantic and acoustic harmonics of each word out in different combinations. It sounds at first like nonsense poetry, but by defeating any attempts to examine it with some conceptual framework, the sequence becomes a streaming experience where you feel the street, the poet, the words and their sounds all overlapping and moving across each other. The meaning is how it moves the myriad meanings around, pulling ear and mind together without prioritising either. As he explained to Pound, no friend of the sonnet, ‘many people had written sonnet sequences – damn ’em they had – but what moved ’em was concepts, not a subjeck matter like two or three balls juggled in the air at once and the play got from the reflected lights in the colors of them balls – development *being*; not *over* a space’.⁶⁶

“A” would develop into one of the twentieth century’s most amazing compendia of forms to keep the poem moving in continuous play like this. An enormously long section such as “A”-14 uses 1,000 stanzas of gradually increasing syllable-counts in order to allow time for the reader’s mind to lose itself, float and then draw threads between Zukofsky’s research, redactions of *Paradise Lost*, news of the space race, letters about his son, Egyptian hieroglyphs

and whatever else moved before his eyes and ears during its composition. The beginning of "A"-15 generates English words from the sound of the Hebrew in the Book of Job, words which then form a three-way musical-conceptual poetry with their actual meaning. Lines 8–9 run, 'So roar cruel hire / Lo to achieve an eye leer rot off', which is from Job 7.7, 'zekhor ki-ruakh khayai lo-tashuv eini lirot tov' ('O remember that my life is a breath; mine eye shall no more see good'), and the flicker between 'cruel hire', 'ruakh' (breath) and 'khayai' (life) becomes a gloss on Job's complaint as well as simply a prompt for sound. "A"-9 runs excerpts from Marx (on the divorce of labour from value) through the internal and external rhyme schemes of Pound's favourite Cavalcanti canzone 'Donna mi priegha', while ensuring the distribution of the letters 'r' and 'n' occur at intervals determined by the mathematics of the conic section (though this begins to fall apart towards the end). The second re-runs some of the same words and rhymes in the transforming light of extracts from Spinoza on thinking God's thoughts, making the rigours of the sonnet form set up connections between work, desire and selflessness that neither Spinoza, Marx nor Pound ever thought of; it is a labour of love in all senses.

All these forms are more like weaving patterns than frames, ways to keep threading together different fibres of the poet's daily connection to the world, making a 'material' poem in both senses of the word. But weaving is such a time-consuming business that these patterns never pre-empt what happens: Zukofsky always writes without being sure what new material would come his way, and "A" was in fact finished by a musical score from his wife weaving four contrapuntal monologues made from Zukofsky's own words against Handel's *Harpsicord Suites*. His friend Lorine Niedecker once described how she loved to feel 'what was sensed / by them guys / and their minds still carry / the sensing', and her shift of tenses catches the feeling of Zukofsky's poem shuttling between the details of its materials and a continual re-recognising of their significance.⁶⁷ In short, the poem is not a subjective outpouring of feeling in a single moment of inspiration; it is, in Williams's phrase, 'a machine made out of words', as if the poem were only itself when in motion, chattering away independently of its creator.⁶⁸ In his book on American handicraft, Zukofsky spoke about creation as a job rather than a feeling, and wondered why good cooperative poems mightn't be made.⁶⁹ For all that, another very deep source of this feeling for art's independent life may have come from his family: many passages in "A" involve his amazement at his son Paul's prodigious violin talent, and the letters between Zukofsky and Niedecker share their wonder at hearing his music coming back to them broadcast over the radio.

Zukofsky's artisanal and anti-subjective procedures had good, left-wing credentials, opposing both alienated mass-production and its double, alienated individualism; like Bunting and Pound, Zukofsky was fascinated by anonymously created folk poetry.⁷⁰ But as the 'machine made of words' keeps the focus on the machine, rather than the product, so his thinking of a poem as craft is still some way from actual craftsmen making things for a given purpose by a given community. "A" is sometimes so absorbed in the craftsman's process that it becomes rather cerebral, its patient stitching of words and sounds flattening out the rises and falls of feeling in the situations they arose from. Perversely, such detachment dramatises Zukofsky's own painful isolation, working in his apartment year in, year out, unpublished and largely unread until rediscovered by the Black Mountain Poets in the later 1950s. As his friend George Oppen remarked, 'Louis's "objectification" – tho he denied it – related back to Kant: the consciousness's *act* of objectification.'⁷¹

After publishing *Discrete Series* (1934), Oppen himself found 'the catastrophe of human lives in the thirties . . . seemed to me to put poetry and the purposes of poetry in question.'⁷² He would return to verse only in the 1960s, not because poetry was a hopelessly subjective affair, but because he could not reconcile the discipline of 'objective' writing with the Marxist demand for poetry to be committed to the service of the oppressed. Poetry, he thought, had to be 'a realist art in that the poem is concerned with a fact which it did not create.'⁷³ But, for the same reason, it could never preach, for that would be to dominate the poem with subjective, egoistic anxiety about saying the right thing. Comparing Williams's poetry with the American verse that preceded it, he remarked that 'the distinction between a poem that shows confidence in itself and in its materials, and on the other hand a performance, a speech by the poet is the distinction between poetry and histrionics.'⁷⁴ *Discrete Series* (1934) makes no such comment about itself; it moves slowly and with studied indifference through the restaurants and yachts of the wealthy, focusing on the texture and surface of the objects which define them:

At the curb,
 Unapplied and empty:
 A thing among others
 Over which clouds pass and the alteration of lighting,
 An overstatement
 Hardly an exterior.
 Moving in traffic
 This thing is less strange—
 Tho the face, still within it,
 Between glasses—place, over which time passes—a false light⁷⁵

Detached from any sense of normal use, this limousine becomes the play of light over its paintwork; the poem does not need to say that the lives quietly sealed within are as shiny and as depthless as its overstated exterior. After Oppen had worked for the communists in the 1930s, he fought with the US Army in Alsace and was blown up in a foxhole with a comrade, an experience of pain and guilty helplessness which never really left him. FBI persecution after the war meant he and his wife were exiled in Mexico; when he returned, finally, to New York and to poetry, it was with a profound sense that the whole city had become ‘a city of the corporations // Glassed / In dreams // And images- //’ a place where people saw only themselves or fantasies of themselves, and so never really came into relation with anything in its mystery, or their own impermanence.⁷⁶ ‘There are things / We live among “and to see them / Is to know ourselves”’, begins *Of Being Numerous*, and the steady, tense pace of Oppen’s concentrated stanzas enacts his unblinking meditation on those rooms, spaces, and times we live in, in which alone the ‘unearthly bonds / Of the singular’ between a self and its others can emerge.⁷⁷ By making consumption the basic model for the experience of things and people, the modern city-dweller, worries *Of Being Numerous*, encounters nothing except what is already provided, and meets no resistance:

unable to begin
At the beginning, the fortunate
Find everything already here. They are shoppers,
Choosers, judges; . . . and here the brutal
is without issue, a dead end.⁷⁸

‘Judgers’ also picks up what Oppen came to feel was wrong with Ezra Pound’s poetry. ‘Pound never freed himself from argument, the moving of chess pieces’, whereas ‘for me, the writing of the poem is the process of finding out what I mean, discovering what I mean’.⁷⁹ As he put it in an unpublished poem, poetry is never ‘the chess game . . . in which the pieces / have already been named’, but ‘rather *inward* / and *outward* // under the sky’.⁸⁰ Oppen was badly shaken after an unexpected encounter with Pound in the late 1960s, and the poem which resulted, ‘Of Hours’ zooms back at one point to his foxhole in the Vosges:

O rage
Of the exile Fought ice
Fought shifting stones
Beyond the battlement

Crevasse Fought
 No man
 But the fragments of metal
 Tho there were men there were men Fought
 No man but the fragments of metal
 Burying my dogtag with H
 For Hebrew in the rubble of Alsace.

Although what Oppens recalls is objective and outward, the breaks show the inward struggle to name it, and to remind himself he was not fighting German soldiers but their weapons and his own injuries. But he is also struggling with feelings about the fascist Pound, who had written the introduction to *Discrete Series*; ‘no man’ is the Odysseus figure who opens *The Cantos* (the phrase occurs in Greek in Canto LXXX) while the repeated ‘fought’ looks back to Mauberley’s ‘these fought, in any case’, when Pound had assimilated the deaths of his friends Hulme and Gaudier to his own cultural combats. It is as if Pound’s fragments have become the shrapnel lodged inwardly in Oppen’s body, and in those detached repetitions of ‘Fought’ he must constantly turn the method against its master. Who finally takes responsibility for burying Oppen’s dogtag, and his Jewish identity, is left unclear.

Marginalised modernism: Bunting and Niedecker

Oppen’s problems with Pound were a peculiarly acute version of the Objectivist situation: how to be modernists in the act of redefining modernism against its masters. Yeats, Eliot and Pound were ‘reactionary to the point of insanity’, he thought, and critics defending them had just not realised that ‘being democratic has got to be absolutely non-dogmatic, a-political, unsystematic.’⁸¹ Simply replacing fascist or monarchist dogma with democratic dogma would miss the point: Peter Nicholls notes how Oppen feared the aggressive avant-gardism of the Living Theatre in the late 1960s because it forced compulsory participation on the audience. Democratic poetry had to unsettle any dominant speaker, attitude or assumption, and modernism’s undoing of grammatical hierarchies and centre–margin distinctions made it a natural ally.

Though she was a Protestant, Lorine Niedecker has become an honorary Objectivist because of her friendship with Zukofsky, and the way her lyrics also speak to and with the unregarded. To Zukofsky’s disquiet, she began as a would-be Surrealist, but her early experiments were always about juxtaposing

inner and outer forms, such as a series of gnomic utterances pasted onto the next year's calendar in 'Next Year I Fly My Rounds Tempestuous', or dreams put side by side with commonplaces from Memorial Day in 'Three Poems'.⁸² With Zukofsky's encouragement, she pared down those elaborate constructions into the spare and bare *Homemade / Handmade Poems*, written from her remote cabin by a lake in Wisconsin, each word exacting attention to the thing and the word at once:

Early morning corn
 shock quick river
 edge ice crack duck
 talk

Grasses' dry membranous
 breaks tick-tack tiny
 wind strips ('Fall')

The simple lists of sounds and nouns puts the minute grass-seed and the large river, the human and the natural on one co-existent plane, while the expert layering of 'k' sounds among nouns, adjectives and the onomatopoeic 'crack' and 'tick-tack' involves the very texture of the poem with what is being heard. The syntax also weakens perspectival distances between the objects and actions 'in' the scene: those 'wind strips' could be the unseen wind stripping or the grasses themselves, for instance. Without such markers, the poem's way of writing and the world it relates come together: the syntax belongs to a flat marsh where distance is hard to gauge, while the poem's tiny size draws attention to all of the sounds in the words, the kind of attention to the minute you get in a silent place surrounded by the empty reaches of water and sky. 'Everything sings (or becomes some art form) if you want to find the measure & the continuity' of it, Niedecker once remarked to Zukofsky, including grass-seeds.⁸³ After the failure of her first marriage, Niedecker worked in a series of increasingly menial jobs. Rarely moving in middle-class or university circles, she picked up whatever culture she could from the radio and the Fort Atkinson shops, and refused to do radio performances or public readings to promote her work. Many of her 'folk-poems' stitch together scraps of conversation from the working-class lives around her, ending without an obvious point because poverty leaves their speakers without a moral to hold on to. But being unregarded was important to her personally: the ideal way to read her poems was, she thought, 'private printed page plus sound and silence', in order to bring the reader into the silence around the forgotten:

Your erudition
the elegant flower
of which

my blue chicory
at scrub end
of campus ditch
illuminates⁸⁴

Her poetry is the common weed burnt up by noon, growing only as the campus runs into waste ground, and also the source of the light which illuminates learning: ‘not thought but everything in a movement of words.’⁸⁵

Zukofsky’s other great Objectivist friend, Basil Bunting, agreed about the need to make poetry less of an ego-driven affair:

Haven’t we all, poets, been riding much too high a horse for a long time? A bit of the Yeatsian Grecian goldsmith or just plain potter (not for teacups though) or the guy who paints the Sicilian carts and British canal boats. Without anonymity you can’t have a healthy art nicht wahr . . . Poetry is overrun with guys who want to tickle their own vanity, and I don’t like it Louis! That’s what falsifies everything. If we’d had the sense to be anonymous amongst these, when you were Objectivising, and to stay anonymous, maybe we’d have had more effect so that more people would have had pleasure in reading us and more people would have written in a way to give them pleasure.⁸⁶

Born a Quaker in Northumbria, Bunting had been jailed as a conscientious objector in the First World War before discovering Pound and following him to Rapallo, where he also met Zukofsky. Although he was now published by Faber, he fulminated against the self-importance of mainstream modernism, particularly the way its conceited denizens ‘thought more carefully about the impression made by their own personality than about that made by the ostensible subject of their verse.’⁸⁷ Poems like ‘The Well of Lycopolis’ satirise Bloomsbury’s incestuous mix of modernism and literary journalism, but since such people also controlled literary reputations, Bunting was almost forgotten after his Objectivist appearances until his late masterpiece, *Briggflatts* (1966). Increasingly fed up with Pound’s anti-Semitism and his support for Mussolini, he had broken off their friendship, and after more globe-trotting spent the war with British Military Intelligence in Persia before finally returning to a humdrum job as a journalist in Newcastle, writing the poem on the train on the way home from work. *Briggflatts* is subtitled ‘an autobiography’, but none of this remarkable life appears; no family, no war, no ‘famous people I have met’, no narrating ‘I’ at all. Instead, there is a sequence of intense memories

of natural scenes, threaded through with myths and stories of other north-eastern wanderers, Eric Bloodaxe and the Lindisfarne saints. The story these images tell is of early love thrown away and never recovered. She was a mason's daughter, he apprenticed to the mason, and in their early happiness the sound of the chisel and the sound of the valley made music together:

Brag, sweet tenor bull
 descant on Rawthey's madrigal,
 each pebble its part
 for the fells' late spring. [. . .]

A mason times his mallet
 to a lark's twitter
 listening while the marble rests,
 lays his rule
 at a letter's edge,
 fingertips checking,
 till the stone spells a name
 naming none, a man abolished.⁸⁸

Like the bull's voice and the pebble, large and small parts of the Rawthey valley make a song together, just as the following stanza unobtrusively chimes 'twitter' and 'letter', or the keyword 'marble' with 'part' and 'lark', 'bull' and 'pebble', not to mention the alliterations. But the marble is also a premonition of what all his writing became, a compressed memorialising of things already dead:

Brief words are hard to find,
 Shapes to carve and discard:
 Bloodaxe, king of York,
 king of Dublin, king of Orkney.
 Take no notice of tears;
 letter the stone to stand
 over love laid aside lest
 insufferable happiness impede
 flight to Stainmore
 to trace
 lark, mallet,
 becks, flocks
 and axe knocks.

Stainmore was the site of Eric's murder, and the 'x' sounds of the last two lines link it to the sound of the mason's chisel. Music and writing appear wherever

the poem then moves, in the way the wind ‘writes in foam on the sea’ during Bunting’s voyages, the bluebottles ‘strewing the notes on the air’, or the ‘mail of linked lies’ which fails to protect Bloodaxe, and its modern equivalent in the newspaper which fails to protect England. Unable to find rest, the poem-life learns instead from the northern Saints to see ‘God in everything, to love without expectation, wander without an inn.’ Rather than chain-mail or the *Daily Mail*, Aidan and Cuthbert ‘put on daylight, / wires of sharp western metal entangled in its soft / web, many shuttles as midges darting’, and of course the poem’s modernist form of indirect, interwoven images, ‘without expectation’, moves in sympathy with the birds, insects and waves the saints meditated on at Lindisfarne, whose movements had found their way into the woven capitals of the illustrated Lindisfarne gospels. Lacking a plot which subordinates elements to a story, the poem is a woven interplay of moments, free to let each one be itself ‘without expectation’, and allowing its patterns to grow on each reading. It works a little like a Quaker service at the Brigflatts chapel, after which the poem is named: no ministering ‘I’ directing the congregation, but each member is priest and prophet, speaking as the spirit moves and as others listen. As well as promoting non-violence, Quakerism is structurally opposed to ‘hierarchy and order, the virtues of the neo-Platonic quasi-religion [which] were the prime virtues also to Yeats, Pound and Eliot’, as Bunting saw it, adding ‘they are not virtues to me, only expedients that chafe almost as vilely as the crimes they try to restrain’.⁸⁹ Without such hierarchies, the poem’s form is then able to give prominence to what lies unregarded by journalists or metropolitan busybodies: sounds hidden within words, the momentary flight of gulls on the outer reaches of the nation, and the damp nettles, slowworms and spiders of soggy northern summers. Their cycles of time are as different from ours as ours from the stars, and the poem closes in contemplation of Sirius overhead, whose light takes so long to reach us that we see it as it was years ago:

Then is Now. The star you steer by is gone,
its tremulous thread spun in the hurricane
spider floss on my cheek; light from the zenith
spun when the slowworm lay in her lap
fifty years ago.

The poem is a moving confluence of the fleeting and the very ancient, human and non-human; it makes Eliot’s ‘simultaneous order’ of tradition into the off-centre, provisional and unfinished pattern which was perhaps always waiting within it.

When did modernism end?

Briggflatts was published in 1966. Still unfinished, a ‘complete’ edition of Pound’s *The Cantos* did not appear until 1964, while a collected edition of Williams’s *Paterson* had come out only the previous year. Neither the full stretch of Zukofsky’s “A” nor Oppen’s last book would appear until 1978. Obviously, modernism did not end neatly in 1945, the date many anthologies use for the start of ‘postmodern’ poetry.

To be fair to the anthologists, though, the division between the ‘modern’ and the ‘postmodern’ was confused from the start, and particularly in poetry, where the meaning of postmodern depended very much on your estimate of modernism. In a 1951 letter, Charles Olson used the term to describe his and Robert Creeley’s work, while Randall Jarrell described Robert Lowell’s *Lord Weary’s Castle* as ‘post- or anti-modernist poetry’ in 1947.⁹⁰ Jarrell himself had been called a postmodernist by John Crowe Ransom in 1941.⁹¹ But for Ransom, Jarrell’s deft narrative poetry demonstrated a wise freedom from having to make it new *all* the time. For Jarrell himself, postmodern meant Lowell’s ‘dramatic, dialectical organisation’, a poetry mixing artifice and intimate-sounding voices and leaving its reader anxious about how to take them – the theatre of discomfort which ‘confessional’ poetry would later exploit against Eliot’s prescription for ‘impersonal’ verse. To Olson and Creeley, on the other hand, being postmodern meant being ‘OPEN, or what can also be called COMPOSITION BY FIELD, as opposed to inherited line, stanza, over-all form, what is the “old” base of the non-projective’ – in other words, opposing the overly-thought-out work of poets such as Lowell or Jarrell.⁹²

At the time, criticism generally opted for Olson’s version. With the unstoppable rise of 1960s counter-culture, it seemed obvious that the most experimental poets belonged in the postmodern bracket, in opposition to an Eliot-based modernism that had by the America of the 1950s become the official verse culture: academic, authoritarian and out of touch. In negotiations with Donald Allen over the latter’s hugely influential anthology *The New American Poetry 1945–1960*, Olson went out of his way to discourage any arrangement that suggested continuity with the modernists – indeed, when the volume was reissued with more contributors, it was retitled *The Postmoderns: The New American Poetry Revised*.⁹³ But as Andreas Huyssen has argued, the ‘postmodern’ wing of American art in the 1960s – Cage’s blurring of the music/noise distinction, Warhol’s art as games with the art market, or Peter Brook’s theatre which fused actors and audience – were not doing something entirely new.⁹⁴ American modernism, he points out, had lacked a powerful avant-garde wing in the 1920s, and its artists had not really internalised the anti-institutional

revolt of Dada, because they were fighting the ‘high art’ snobbery of rich American collectors rather than the Schillerian tradition of state-sponsored theatres and galleries. What was now being called ‘postmodern’ art was really the emergence of a home-grown avant-garde, breaking down the differences of art and life, artist and audience – but re-politicised by the Vietnam conflict rather than by the First World War, and given an enormous shot of popular energy by the fusion of art and anti-authoritarianism in the counter-culture’s sit-ins and happenings. And the same persistence of modernism is evident in Olson’s classic definition of his ‘postmodern’ poetic, ‘Projective Verse’.

Olson demands that poetry must now oppose ‘the lyrical interference of the individual as ego’, as well as inherited stanza forms, by becoming a ‘field’ wherein everything (history, language, feeling, unconscious content) would start to relate and counter-relate.⁹⁵ In such a field, meanings and their shapes are never designed in advance (‘FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT’) and the poem can only become itself in the act of composition, for the poet ‘can go by no track other than the one the poem under hand declares, for itself’.⁹⁶ But getting rid of the controlling ‘ego’ was a basic move within modernism – not just in Eliot’s ‘impersonal’ poetry, but in Yeatsian séances and Objectivist procedures. Defining form as an experimental ‘field’ rather than a prepared box moves beyond endorsing declarative free verse, to be sure, but it is already present in *The Cantos*’ documents’ or Stevens’s sense that the poem must make a new reality rather than reflect it. And while Olson’s commitment to a ‘live’ feel – ‘the line comes (I swear it) from the breath, from the breathing of the man who writes, at the moment that he writes’ – is a newer note for American modernism, it still has continuities with Stevens’s definition ‘Of Modern Poetry’ (‘the poem of the mind in the act of finding / What will suffice’), with Williams’s experiments in spontaneous composition in *Kora in Hell* (1918) and of course the performance poetry of the European avant-garde.⁹⁷ The San Francisco and Beat poets’ experiments in multimedia and improvisatory performance poetry have similar roots, although given a huge new impetus through the invention of the microphone, tape-recorder and the radio. Though he stood a little aloof from both groups, Jack Spicer’s principle of the poet as anonymous radio transmitter mixes the idea of Pound’s ‘Radio Cantos’ (XVIII–XIX) with the ideas of the poem as séance and broadcast in the late works of H. D.⁹⁸

Of course, Olson and Creeley knew this. What complicates the official story of their postmodern break from the modernist past is the way the letters swapping ideas about the poetics of ‘Projective Verse’ also contain constant efforts to reshape what ‘modernism’ meant by finding the poets ignored by Ransom and the New Critics. In Black Mountain College’s early curriculum,

Eliot is demoted, and Pound, Williams, Stein and Hart Crane come well to the fore. During the 1950s and 1960s, Creeley and his fellow Black Mountaineer Ed Dorn would alter the canon still further by their efforts to get Zukofsky and Niedecker in the public eye again. Robert Duncan, Denise Levertov and Barbara Guest would do the same for H. D, while the Beats kept Mina Loy's flame alive. But with such a widened range of modernist writers to draw inspiration from, 'postmodern' also began to lose its distinctive edge.

This blurring is also evident in Olson's own poetry. *The Maximus Poems*, his epic about the town of Gloucester, Massachusetts, use zingy shorthand, multiply-indented lines, unfinished sentences, switches between double- and single-spaced lines and, later, sentences cut and pasted over each other to make the visual layout signify in a way that goes beyond e. e. cummings or Williams's *Spring and All*. Visually, the sentences seem to react to each other; they squeeze up or swell out, shout or whimper, and allow four or five lines of thought to criss-cross vividly. After a piece of prose conversation chatting about a crash between fishing boats, both of which had sighted a shoal, for instance, the verse suddenly crystallises into reflection:

So few need to,
to make the many
share (to have it,
too)

but those few . . .

What kills me is, how do these others think
the eyes are
sharp? by gift? bah by love of self? try it by god ask
the bean sandwich

There are no hierarchies, no infinite, no such many as mass, there are
only
eyes in all heads
to be looked out of.⁹⁹

The multiple and non-hierarchical planes of attention signified by these indented, almost-concurrent sections are, it's implied, like Gloucester's sharp-eyed fishermen, hunting particulars rather than generalizing about the 'many', as the first stanza catches itself doing. Despite its innovative 'scoring', however, *Maximus's* divining of all the currents which flowed into the poem's making – the ecology of fisheries, town history, global trade, coinage and so on – is very much in keeping with *The Cantos's* project to integrate art and its entire context. *Maximus* focuses on one single place rather than zooming between republics and dynasties, but Gloucester has historically been such a gateway in and out

of the United States that its harbour traffic is really a microcosm of America's global role. And like Pound, Olson finds in the luminous details of names and words the same colonial violence, finance capitalism and anti-democratic journalese that have enfeebled 'the agora America is', where 'the true troubadours / are CBS'; and 'Melopoiea // is for Cokes by Cokes'.¹⁰⁰ Black Mountain poetry's consequent fascination for pre-industrial cultures may use different groups – Apaches, Mayans, Hopi or cowboys rather than Pound's Chinese or H. D.'s Greeks – but the tribes are fulfilling the same symbolic function: people whose language is more poetic by being closer to forms of action (like the ideogram), whose minds are more in touch with their bodies, whose self is integrated with nature, and whose art is endemically part of everyday life. And though Olson was committed to rescuing Pound's poetics from his politics, the commanding tones of 'Projective Verse' are unmistakable when they exhort the poet to all that undivided experience:

ONE PERCEPTION MUST IMMEDIATELY AND DIRECTLY LEAD TO A FURTHER PERCEPTION. It means exactly what it says, is a matter of, at all points (even, I should say, of our management of daily reality as of the daily work) get on with it, keep moving, keep in, speed, the nerves, their speed, their perceptions, theirs, the acts, the split second acts, the whole business, keep it moving as fast as you can, citizen. And if you also set up as a poet, USE USE USE the process at all points, in any given poem always, always one perception must must MOVE, INSTANTER, ON ANOTHER!¹⁰¹

Meant to free the poet from abstract thinking, the capitals sound more like a coach shouting at an underperforming athlete. The open-ended, non-hierarchical and holistic postmodern could, it seems, be as remorseless, over-masculine and disciplinary as the closed forms it thought to leave behind.

The problems applying the term 'postmodern' to poetry got worse as the word itself became more popular. In the wake of the Vietnam protests and the May riots of 1968 in Paris, critics and theorists began to agree that the demands for social change, art and architecture were all part of an emerging culture of the 'postmodern'. But the broad definitions of 'postmodern' were generally drawn from fields such as architecture where the division was much sharper than in poetry. The consensus on postmodern artwork, according to Terry Eagleton in 1987, is that it is 'playful, self-ironising and even schizoid . . . it reacts to the austere autonomy of high modernism by impudently embracing the language of commerce and the commodity'.¹⁰² This is an excellent account of the difference between Warhol and Kandinsky, but it could also be a description of *The Waste Land*, with its pop songs, banks and self-ironising fragmentation.

David Harvey's *The Condition of Postmodernity* summarised postmodernism as the acceptance of 'ephemerality, fragmentation, discontinuity' without any desire to fit parts into an overarching system or a past history, turning instead to local differences and marginalised groups.¹⁰³ Again, he could be talking about Olson's projective poetics, but it's not a bad description of *Spring and All*, with its hatred of set forms as un-American snobbery. 'In nearly every case the post-modern is a complexification, hybridisation and sublation of the modern – not its antithesis', admitted Charles Jencks, but the terms on his postmodernist side ('disharmonious harmony', 'conflicted semiosis', a fusion of localism and internationalism) make Eliot and Pound sound as postmodern as well as modernist.¹⁰⁴

Which, perhaps, they were. For as the Objectivists had first discovered, modernist style had connotations which Pound's and Eliot's *politics* had been deaf to. It levelled out its actors' relative importance, while drastically expanding the consciousness of any individual 'I', reader or narrator. It encouraged the mixing of national cultures and the blend of high and low forms; it was fascinated by ritual and performance as the natural locus of poetry, by a blend of world religions, and the shamanic role of the poet, able to fuse emotional, political, natural and ecological energies into a single word. It wasn't so much that Olson's poetics were simply an ill-disguised modernism, in other words, but that modernism itself had profound continuities with the New Age, mind-expanding counter-culture of the 1960s, a transition which the word 'postmodern' had evaded, thanks to its users' eagerness to repudiate the authoritarian or brow-beating politics of pre-war modernism.¹⁰⁵ Modernism does not account for all the innovations in *The New American Poetry*, of course, but neither has it been left behind.

But if modernism had not yet ended with Olson or the counter-culture, nor had it come to a stop with the arrival of the influential group based round the magazine *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* in 1978. Their interest in chance-based or procedurally led compositions foregrounding the meaning-making power of language itself, rather than the subjective intentions of the poet, was a deliberate attack on the lax, free-wheeling, self-performing ethos of Olson (and, in their different ways, of the Black Arts Movement of Amiri Baraka, the 'personism' of Frank O'Hara or the Whitmanism of Allen Ginsberg). To free poetry from the cult of the ego, language poetry looked instead to the simulacra of sense-making in John Ashbery's *The Tennis Court Oath* (1962) or the experiments with randomly chosen orders by Jackson Mac Low and the French OULIPO writers. But the use of arbitrary rules to generate unforeseen texts was no less a development from modernist attitudes; the games with chance of the Dada performers, for instance, or the sublime detachment in relation to one's own work cultivated by Eliot's 'Ash-Wednesday', a poem whose prayer to

'care and not to care' pops up rather surprisingly in Larry Eigner's opening article for the magazine.¹⁰⁶ Language writing was another development from modernism, rather than a break with it, a development which again required a retrospective re-selection of modernist forebears, this time defined more on the oppositional model of the avant-gardes. For with the disappearance of representative 'immediacy' also went the role of the poet as shaman, healer or social mediator; the contributors to $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$ tended to see their task much more in terms of opposition and resistance to the capitalist ideology of easily consumable writing and the institution of academic literary criticism than in Poundian-Olsonian terms of incarnating a unified sensibility or common culture.

As these continuities with modernism became clearer, discerning poetry critics settled for a while on 'late modernist' to describe this kind of experimentalism in contemporary poetry, a term which had several tremendous advantages over 'postmodern'. It made much better sense of the developments of modernism in a post-war cultural climate: Bob Cobbing's relocation of avant-garde performance through duplicators and tape recordings, for instance, or the way the live readings at the Morden tower which revived Bunting's reputation updated Pound's antique troubadours to the folk-song interests of the 1960s. It also registered the impact that rediscovered first-generation modernists were making on writers after the 1960s. Through their efforts to put Stein and Zukofsky back on the map, or to make Williams important enough to warrant the first easily accessible issue of *Spring and All* in 1970, Creeley and others had ensured that the $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$ group were reading these modernists as if for the first time, and there are striking similarities in their mission to make language's shaping power supremely evident. During the 1970s, Bunting became a talisman for the late modernist poets of the 'British Poetry Revival', which was seeking the return of the British modernist tradition that the academy and the anthologies had assumed died with early Auden. Thinking in terms of 'late modernism' could also accommodate the revived interest in the unfinished lyric-epic, cultivated for its loose inclusivity or its sense of being in process as it goes. High points of the long poem include Hugh MacDiarmid's turn away from his earlier ballads in 'synthetic Scots' to the multilingual *In Memoriam James Joyce* (1957), W. S. Graham's endless small readjustments to his own words in *The Nightfishing* (1955), the gradual revelation of loving, non-coercive, non-Yeatsian order as the reader journeys through Brian Coffey's *Advent* (1975), or Roy Fisher's spiralling through 'urban regeneration' for ex-industrial Birmingham in *A Furnace* (1987).

But the other great advantage of 'late modernism' was to suggest how much its poets were opposed to the market-led values of mainstream culture. The term picks up Fredric Jameson's influential analysis of postmodern culture

as really just ‘late capitalism’, whose vaunted openness is a cover for a consumerist pick-and-mix approach to style, leaving business as usual intact. Many late modernist poets, by contrast, made a point of their anti-capitalist stance by reviving the modernist-style small presses and little magazines, allowing them to print and distribute work that made ‘no compromise with public taste’, as the *Little Review*’s slogan originally had it in the 1920s.¹⁰⁷ The semi-private publications of the British poet J. H. Prynne, in particular, were part of his Poundian-Olsonian sensitivity to the way market ideology had insinuated itself into our most basic sense of self and its properties. Precisely because you couldn’t buy them in ordinary bookshops, the poems Prynne gave away would circulate like bootleg recordings among his fans, and, when one came into your hands, its refusal to work like any statement of consumable meaning matched the way his poems circulated like gifts in the aristocratic, pre-money tribal economies the poems sometimes alluded to, precious objects which were bestowed and passed on, but not bought or kept. You knew you were reading something very few others would, but at the same time the poem’s complexity outlined how much its meaning would never be yours to own, nor the person you passed it to, nor indeed the poet himself. ‘What goes on in a / language is the corporate & prolonged action of worked self-transcendence’ says ‘Question for the Time Being’, and Prynne’s limpid, remorseless relativisation of the self’s interiorities and intentions through language meant his readers could never really tell whether their own interpretations were precious finds or complete rubbish.¹⁰⁸ The controversies about poems of such tremendous difficulty continued long-held anxieties about modernist exclusivity outlined in the previous chapter, though the poet’s own frequent interest in rubbish and the mechanisms of value and exclusion which create it (as with ‘L’Extase de M. Poher’) suggest that the poems were, among other things, anticipating their readers’ outraged reactions. Nor is it impossibly hard to work out what the mash-up of Prynne’s recent ‘Refuse Collection’, about Abu Ghraib, is getting at, either.¹⁰⁹

Still, ‘late modernism’ has its problems as well. The period credentials of ‘modernism’ make it suggest belatedness – as if living and breathing poets were just survivals from another age, rather than ahead of their time, as if the initial struggle between modernists and traditionalists was still being played out today by a weary remnant. ‘New modernism’ has been suggested as an alternative for contemporary poets in this line, but given that ‘modernism’ has developed into an academic subject in its own right, this also sounds a little like borrowed robes, as if experimental work designed to circumvent all disciplinary frameworks also needed the trademark of a powerful institution in a way a Schwitters or an Olson would have scorned.¹¹⁰ On the other hand, the

gap between their poems and the more totalising claims of the avant-garde for revolution in the 1920s or the 1960s is now so wide that some now prefer the deflationary term 'post-avant' for the poetry formerly known as postmodern. On gig flyers, some just put '/whatever'.

Difficulty defining when modernism stopped may be no bad thing, however. Attempting to make a clean break between modernism and the postmodern always ended up defining 'postmodern' by exactly the kind of binary us-and-them structure which its poetry is supposed to do away with. And it belies the enormous expansion of university education, whose role in promoting modernist writing, sponsoring creative writers and training new, cross-cultural readerships has meant modernism became part of the general horizon of expectation of generations of graduates, who then adapted it for genres and subjects the original modernists could not have imagined.¹¹¹ Indeed, if poetry adapting, addressing or just bouncing off modernism could be given an historically accurate label, it and modernism would be safely bracketed as surely as the dullest *fin-de-siècle* sonnet. In a prophetic paragraph of that most canonical modernist essay, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', Eliot pointed out that we cannot measure any new art by treating older art as an accomplished fact:

It is a judgment, a comparison, in which two things are measured by each other. To conform merely would be for the new work not really to conform at all; it would not be new, and would therefore not be a work of art.¹¹²

Modernism, in other words, would also be judged by what contemporary art makes of it. But it will not only be judged by small groups of under-appreciated poets. The musical landscape of our own time has been changed by modernism: its sampling and looping are now coded into electronica, its distortions and shocks into the willed pain of experimental noise or avant-rock. The eccentric typography and montage of its avant-gardes is now in the most basic graphic design package. Its dream of a poem where every point is instantly connected to every other point is now the normality of the internet. One of the fringe contributors to *transition*, Bob Brown, wrote a manifesto in 1930 for poetry which would be played across a reading machine like a ticker-tape, its punctuation replaced by close-ups and word-condensations, now a possibility with e-books and twitter.¹¹³ Modernism was not the sole creator of any of these, but they, too, are now part of the connotations of its forms. If modernist experiment meant anything to twentieth-century poetry, it was that forms were not agreed moulds into which noble feelings were to be poured, but should flex with and against the pressures of non-poetic life. As

that life changes, as poetry changes, so does modernism; the question may be less when modernism ended, but what it will become next.

Recommended Further Reading

- Alex Davis and Lee M. Jenkins (eds.), *The Locations of Literary Modernism: Region and Nation in British and American Modernist Poetry* (Cambridge University Press, 2000). On thinking of modernism outside the metropolitan elite.
- Ann Douglas, *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s* (London: Picador, 1996). On the mutual dependencies of 'black' and 'white' culture.
- Matthew Hart, *Nations of Nothing but Poetry* (Oxford University Press, 2010). On Bunting, MacDiarmid and Tolson.
- Hugh Kenner, *A Homemade World: The American Modernist Writers* (London: Marion Boyars, 1977).
- Antony Mellors, *Late Modernist Poetics: from Pound to Prynne* (Manchester University Press, 2005).
- Cary Nelson, *Repression and Recovery: Modern American Poetry and the Politics of Cultural Memory, 1910–1945* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989). On the poetry pushed aside by the narrowing of the modernist repertoire in academic teaching.
- Peter Nicholls, *George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism* (Oxford University Press, 2007).
- Michael North, *The Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language and Twentieth-Century Literature* (Oxford University Press, 1997).
- Mark Scroggins, *Louis Zukofsky and the Poetry of Knowledge* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1998).

Notes

1 Why write like this?

- 1 Hope Mirrlees, *Paris: A Poem* (London: Hogarth Press, 1919), repr. in 'Hope Mirrlees and Continental Modernism', ed. by Julia Briggs, in *Gender in Modernism: New Geographies, Complex Intersections*, ed. by Bonnie Kime Scott (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007), pp. 261–303.
- 2 Pound, 'A Retrospect', *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. by T. S. Eliot (London: Faber & Faber, 1954), p. 9.
- 3 Rod Rosenquist, *Modernism, the Market and the Institution of the New* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 16–17.
- 4 Peter Nicholls, *Modernisms: A Literary Guide* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1995), pp. vii–viii.
- 5 'Futurist Painting: Technical Manifesto', in *Futurist Manifestos*, ed. by Umbro Apollonio (Boston, MA: MFA Publications, 2001), p. 28.
- 6 Severini, 'Get Inside the Picture: Futurism as the Artist Sees It', *Daily Express*, 11 April 1913, p. 4.
- 7 Pound, *The Spirit of Romance*, rev. edn (London: Peter Owen, 1952), p. 94.
- 8 Jane Harrison, *Unanimism: A Study of Conversion and Some Contemporary French Poets* ('Printed for "The Heretics" by The Express Printing Co, King St, Cambridge', 1912), pp. 18–19.
- 9 Stein, 'Composition as Explanation', in *Selected Writings of Gertrude Stein*, ed. by Carl Van Vechten (New York: Random House, 1962), p. 517.
- 10 Pound, *The Spirit of Romance*, p. 8.
- 11 Filippo Marinetti, Emilio Settimelli and Bruno Corra, 'The Futurist Synthetic Theatre 1915', in *Futurist Manifestos*, p. 195.
- 12 William Carlos Williams, *The Embodiment of Knowledge*, ed. by Ron Loewinsohn (New York: New Directions, 1974), p. 27.
- 13 David Jones, 'Notes to the 1930s', in *The Dying Gaul*, ed. by Herman Grisewood (London: Faber & Faber, 1978), p. 44.
- 14 Yeats, 'The Theatre', in *Ideas of Good and Evil*, 2nd edn (Dublin: Maunsel, 1905), p. 265.
- 15 Eliot, 'Eeldrop and Appleplex', *The Little Review* IV: 1 (1917), p. 10. Available at: www.gutenberg.org/files/5982/5982-h/5982-h.htm.
- 16 Pound, *Jefferson and/or Mussolini* (London: Stanley Nott, 1935), p. 63.

- 17 Mina Loy, 'Psycho-Democracy', *The Little Review* VIII (Autumn 1921), p. 15.
- 18 Hulme, 'Notes on Language and Style', in *Selected Writings*, ed. by Patrick McGuinness (Manchester: Carcanet, 1998), p. 38.
- 19 Eliot, 'Observations', *Egoist* (May 1918), p. 69.
- 20 Hulme, 'A Lecture on Modern Poetry', in *Selected Writings*, pp. 62–7.
- 21 See *The Pelican Guide to European Literature: Modernism*, ed. Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane (London: Penguin, 1976), particularly essays by Graham Hough (pp. 312–22), Richard Sheppard (pp. 323–6) and G. M. Hyde (pp. 337–48), and Nicholls, *Modernisms*, pp. 5–41. *The Letters of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. by John Ward Ostron, 2 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1948), I: 268.
- 22 Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man in a Series of Letters*, trans. and ed. Elizabeth M. Wilkinson and L. A. Willoughby (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), p. 35 (Letter VI).
- 23 *Ibid.*, p. 217 (Letter XXII.10).
- 24 *Ibid.*, pp. 125 (Letter XVIII.4) and 145 (Letter XXI.1).
- 25 *Ibid.*, p. 151 (Letter XXII.1).
- 26 *Ibid.*, p. 219 (Letter XXVII.11).
- 27 Wilkinson and Willoughby, 'Preface' to Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, p. clxi. See Michael John Kooy, *Coleridge, Schiller and Aesthetic Education* (London: Palgrave, 2002); Jacques Rancière, *Malaise dans l'esthétique* (Paris: Galilée, 2004), pp. 50ff.
- 28 Chris Baldick, *The Social Mission of English Criticism 1848–1932* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983); David Lloyd and Paul Thomas, *Culture and the State* (London: Routledge, 1997).
- 29 Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964).
- 30 André Breton, 'First Manifesto of Surrealism' [1924], in *Art in Theory 1900–2000*, ed. by Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), p. 452.
- 31 Robert Graves and Laura Riding, 'Modernist Poetry' [1926] in Graves, *The Common Asphodel* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1949), p. 115.
- 32 Pound, 'A Retrospect', *Literary Essays*, p. 11.
- 33 Eugene Jolas, 'Notes on Reality', *transition* 18 (1929), pp. 19–20.
- 34 Pound, 'I Gather the Limbs of Osiris' [1912], *Selected Prose 1909–1965*, ed. by William Cookson (London: Faber & Faber, 1973), p. 33.
- 35 'Long Live the Vortex!' *Blast* 1 (1914), p. 7.
- 36 Mina Loy, 'Aphorisms on Futurism', in *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*, ed. by Roger L. Conover (Manchester: Carcanet, 1997), p. 151.
- 37 Hugh Sykes Davies, 'Biology and Surrealism', *International Surrealist Bulletin* 4 (1936), p. 15.
- 38 William Carlos Williams, *Selected Essays* (New York: Random House, 1954), pp. 132, 193.
- 39 Schiller, *Aesthetic Education*, p. 215 (Letter XXVII).
- 40 See John Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses* (London: Faber & Faber, 1992), p. 17.
- 41 Schlegel, *Athenaeum Fragment* 116, in Friedrich Schlegel's *Lucinde* and the Fragments, trans. and ed. Peter Firchow (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1971), p. 175.

- 42 Loy, 'Modern Poetry', in *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*, p. 159.
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Index

- Adams, John
 in Canto LXXI, 44
 in Canto LXXXIV, 35
 in *The Cantos*, 51
- Adorno, Theodor, 14, 180–2
 and Weber, 180
- advertising, 5, 7, 22–3
 influence of, 11
- Aldington, Richard
 and H. D., 159
 Some Imagist Poets, 126
- Allen, Donald, 214
- Altieri, Charles, 139
- An “Objectivists” Anthology*, 203
- Anderson, Margaret, 186
- anthology, 36, 46
 and publicity, 45
 as compilation, 41
 as education, 45
 as means of selection, 36
 Anthology of Revolutionary Poetry, The, 198
 Des Imagistes, 12
 Georgian Poetry 1918–1919, 1
 Palgrave’s Golden Treasury, 46
- Apollinaire, Guillaume, 4
 and advertising, 22
 and Simultaneism, 141
 and Stein, 155
- Arensburg, Walter, 114
- Armory Show, 106
- Arnold, Matthew, 14
- art’s relation to society, 13, 187–8,
 197–207
- Arts and Crafts movement, 14
- Ashbery, John, 218
- Athenaeum, The* 63
- Auden, W. H.
 and modernism, 189, 191
 on difficulty, 171
 The Orators, 189
- autonomy (of poem), 7–8
- avant-garde, 95, 163, 164
 against compromise, 144
 against fascism, 187
 against genre, 142
 and art–life division, 142, 144
 and audience relations, 145
 and black culture, 193
 and consumerism, 145
 and feminism, 143
 and ‘Language’ writing, 219
 and mainstream, 142, 145–6
 and manifestos, 142–5
 and modernism, 186
 and organic form, 188
 and performance, 142
 and ‘post-avant’ poetry, 221
 and Puritans, 176
 and sexuality, 163
 and transnationalism, 142
 anti-personal composition, 142
 as postmodernism, 214
 Blaise Cendrars and, 141
 characteristics of, 141–2
 experiments with layout, 14
 hybrid works, 141
 influence of, 145
 Kurt Schwitters and, 141
 left-wing origins, 142

- avant-garde (*cont.*)
 military origins, 144
 rivalries of, 144
 sound poetry, 4, 141
 theorists of, 145
 use of chance, 14
- Baker, Houston A., 21, 186
- balance (in art), 13
- Ball, Hugo, 141
- banks, 10
 creation of consumer mentality,
 11
- Baraka, Amiri, 218
- Barker, George, 191
- Baudelaire, Charles
 as *flâneur*, 22
 as reactionary, 74
 in *The Waste Land*, 70
 on crowds, 12, 22
 on modernity and time, 25
 on the dandy, 59
- Bauhaus, The, 14, 143
- Baxter, Richard, 127
- Beard, George, 22
- Beat poetry
 and Mina Loy, 216
 and orality, 25
 and Pound, 55
- Beeching, John, 198
- Benjamin, Walter, 13
- Bergson, Henri, 26–7
- Black Mountain College, 215
 and Pound, 55
- Blackmur, R. P., 122
- Blake, William, 58
 and difficulty, 182
- Blast*
 and popularity, 143
 and posters, 22
 and T. S. Eliot, 63
 as vortex, 45
 on individualism, 15
- Bogan, Louise, 191
- Brathwaite, Kamau, 81
- Breton, André
 and avant-garde, 144
 and left-wing alliances, 197
- British Poetry Revival, 219
- broadcasting, 24
- Brook, Peter, 209
 and postmodernism, 214
- Brooks, Gwendolyn, 193
- Brown, Bob, 221
- Brown, Sterling, 192
- Browning, Robert, 41
 Eliot on, 74
- Bunting, Basil, 211–13
 against hierarchy, 213
 and British Poetry Revival, 219
 and difficulty, 169
 and Objectivism, 203
 and orality, 25
 and performance, 219
 and Pound, 211
 and Quakers, 213
 and regionalism, 212
 as late modernist, 219
Briggflatts, 211–13
 on poetry as craft, 211
 ‘On the Fly-Leaf of Pound’s *Cantos*,
 191
 ‘The Well of Lycopolis’, 211
- bureaucracy, 10, 11
- Bürger, Peter, 145
- Burnshaw, Stanley, 137
- Bynner, Witter, 185
- Cabaret Voltaire, 141
- Cage, John, 214
- Camera Work, 106
- Carpenter, Edward, 163
- Catholic Anthology*, 36
- Catullus, 52
- Cavalcanti, Guido, 43
- Cendrars, Blaise, 4, 145
 ‘Contraste’, 18
Prose du Transsibérien, 14, 141, 188
- Césaire, Aimé, 200
- Chaplin, Charlie, 75

- cinema, 25
- cities, 4, 21–2
 and blasé attitude, 22
 and nerves, 22
 and unconscious, 20
 in Eliot, 61
- Close Up*, 163
- Coffey, Brian, 219
- Coleridge, Samuel Taylor
 in Eliot, 74
 on art and society, 14
 on free verse, 24
- collective consciousness, 8
 and ritual, 29
 and séances, 19–20
 in Eliot, 63
- concrete poetry, 188
- confessional poetry, 214
- Constructivism, 141, 143
- Crane, Hart, 107–10
 and Black Mountain poetics, 216
 and homosexuality, 108
 and *The Waste Land*, 108
 ‘Atlantis’, 109
 ‘Garden Abstract’, 107
 on Eliot’s ‘Rhapsody’, 108
The Bridge, 109
 ‘The Tunnel’, 108–9
 Whitman’s influence on, 107
- Creeley, Robert, 215
 impact on ‘Language’ writers, 219
- Criterion, The*, 63
 Ezra Pound in, 41
- Cullen, Countee, 192
- Cummings, E. E., 199
 and typography, 188
 compared to Olson, 216
- Cummins, Geraldine (medium), 20
- Cunard, Nancy, 193
- Dadaism
 and Cabaret Voltaire, 141
 and popular culture, 17
 and Pound, 50
 and primitivism, 188
- Manifesto (1918), 17
 mixing high and low art, 143
 on artist and audience, 8
 on journalism, 22
 on spontaneity, 143
 sound-poetry, 147
 spontaneous composition, 14
- dandyism, 59
 and Stevens, 139
- Daniel, Arnaut, 35
- Dante (Alighieri)
 in *The Waste Land*, 63, 68
La Vita Nuova, 90
Purgatorio, 34
- Davies, Hugh Sykes, 15
- de Duve, Thierry, 174
- Delaunay, Sonia, 141
- Demuth, Charles, 114
- Dial, The*
 and Eliot, 63
 and Marianne Moore, 126
- Diepeveen, Leonard, 169
- difficulty, 3, 5
 Adorno’s arguments for, 180–2
 against domination, 172
 against expertise, 174
 and America, 105
 and anti-didacticism, 123
 and artistic elitism, 16
 and citizen reform, 173–6
 and cultural omnivorousness, 183
 and diversity, 182–4
 and elitism, 176–80
 and exclusion, 166, 169
 and fan clubs, 179
 and immersion, 166
 and mainstream, 182
 and marketing, 182
 and meaning as property, 168
 and ordinary life, 170–1
 and professionalisation, 177
 and reader participation, 175–6
 and Schiller, 171
 and T. S. Eliot, 170
 and the University, 176–80

- difficulty (*cont.*)
 as anti-narcotic, 171
 as artistic strategy, 169, 171–3
 as discipline, 176
 as ethical duty, 181
 as means to universality, 174
 as resistance to homogenisation,
 181
 in older poets, 167
 Steiner's types of, 167–8
- disenchantment, 28
- documentary, 199–201
- Donne, John, 60
 difficulty of, 175
- Dorn, Ed, 216
- Douglas, Major C. H., 46–8
- Duchamp, Marcel
 and mass production, 145
 and Williams, 114
- Duncan, Robert, 216
- Durkheim, Émile
 on re-enchantment, 30
 theories of, 29
- Eagleton, Terry, 217
- Eastman, Max, 197–8
- Edwardianism, collapse of, 16
- Egoist, The*, 22
 and Eliot, 63
 and social reform, 173
- Eigner, Larry, 219
- electricity, 23–5
- Eliot, T. S.
 'Ash-Wednesday', 218
 'Bolo' poems, 73
 'Eeldrop and Appleplex', 11, 191
 'Mr Eliot's Sunday Morning Service',
 4
After Strange Gods, 76
 against 'inner voice', 66
 against amateurs, 177
 against Georgians, 65
 against Imagists, 65
 against liberalism, 74, 77
 and America, 80
 and anti-semitism, 76–7
 and automatism, 61
 and avant-garde, 146
 and banking, 63, 71
 and biography, 72
 and Blake, 58
 and Blitz, 78
 and canon, 185
 and Christianity, 77–80
 and classicism, 50, 63, 67, 73–4
 and David Jones, 196
 and definition of modernism, 221
 and difficulty, 71, 167
 and 'dissociation of sensibility',
 170
 and F. H. Bradley, 63–5
 and grail legends, 68
 and hysteria, 60
 and impersonality, 215
 and marketplace, 187
 and music hall, 75
 and Objectivism, 203
 and organicism, 66
 and post-colonialism, 80
 and postmodernism, 218
 and Q. D. Leavis, 75
 and ritual, 75
 and Schiller, 74
 and social reform, 173
 and tradition, 105
 and WWI poetry, 195
 and Zukofsky, 202
Ash-Wednesday, 77–8
 'Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleistein
 with a Cigar', 76
 Choruses from *The Rock*, 76
 contradictions of, 57–8
 critical reputation, 3
 cultural and political criticism,
 73–7
 disliked by Olson, 216
 early criticism, 65–7
Four Quartets, 78–80
 impersonality, 66
 in *Catholic Anthology*, 36

- individualism, 63
 influenced by Baudelaire, 12
Inventions of the March Hare, 62
Knowledge and Experience in the Work of F. H. Bradley, 58
 leaving America, 105
 marriage, 63, 72–3, 77
Murder in the Cathedral, 72
Notes towards the Definition of Culture, 63
 on ‘dissociation of sensibility’, 74
 on ‘mythic method’, 30
 on authorial ignorance, 168
 on dandyism, 59
 on democracy, 74
 on Durkheim, 30
 on free verse, 59
 on Imagism, 42
 on inarticulacy, 178
 on individual and collective, 63–7
 on intuition, 180
 on literary heritage, 11
 on Pater, 60
 on poem as medium, 20
 on poetic autonomy, 73
 on popular culture, 75–6
 on smells, 62
 ‘Preludes’, 61–2
 relation of form and history, 187
 ‘Rhapsody on a Windy Night’, 62
 romanticism of, 186
The Criterion, 63
The Family Reunion, 70
 ‘The Love-Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’, 58–61, 80
 ‘The Metaphysical Poets’, 74, 170, 176
The Waste Land, 4, 63, 68–73
 as radio, 24
 difficulty of, 172
 quoted by Pound, 35
 simultaneous time, 9
 ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’, 65–7, 72, 80
 use of quotation, 8, 14, 15
- Eliot, Vivien, 63, 72, 77
 Ellington, Duke, 182
 Ellis, Havelock, 163
 Emerson, Ralph Waldo, 14
 and cosmic individualism, 191
 empire, 4, 7, 10, 11, 21, 43, 193–5
 and America, 124
 ends vs. means in poetry, 9–10, 13, 25
Exile, The, 202
- Fascism
 and Eliot, 75
 and Pound, 54–6
 and Yeats, 100
- Fearing, Kenneth, 198
 Fenollosa, Ernest, 42
 Ficino, Marsilio, 52
 Fisher, Roy
 A Furnace, 3, 219
- Flaubert, Gustave, 14
 Fletcher, John Gould, 22
 Formalism, Russian, 174
 Forster, E. M., 177
 Foster, Roy, 83, 100
- found materials (as artistic method), 10
- fragments, 6–7
 and difficulty, 171
 and H. D., 159
 and Judaism, 182, 202
 and Oppen, 209
 and war, 18
 as connective nodes, 17
 in Dada, 142
 in *The Waste Land*, 69–70, 71
 opposition to ends–means, 9
 poetic significance of, 9–10
 Schiller’s analysis of, 12
- Frazer, J. G., 27
- free verse, 7, 10, 12, 24
 and America, 104
 and Black Mountain poetics, 215
 and elitism, 186

- free verse (*cont.*)
 and Imagism, 37
 and sex reform, 173
 in translation, 42
 relation of mind and body, 14
 T. S. Eliot on, 59
 Yeats's dislike of, 91–3
- Freud, Sigmund, 27
 and H. D., 162–3
 and modernist self-justification, 187
 Anna O. and hysteria in, 20
- Frost, Robert, 179
 and modernism, 185, 189–90
- Funaroff, Sol, 198
- Futurism, 2, 3, 4, 6, 141, 147–50
 against the past, 147
 and art–life relation, 148
 and circuses, 17, 143
 and impersonality, 148
 and Loy, 149
 and speed, 148
 and violence, 148
 cookery, 147
 Marinetti on syntax, 18
 misogyny, 149
 rivalry with Pound, 4
 simultaneous time, 9
 Variety Theatre, 147
 ‘Words-in-Freedom’, 147
- Gaudier-Brzeska, Henri, 38, 43
- Georgian Poetry 1911–12*, 37
- Georgian Poetry 1918–19*, 1
- Gershwin, George, 182
- Ginsberg, Allen
 and confession, 183
 and Whitman, 107, 218
- Gold, Mike, 199
 and Zukofsky, 202
 on ‘proletarian realism’, 198, 205
- Golden Treasury of English Songs and Lyrics* (Palgrave’s anthology), 46
- Graham, W. S., 219
- gramophone, 25
- Graves, Robert
A Survey of Modernist Poetry, 176
 on modernism and democracy, 31
 on withdrawal of the will, 14
- Greek Anthology, The*, 41
- Gris, Juan, 117
- Guest, Barbara, 216
- H. D., 4, 158–65
 and Aldington, 165
 and art-life relation, 163
 and bisexuality, 146, 162
 and *Borderline*, 163
 and broadcasting, 25
 and *Close Up*, 163
 and feminism, 160
 and film, 163–4
 and fragments, 161
 and Freud, 162–3
 and *Greek Anthology*, 161
 and Kenneth MacDonald, 159
 and Pound, 146, 159
 and pre-industrial culture, 217
 and ready-mades, 165
 and Sappho, 161, 162
 and séances, 215
 biography, 159
 erased from canon, 4, 186
Euripides’ Ion, 165
 ‘Eurydice’, 159
Helen in Egypt, 20, 159
 in *Des Imagistes*, 36
 leaving America, 105
 love-triangles, 159
Notes on Thought and Vision, 163
 on fragments, 105
 post-WWII reputation, 216
 ‘Sea-Rose’, 160–1
 ‘The Master’, 162, 164
 Trilogy, 20, 159–60, 161, 164–5
 wealth of, 178
- Hamilton, Alexander, 120

- Hardy, Thomas, 74, 179
- Harlem Renaissance, the, 187
and authenticity, 193
formal poetry of, 192
- Harrison, Jane, 8
and Durkheim, 27
on Pandora, 30
theories of religion, 26
- Harrison, Tom, 200
- Hartley, Marsden, 114
- Harvey, David, 218
- Heap, Jane, 186
- Henderson, Alice Corbin, 23
- Hennings, Emmy, 141
- heteronomy (of poem), 7–8
- Hirschfeld, Magnus, 173
- Holtby, Winifred, 23
- Homer, 44
- Horace
and difficulty, 167
- Hughes, Langston, 192–3
‘America’, 192
and vernacular, 192
‘The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain’, 192
- Hulme, T. E., 43
against automatism, 11
and Imagism, 12
‘Romanticism and Classicism’, 73
- Hurston, Zora Neale, 193
- Huyssen, Andreas, 146
on feminisation of popular culture, 176
on postmodernism, 214
- Iamblichus, 52
- Imagism, 4, 11, 185
and advertising, 22
and anthologies, 37
and D. H. Lawrence, 190
and haiku, 41
and Marianne Moore, 126
in America, 106
manifesto of, 37
self-consciousness of, 189
- individualism, 8, 11, 17, 22, 40, 185–8
and collective consciousness, 8
and Social Credit, 46
atomisation, and 11
in Williams, 121
- industrialism
effects on society, 12
opposed to free verse, 24
- James, Henry
‘In the Cage’, 69
- James, William, 27, 105
- Jameson, Fredric, 219
- Jarrell, Randall, 214
- jazz, analogy with modernism, 4
- Jefferson, Thomas, 11
- Jencks, Charles, 218
- Jolas, Eugene, 15
- Jones, David, 11, 18, 195–7
Eliot on, 180
In Parenthesis, 18, 195–7
The Anathemata, 197
- Joyce, James
Finnegans Wake, 190
in *Des Imagistes*, 36
T. S. Eliot on, 30
- Jung, Carl, 88
- Kandinsky, Wassily, 217
- Kees, Weldon, 191
- Kenner, Hugh, 186
- Kermode, Frank, 186
- Khlebnikov, Velimir, 147
- Kreymborg, Alfred
and Mina Loy, 150
edits *Others*, 185
- Laforgue, Jules, 59, 176
- ‘Language’ writing, 218
and ‘objective’ poetics, 110
- Larkin, Philip
and Adorno, 180
on difficulty, 179

- Late modernism, 219–21
 and epic, 219
 problems of definition, 220
- Lawrence, D. H., 74, 173
 and modernist poetics, 190
 ‘Elemental’, 190
- Le Bon, Gustave 21
- Leavis, F. R., 177
 and Eliot, 178
 and Schiller, 14
- Lenin, Vladimir Ilyich, 205
- Levertov, Denise, 216
- Lewis, Wyndham, 22
 T. S. Eliot on, 30
- Lindsay, Vachel, 106
- little magazines, 16
 and counter-public sphere, 22
- Little Review, The*, 22
 anti-popular stance, 220
- Lloyd, David, 96
- Lloyd, Marie, 75
- Lowell, Amy, 106
 and cosmic poetry, 191
Some Imagist Poets, 126
 ‘*Tendencies in Modern Poetry*’, 191
- Lowell, Robert 183
- Loy, Mina
 against newspapers, 11
 and avant-gardes, 146
 and broadcasting, 25
 and Christian Science, 152
 and Futurism, 149–53
 and sex-reform, 173
 and sexuality, 146, 150
 and tramps, 152
 and Williams, 114
 ‘Aphorisms on Futurism’, 149
 as ‘the modern woman’, 145
 ‘Brancusi’s Golden Bird’, 152
 erased from canon, 4, 186
 Feminist Manifesto, 149
 ‘Gertrude Stein’, 152
 in *Others*, 106
 ‘Lion’s Jaws’, 149
 on avant-garde, 145
 on Gertrude Stein, 153–5
 on hybrid America, 105
 on journalism, 23
 on poetry and the market, 17
 on universal consciousness, 15
 ‘Parturition’, 151
 ‘Psycho-democracy’, 151–2
 ‘Songs to Joannes’, 150–1
 ‘The Effectual Marriage’, 149
 ‘There is no Life or Death’, 152
- Lukács, Georg, 197
- Mac Low, Jackson, 218
- MacDiarmid, Hugh, 219
- machines, 10
- Madge, Charles, 200
- Mailla, Joseph-Anne-Marie de Moyriac
 de, 51
- Mallarmé, Stéphane, 12
- manifesto
 and avant-garde, 142–5
 Bob Brown on ‘the readies’, 221
 Dada 1918, 22
 Imagist, 37
- Mann, Thomas, 84
- Marcuse, Herbert, 14
- Marinetti, Filippo, 147–9
 and Mussolini, 149
 and typography, 188
 metal book, 145
Zang Tumb Tuumb, 168
- Marquis, Don, 169
- Mass Observation, 200
- Masses, The*, 197
- Masters, Edgar Lee, 106
- Matisse, Henri, 155
- Maurras, Charles, 74
- McKay, Claude, 192
- Mead, G. R. S., 85
- memory, 6, 26
- metre
 and Harlem Renaissance, 192
 and war poetry, 195
 and Yeats, 91–3
 modernism’s break with formal, 9

- Middleton Murry, John, 66
Migrant, 188
 Miller, Cristanne, 125
 Milton, John, 167
 Mirrlees, Hope
 and city, 21
 and re-enchantment, 29
 and war, 19
 as commuter, 23
 as *flâneuse*, 22
 layout of Paris, 14
 modernist style, 3
 on Catholic ritual, 30
 on Freud, 20
 Paris: A Poem, 4–10
 and cinema, 25
 as broadcast, 24
 on Freud, 20
 suppresses *Paris*, 4
 modernism
 American and European, 105
 definitions of, 3–4
 discontent with modernity, 10–12
 modernist poetry
 against hierarchy, 14
 against mediation, 31, 55, 101, 118
 American and European, 105
 and advertising, 22–3
 and African-American poetry, 187, 191–5
 and America, 104–10
 and anthology, 36–7
 and anti-commercial publishing, 220
 and art–life relation, 87, 114
 and Beats, 215
 and Bergson, 27
 and broadcasting, 215
 and bureaucracy, 180
 and canon, 185–7
 and cinema, 25
 and cities, 8, 16, 21–2
 and collage, 105
 and context, 26, 73
 and continuous present, 174
 and counter-culture, 214–16, 218
 and crowds, 21
 and democracy, 16, 29, 74, 110
 and difficulty, 166–84
 and documentary, 199–201
 and electronica, 221
 and elitism, 176–80
 and experimental syntax, 5–7
 and feminist criticism, 186
 and formal pattern, 91–3
 and gramophone, 25, 71
 and heroic individualism, 185–8
 and homosexuality, 107
 and hysteria, 20
 and Judaism, 182, 209
 and ‘Language’ writing, 218–19
 and ‘late modernism’, 219–21
 and left-wing poetry, 187
 and mediation, 31
 and mediums, 66
 and multiple perspectives, 5
 and newspapers, 22–3
 and noise music, 221
 and occult, 95
 and photography, 25
 and popular culture, 17
 and ‘post-avant’, 221
 and postmodernism, 221–2
 and pragmatism, 104
 and primitivism, 188
 and professionalism, 178
 and quotation, 124
 and racism, 186
 and radio, 51
 and reader-relations, 73, 93
 and re-enchantment, 28, 92–3
 and ritual, 77–80
 and simultaneous time, 21
 and social reform, 173–6
 and social unity, 15–16
 and subject–object relations, 86
 and technology, 8, 23–5
 and telephones, 105
 and the internet, 221
 and the University, 176–80, 186

- modernist poetry (*cont.*)
 and unconscious, 20–1
 and war, 18–19, 195–7
 as active and passive, 24, 61, 92
 as cultural omnivorousness, 183
 as immersion, 5
 as re-enchantment, 26–30
 criticised by Left, 197–9
 crossing borders of art and life, 18
 defence against society, 16
 definitions of, 3–4
 democratic form, 13
 discontent with modernity, 10–12
 distinguished from modern poetry,
 3
 domination of reader, 189
 form and new media, 221
 Mass Observation as, 200
 opponents of, 179
 relation to society, 187–8
 ‘subjective’ vs. ‘objective’ styles, 110
 unsuitable for marginalised, 191
 use of references, 68–70
 Moholy-Nagy, László, 143
 money, 22
 Monro, Harold, 1
 Monroe, Harriet, 23, 106, 108
 and Objectivism, 202
 editing modernism, 186
 Moody, A. David, 56
 Moore, Marianne, 121–9
 against consumerism, 124
 against prejudice, 121
 always re-editing, 129
 and difficulty, 172
 and ephemera, 128
 and Imagism, 126
 and Objectivism, 203
 and poem titles, 188
 and references, 122
 and reticence, 126–7
 and sexuality, 126
 animal poems, 122
 as dandy, 126
 ‘Camellia Sabina’, 122
 ‘Efforts of Affection’, 122
 ‘Four Quartz Clocks’, 122
 ‘His Shield’, 129
 in *Others*, 106
 ‘Marriage’, 127
 ‘New Poetry since 1912’, 185
 on difficulty, 123
 on humility, 122
 on Pound’s difficulty, 180
 ‘Pedantic Literalist’, 127
 ‘People’s Surroundings’, 129
 ‘Poetry’, 129
 process of composition, 10
 ‘Silence’, 126
 ‘The Fish’, 127
 ‘The Jerboa’, 123–4
 ‘The Labors of Hercules’, 122
 ‘The Paper Nautilus’, 127
 ‘The Plumet Basilisk’, 122
 ‘The Steeplejack’, 122, 127
 ‘To a Snail’, 125
 ‘To a Steam-Roller’, 123
 use of quotation, 8, 14, 124–5
 use of rhyme, 128
 use of syllabics, 127
 use of titles, 15, 128
 ‘Voracities and Verities’, 122
 Mussolini, Benito, 11, 33, 53
 admired by Yeats, 100
 Eliot on, 75
 Pound’s attraction to, 36
 Myers, F. W. H., 20

Negro Anthology, 193
 Nelson, Cary, 187
 Neruda, Pablo, 200
 Nerval, Gerard de, 69
New Age, The, 86
 and social reform, 173
New American Poetry 1945–1960, The,
 214
 New Criticism, 186
 and poetry syllabus, 178
New Masses, 198
New Statesman, The, 63

- newspapers, 22–3
 and Social Credit, 47
 as propaganda, 11
 Bunting on, 213
 Daily Express, 6
 Daily Mail, 63
 opposition to individuality, 11
 Yeats's contempt for, 92
- Niedecker, Lorine, 209–11
 and working-class, 210
 'Fall', 210
 Homemade/Handmade Poems, 210
 on Zukofsky, 206
 revived interest in, 216
- North, Michael, 193
- O'Duffy, Eoin, 100
- O'Hara, Frank, 218
- Objectivism, 4, 202–4
 membership of, 203
 redefines modernist politics, 209
 relation to American modernism, 109
- occult, the
 and broadcasting, 215
 and mediums, 8
 and new physics, 25
 séances and poetry, 19–20
- Okigbo, Christopher, 195
- Olson, Charles, 169, 215–17
 altering modernist canon, 215
 and 'field theory', 215
 and Objectivism, 215
 and politics, 217
 and pre-industrial society, 217
 and Yeats, 215
 defining 'postmodern', 214
 field theory, 25
 Maximus, 216–17
 'Projective Verse', 214, 217
 Whitman's influence on, 107
- Oppen, George, 207–9
 and democracy, 209
 and difficulty, 169
 and Objectivism, 203
 and Pound, 208–9
 Discrete Series, 207
 dislikes avant-garde, 209
 Of Being Numerous, 208
 persecuted by FBI, 208
- Orage, Alfred, 47
- organic form
 and Black Mountain poetics, 215
 and context, 188
- Others*, 104, 106, 185
- OULIPO writing, 218
- Ovid
- Owen, Alex, 86
- Owen, Wilfred
 and modernism, 195
 'Insensibility', 195
 Yeats on, 89
- Paris Commune, 12
- Partisan Review*, 198
 and Williams, 115
- Pater, Walter, 60
- Pearse, Padraic, 96, 97
- Pervigilium Veneris*, 72
- Petronius, 68
- Picasso, Pablo, 155
- Plotinus, 45
- Poe, Edgar Allan, 12
 and Hart Crane, 108
- Poetry*, 106
 and Objectivism, 36
- Poetry Bookshop, 1
- Poggioli, Renato, 147
- postmodernism, 221–2
 and 'late modernism', 219–21
 and 'post-avant' poetry, 221
 and universities, 221
 definitions of, 214, 217
- Pound, Dorothy, 34, 43
- Pound, Ezra
 against business writing, 35
 against commodification of art, 181
 against democracy, 16
 against universities, 178
 and America, 104

- Pound, Ezra (*cont.*)
 and anthologies, 36–46
 and avant-garde, 144
 and Black Mountain poetics, 216
 and canon, 45, 185
 and Dada, 50
 and difficulty, 168
 and elitism, 167
 and exile, 44
 and fascism, 54–6
 and folk revival, 219
 and fragments, 161
 and Georgians, 39
 and H. D., 158
 and haiku, 38
 and ideograms, 34
 and Nietzsche, 54
 and Objectivism, 203
 and poetic influence, 43
 and postmodernism, 218
 and pre-industrial culture, 217
 and Quest Society, 85
 and Sigismundo Malatesta, 52
 and Social Credit, 46–9
 and subject-rhymes, 53
 and Thomas Jefferson, 52
 and translation, 41–3
 and troubadours, 36, 48
 and university, 45
 and WWI, 43, 48
 anti-semitism, 41
 as commuter, 23
Cathay, 42–3
Catholic Anthology, 36
Confucius to Cummings, 36
 critical reputation, 3
Des Imagistes, 12, 36
 economics and poetic form, 48
 editing *The Waste Land*, 73
 fascism, 11
 fusion of individual and cosmos, 54
Gaudier-Brzeska, 38
Guide to Kulchur, 178
 ‘Histrión’, 43
 ‘Homage to Sextus Propertius’, 43
 ‘How to Read’, 45
 Hugh Selwyn Mauberley, 49–50
 ‘In a Station of the Metro’, 23, 38–40
 in St Elizabeth’s hospital, 33
 influence on younger poets, 55
Jefferson and/or Mussolini, 105
 lack of metaphor, 52
 leaving America, 105
Make It New, 9
 Marianne Moore on, 180
 on ‘ideogrammic method’, 174
 on bankers, 41
 on beauty, 168
 on democracy, 36
 on difficulty, 180
 on electricity, 24
 on Eliot’s sense of smell, 62
 on epic, 51
 on Felicia Hemans, 46
 on folk-song, 17
 on Georgian Poetry, 37
 on Homer, 55
 on ideograms, 55
 on Imagist technique, 41
 on impersonality, 44
 on individualism, 40
 on inspiration as electricity, 24
 on journalism, 23
 on leadership, 31
 on luminous details, 24
 on Maj. William Bullitt, 33
 on Milton, 55
 on multidirectional poetry, 172
 on Mussolini, 53
 on poet as medium, 8
 on rhythm, 3, 38
 on spiritual, 53
 on T. S. Eliot, 35
 on the primitive, 55
 on universality, 15
 on vortex, 45
 on William Collins, 46
 on William Cowper, 46
 on Winston Churchill, 46
Pisan Cantos, 53

- poetry not vehicle of thought, 15
 politics of style, 33–6
Profile, 36
 ‘Radio Cantos’, 215
 rivalry with Futurism, 4
 ‘South-Folk in Cold Country’, 43
 subject-rhymes, 52
The Cantos, 4, 50–4
 and Olson, 215
 as anthology, 41
 as radio, 51
 Canto II, 44
 Canto LXXI, 44
 Canto LXXXIV, 33
 Canto V, 51
 Canto XLV, 53
 Canto XXII, 46
 difficulty of, 172
 length of, 8
 simultaneous time in, 9, 27
 ‘The River-Merchant’s Wife’, 42
 ‘The Serious Artist’, 40
 use of quotation, 8
 usury, 53
 primitivism, 187
 professionalisation, 4
 Prynne, J. H., 220
 and difficulty, 167
 ‘L’Extase de M. Poher’, 220
 ‘Question for the Time Being’, 220
 ‘Refuse Collection’, 220
- Rakosi, Carl, 203
 Ransom, John Crowe
 and Eliot, 178
 and ‘postmodern’, 214
 rationalism, 10, 11
 Read, Herbert, 200
 Reed, John, 197
 references
 and quotations, 8
 in *The Waste Land*, 68–70
 religion
 and irrational, 26
 and occult, 95
 anthropology of, 27
 festivals, 8
 Judaism and fragments, 202
 Judaism and modernism, 182
 modernist poetry as ritual, 26–30
 mysticism, 12
 primitive, 4
 Roman Catholicism, 4
 Reznikoff, Charles, 199
 and Objectivism, 203
 Richards, I. A., 178
 and Schiller, 14
 Riding, Laura Jackson, 191
 A Survey of Modernist Poetry, 176
 Rimbaud, Arthur, 12
 Romain, Jules, 8
 Rose, Jonathan, 177
 Rosenberg, Isaac, 76
 and modernist form, 195
 Ross, Ronald, 37
 Rothermere, Lady, 63
 Rukeyser, Muriel, 200–1
 and avant-garde, 146
 and photography, 25
 and readymades, 188
 ‘The Book of the Dead’, 200–1
 use of quotation, 8
 Russell, Bertrand, 72
- sales of poetry volumes, 3
 San Francisco Renaissance, 215
 Sandburg, Carl, 106, 185
 Sappho, 41, 49
 and H. D., 161
 Sassoon, Siegfried, 1–3
 and modernist form, 195
 ‘Repression of War Experience’, 195
 Schiller, Friedrich
 and American culture, 106
 and re-enchantment, 29
 influence on modernism, 14–16
 Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man, 12–14, 16
 play in, 13
 Schlegel, Friedrich, 17

- Schoenberg, Arnold, 182
 Schwitters, Kurt, 4, 141
Scrutiny, 177
 'Seafarer, The' (Anglo-Saxon Poem),
 41
 séances, 19–20
Seven Arts, 106
 Severini, Gino, 5–6
 Shakespeare, William
 and difficulty, 167, 182
 Antony and Cleopatra, 69
 Hamlet, 90
 King Lear, 90
 Romeo and Juliet, 93
 The Tempest, 69
 Sherry, Vincent, 76
 Shklovsky, Viktor, 174
 shopping, 30
 Sieffert, Marjorie A., 185
 Simmel, Georg, 27
 on money, 71
 'The Metropolis and Mental Life',
 21
 Simultaneism, 141
 Situationism, 145
Some Imagist Poets, 191
 Spicer, Jack, 215
 Squire, J. C., 169
 Steiglitz, Alfred, 114
 Stein, Gertrude, 153–8
 'A Waist', 153
 against description, 154
 against genteel art, 105
 against identity, 156
 against memory, 156
 and automatic writing, 20
 and Bergson, 154
 and Bernard Faÿ, 158
 and genius, 155
 and genre, 153
 and internal–external, 157–8
 and Loy, 153–5
 and Nazism, 158
 and Picabia, 157
 and Picasso, 106, 158
 and post-Impressionism, 155
 and simultaneousness, 155
 and telescoping, 154
 and unrecognisability, 156
 and William James, 155
 'Asparagus', 157
 cinematic style, 25
 continuous present, 9
 lesbianism, 146
 on war and poetry, 19
 Tender Buttons, 154, 157
 wealth of, 178
 'What Are Master-Pieces', 156
 Steiner, George
 on difficulty, 167
 Stevens, Wallace, 129–40
 Adagia, 135
 against form–content split, 134
 and active–passive relations, 135
 and aestheticism, 137
 and avant-garde, 146
 and dandyism, 139
 and difficulty, 172
 and faith, 130–1
 and Kant, 136
 and Marxist critics, 137–8
 and Objectivism, 203
 and Olson, 215
 and pluralism, 131
 and politics, 137–40
 and sounds, 133
 and suburbia, 140
 and 'supreme fiction', 130
 and unity of being, 131
 argument with Williams, 115
 as 'subjective' poet, 110
 'Examination of the Hero', 139
 form and context in, 188
 Harmonium, 137
 Ideas of Order, 137
 in *Others*, 106
 'Man and Bottle', 132
 'Man Carrying Thing', 132
 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction',
 138

- 'Of Modern Poetry', 139–40
 on reality and imagination, 135–8
 on resisting explanation, 172
Owl's Clover, 138
 relationship with reader, 8
 romanticism of, 186
 'Solitaire under the Oaks', 131–2
 strained marriage, 134
 'Sunday Morning', 130
 'The Idea of Order at Key West',
 136–7
 'The Latest Freed Man', 133
The Man with the Blue Guitar,
 138
 'The Plain Sense of Things', 135
 'The Snow Man', 135
 Stirner, Max, 40
 Stravinsky, Igor, 182
 subject–object distinctions, 6, 29
 Surrealism, 4, 141
 and flux, 27
 and left-wing alliances, 197
 and Mass Observation, 200
 and *Negro Anthology*, 193
 attacked by Marxists, 198
 'Exquisite Corpse', 142
 psychic automatism in, 14
 Symbolism
 French, 12
 in America, 110
 Pound on, 50
 Symons, Arthur, 59
 Synge, J. M., 95
 syntax (or lack of), 5
 and effect on meaning, 6
 and feminism, 146, 159
 and Futurism, 147
 and immersion, 166
 and inclusivity, 107
 and non-modernism, 191
 and organic form, 188
 and Stein, 157
 and War Poetry, 191
 effect on time, 8
 in Loy, 151
 in Niedecker, 210
 in Pound, 52
 in Symbolism, 12
 Tate, Allen, 109
 and Eliot, 178
 Täuber, Sophie, 141
 technology, 11
Teaching of English in England, The,
 177
 Tennyson, Alfred Lord, 42
 Eliot on, 74, 176
 Maud, 69
 Thomas, Dylan, 190
 Thomas, Edward, 189
 time
 and anthology, 41
 and modernist architecture, 173
 and Stein, 155
 and *The Waste Land*, 68
 Baudelaire on modernity, 25
 Bergson's theories of, 26
 elitism and, 187
 experimental use of, 3
 in *The Cantos*, 44
 in Yeats, 95
 simultaneous present, 6
Times Literary Supplement, The
 and Eliot, 63
 Tolson, Melvin B., 193–5
 Libretto for the Republic of Liberia,
 193
 Toomer, Jean, 193
transition
 on 'the readies', 221
 on universalism, 15
 'Proclamation', 109
 read by Dylan Thomas, 190
 Treaty of Versailles, 8, 18
 troubadours, 36
 and difficulty, 167
 and folk-song, 219
 Turnbull, Gael, 188
 Tzara, Tristan, 142
 on primitive, 188

- Unanimisme*, 8
 unconscious, the, 10, 20
 and religion, 28
 underworld, 4
 and Métro, 6
 in *The Waste Land*, 68
 Upward, Allen, 53
- Verlaine, Paul, 7, 12
 Virgil, 68
 Vorticism, 3, 141, 143
 and anthologies, 37
 and creation myth, 45
 individualism, 15
 on machinery as art, 143
- Walcott, Derek, 81
 war, 4, 18–19
 and difficulties of modernism,
 195–7
 indifference to individual, 11
 in *The Waste Land*, 68
 Ireland and WWI, 95
 Warhol, Andy, 214, 217
 Warren, Robert Penn, 178
 Weber, Max, 27
 and bureaucracy, 31
 on disenchantment, 28
 theories of religion, 27–9
- Weston, Jessie L., 68
 Whitman, Walt, 106–7
 and cosmic individualism, 192
 and reader's effort, 175
 in *The Waste Land*, 69
 Leaves of Grass, 104
 on democracy, 107
 on free verse, 104
 ‘Starting from Paumanok’, 107
- Williams, William Carlos, 10, 110–21
 against finance capital, 120
 against judgement, 111
 and avant-garde, 146
 and avant-gardes, 114
 and Cubism, 117
 and democracy, 116, 118–20
 and found texts, 114, 116
 and Objectivism, 203
 and objects, 110–13
 and Olson, 215
 and Pound, 120
 and racism, 115
 and syntax, 112
 and ‘variable foot’, 119
 argument with Wallace Stevens,
 115
 ‘Asphodel, That Greeny Flower’, 118
 ‘Brilliant Sad Sun’, 168
 in *Catholic Anthology*, 36
 in *Des Imagistes*, 36
 in *Negro Anthology*, 193
 in *Others*, 106
 In the American Grain, 119
 on difficulty, 170
 on free verse, 116
 on Marianne Moore, 117, 174
 on personality, 110
 on the poet as social regenerator, 15
 on poetry as news, 23
 on Pound, 181
 Paterson, 113, 120
 ‘field theory’ in, 25
 ‘Paterson’, 110, 112
 ‘Portrait of a Woman In Bed’,
 114–15
 rivalry with T. S. Eliot, 4, 119–20
 Spring and All, 116–20, 218
 The Embodiment of Knowledge, 119
 ‘The Red Wheelbarrow’, 116
 ‘The rose is obsolete’, 117–18
 ‘This Is Just to Say’, 114, 120–1
 ‘To a Poor Old Woman’, 111
 ‘To Close’, 114
 ‘To Elsie’, 120
 use of interruptions, 188
 ‘Young Woman at a Window’,
 111–12
- Winters, Yvor, 109
 Wolfe, Cary, 55
 Wonder, Stevie, 182
 Wordsworth, William, 167

- Yeats, George 85
- Yeats, William Butler
- 'A Dialogue of Self and Soul', 86
 - A Vision*, 83
 - against Catholic nationalism, 83, 95
 - against democracy, 16
 - against materialism, 97
 - against mediation, 101
 - against modernity, 11
 - 'An Irish Airman Foresees his Death', 88
 - and Anima Mundi, 94
 - and avant-garde, 146
 - and Bolshevik Revolution, 99
 - and Celtic Twilight, 82
 - and Dante, 90
 - and democracy, 98, 99–103
 - and Easter Rising, 95–7
 - and eugenics, 100
 - and fascism, 100
 - and folk, 101
 - and folk tradition, 92
 - and Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, 85
 - and Homer's *Iliad*, 84
 - and Irish Ascendancy, 83
 - and Irish Civil War, 97–9
 - and Iseult Gonne, 86, 100
 - and J. M. Synge, 95
 - and joy of tragedy, 102
 - and Maud Gonne, 82–5, 86, 96
 - and metaphor, 86
 - and Nietzsche, 102
 - and Nobel Prize, 99
 - and occultism, 85–95
 - and Romeo and Juliet, 93
 - and Seán MacBride, 96
 - and simultaneity, 27
 - and social reform, 173
 - and violence, 98–9, 102
 - 'Byzantium', 101–2
 - dynamic union of opposites, 87–91
 - early nationalism, 82
 - 'Easter 1916', 95–7
 - 'Ego Dominus Tuus', 89–90
 - form and context in, 188
 - 'General Introduction for my Work', 92
 - in *Catholic Anthology*, 36
 - 'In Memory of Major Robert Gregory', 88
 - 'Lapis Lazuli', 90–1
 - 'Leda and the Swan', 98–9
 - meditation on symbols, 14
 - nationalism, 12
 - 'Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen', 99
 - 'No Second Troy', 83–4
 - on Byzantium, 101–2
 - on folk-song, 17
 - on free verse, 91–3
 - on impersonality, 92
 - on Italian fascism, 54
 - on the joy of tragedy, 91
 - on leadership, 31
 - on Pound's *Cantos*, 52
 - on public opinion, 96
 - on Shakespeare, 92
 - on the poet's power, 91–5
 - on Wilfred Owen, 89
 - 'Politics', 84
 - romanticism of, 186
 - 'Sailing to Byzantium', 102
 - 'September 1913', 96
 - T. S. Eliot on, 30
 - 'The Cold Heaven', 93–5
 - 'The Second Coming', 98
 - 'The Symbolism of Poetry', 98
 - 'Under Ben Bulbin', 100
 - use of traditional forms, 8
- Yehoash [Solomon Blumgarten], 202
- Ziarek, Kryzstof, 110
- Zukofsky, Louis, 201–7
- "A"-1, 203
 - "A"-7, 205
 - "A"-8, 205
 - "A"-9, 206
 - "A"-14, 205
 - "A"-15, 206

Zukofsky, Louis (*cont.*)

“Mantis” An Interpretation’, 204

and anonymous artisans, 207

and Marianne Moore, 110

and music, 205

and Objectivism, 202–4

and Pound, 202

and readymades, 188

and sonnets, 205, 206

and *The Waste Land*, 202

and Wallace Stevens, 110

Creeley’s interest in, 216

Objectivist issue of *Poetry*, 36

on Judaism and fragments,

202

‘Poem Beginning “The”’, 202

poem-in-process, 206

process of composition, 10

‘Sincerity and Objectification’,

203–4

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