A HISTORY OF MODERNIST POETRY

Edited by
ALEX DAVIS and LEE M. JENKINS
A History of Modernist Poetry examines innovative anglophone poetries from decadence to the post-war period. The first of its three parts considers formal and contextual issues, including myth, politics, gender, and race, while the second and third parts discuss a wide range of individual poets, including Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, W. B. Yeats, Mina Loy, Gertrude Stein, Wallace Stevens, William Carlos Williams, and Marianne Moore, as well as key movements such as Imagism, Objectivism, and the Harlem Renaissance. This book also addresses the impact of both world wars on experimental poetries and the crucial role of magazines in disseminating and proselytising on behalf of poetic modernism. The collection concludes with a wide-ranging discussion of the inheritance of modernism in recent writing on both sides of the Atlantic.

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Lee M. Jenkins is Senior Lecturer in English at University College Cork, Ireland. She is the author of Wallace Stevens: Rage for Order (1999), The Language of Caribbean Poetry: Boundaries of Expression (2004), and The American Lawrence (2015). She has published many articles on American literature, modernism, and Caribbean poetry, and she has contributed chapters to The Black and Green Atlantic (2009), The Cambridge Companion to British and Irish Women’s Poetry (2011), and The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Poetry (2015).
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Glen MacLeod is the author of Wallace Stevens and Company (1983) and Wallace Stevens and Modern Art: From the Armory Show to Abstract Expressionism (1993), as well as numerous essays on American literature. He is Professor of English at the University of Connecticut, Waterbury.

Stephen Matterson is Professor of American Literature in the School of English at Trinity College, University of Dublin. He

Anthony Mellors is currently Professor of Poetry and Poetics at Birmingham City University. His work includes Late Modernist Poetics from Pound to Prynne (2005), The Lewknor Turn (2013), and The Christmas Album (2015).

Sally Minogue is a retired academic. She has published The Nature of Criticism, jointly with Colin Radford (1981), and was contributing editor of Problems for Feminist Criticism (1990), which in 2012 was republished in print and as an e-book. She and Andrew Palmer have collaborated on papers on First World War poetry and twentieth-century poetic responses to the First World War which have appeared in the Journal of Modern Literature and Word and Image. They are currently completing a monograph, Remembering the Dead: Poetry and the First World War.

Andrew Palmer is Principal Lecturer in Modern Literature at Canterbury Christ Church University. His teaching and research are focused on the literature of war in the twentieth century. With Sally Minogue, he has published papers on First World War poetry and they are now completing a monograph, Remembering the Dead: Poetry and the First World War, which will interrogate the ways soldiers of the war have been represented, mourned, and commemorated through poetry. He has also published papers on the travel writing of Bruce Chatwin and Ray Davies’s seminal Kinks album, Arthur.
ADAM PIETTE is a Professor of Modern Literature at the University of Sheffield. He is the author of *Remembering and the Sound of Words: Mallarmé, Proust, Joyce, Beckett* (1996), *Imagination at War: British Fiction and Poetry, 1939–1945* (1995), and *The Literary Cold War, 1945 to Vietnam* (2009). He co-edited *The Edinburgh Companion to Twentieth-Century British and American War Literature* (2012) and is co-editor of the poetry journal *Blackbox Manifold*.


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monograph, *Colleen Modernism: Experience and Experiment in Irish Women’s Writing*.


TIMOTHY YU is the author of *Race and the Avant-Garde: Experimental and Asian American Poetry since 1965*. He is Associate Professor of English and Asian American Studies and Director of the Asian American Studies Program at the University of Wisconsin–Madison.
Preface

*A History of Modernist Poetry* provides a survey of anglophone poetic modernisms, from the 1890s to the 1940s and beyond. The volume takes cognisance of the renaissance in the study of modernisms that has been underway since the late 1990s, reflecting and contributing to the sea change in the discipline brought about by the New Modernist Studies: the opening-up of the canon to include modernist poets who, whether on grounds of gender, ethnicity, or poetic praxis, were marginalised within earlier understandings of modernism; and the extension of the chronology of modernism to the Second World War and the decolonising era of the 1960s, in which the legacies of the modernists were creatively re-interpreted by poets according to their own agendas. At the same time, however, the present *History* acknowledges the profound and inescapable contribution to poetic modernism of, for example, Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot, poets long recognised as canonical. While *A History of Modernist Poetry* registers recent developments in scholarship, it also recognises that a literary history is, by definition, distinct from the often enabling ‘turf wars’ of literary criticism, in that it must provide, as far as is possible, an ‘objective’ and accurate perspective on modernist poetry in history.

This *History* offers, in one volume, a comprehensive resource which encompasses detailed readings and historical contextualisations of major modernist poets, movements and schools within poetic modernism, and discussion of the origins, formal innovations and thematic, political, racialised, and gendered preoccupations of modernist poetry, from the *fin de siècle*
to the post–Second World War period. Owing to its subject area’s relatively recent periodisation, there is a pressing need for a history of a genre which pays attention to the large array of innovative, lasting, and influential works of the modernist era – works increasingly recognised as comparable to the major poetic texts of the early modern and romantic periods.

At Cambridge University Press, we would like to thank our editor, Dr Ray Ryan, and editorial assistant, Caitlin Gallagher; our Senior Project Manager, Sathish Kumar; and the anonymous readers for the Press. Thanks, too, to Claire Connolly and colleagues in the School of English and the College of Arts, Celtic Studies and Social Sciences at University College Cork, and to Sarah Hayden, who compiled the Chronology.
Chronology

Sarah Hayden

1818  Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*.
1852  Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*.
1855  Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*.
1867  Matthew Arnold, *On the Study of Celtic Literature*.
      Karl Marx, *Das Kapital*, vol. 1.
1872  Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*.
1873  Matthew Arnold, *Literature and Dogma*.
1882  Rudyard Kipling, *Barrack-Room Ballads and Other Poems*.
1884  Greenwich Mean Time introduced.
1885  Internal combustion engine developed.
      William James, *Principles of Psychology*.
1892  *The Book of the Rhymers’ Club* (a second anthology in 1894).
1895  W. B. Yeats, *Poems*.
      Independent Labour Party founded in Britain.
      Invention of the motion picture and of wireless.
1896  *The Savoy* magazine (Jan.–Dec.).
1897  Lionel Johnson, *Ireland and Other Poems*.
      *The Dome* magazine founded (until 1900).
1899  Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*.
Chronology

W. B. Yeats, *The Wind Among the Reeds.*

1900
W. B. Yeats, ‘The Symbolism of Poetry’.
Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams.*

1901
First Picasso exhibition in Paris at Galerie Ambroise Vollard.
Death of Queen Victoria; Edward VII accedes to the British throne.
Theodore Roosevelt elected to the US presidency.

1902–3
Georg Simmel, ‘The Metropolis and Modern Life’.

1902
John Masefield, *Salt-Water Ballads.*
Walter de la Mare, *Songs of Childhood.*
*Times Literary Supplement* founded.

1903
*Camera Work* magazine founded (until 1917).
Otto Weininger, *Sex and Character.*
Wright brothers’ first aeroplane flight.

1904
Thomas Hardy, *The Dynasts* (pt 1; pts 2 (1906) and 3 (1908)).

1905
Alfred Stieglitz opens 291, the Photo-Secession Gallery at 291 Fifth Avenue, New York.
Die Brücke Group formed in Dresden.
The ‘Fauves’ exhibit at the Salon d’Automne.
Albert Einstein, *Special Theory of Relativity.*
George Santayana, *The Life of Reason: Reason in Art.*
First Russian Revolution.

1906–11
Ferdinand de Saussure teaches his ‘Course in General Linguistics’ at the University of Geneva.

1907
*New Age* periodical founded (until 1922).
Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution.*

1908
Ezra Pound arrives in London.
*English Review* periodical founded (until 1937).
1909

William Carlos Williams, *Poems*.
The ‘School of Images’ meets at the Café de la Tour d’Eiffel, Percy Street, London.
Emil Nolde, ‘On Primitive Art’.
Poetry Recital Society founded (later New Poetry Society).
National Association for the Advancement of Colored People founded.

1910

W. B. Yeats, *The Green Helmet and Other Poems*.
Umberto Boccioni et al., ‘Futurist Painting: Technical Manifesto’.
F. T. Marinetti delivers ‘Futurist Speech to the English’ in London.
*Crisis* magazine founded (until 1934).
*Der Sturm* magazine founded (until 1932).
First Post-Impressionist Exhibition in London.
Death of Edward VII; George V accedes to the British throne.

1911


1912

Claude McKay, *Songs of Jamaica* and *Constab Ballads*.
Ezra Pound coins the term *Imagisme*; Pound, *Ripostes*.
Rainer Maria Rilke, *Duino Elegies* (until 1922).
Gertrude Stein, ‘Portrait of Mabel Dodge at the Villa Curonia’.
*Poetry: A Magazine of Verse* founded in Chicago (to present).
*Poetry Review* founded (to present).
Arnold Schoenberg, *Pierrot Lunaire*.
Guillaume Apollinaire, *The Cubist Painters*.
Marcel Duchamp, *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2* (withdrawn from Cubist room of Salon des Indépendants).
Robert Delaunay, ‘Note on the Construction of Reality in Pure Painting’.
Salon de la Section d’Or at the Galerie de la Boétie, Paris.
Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger, *On Cubism*.
Jane Harrison, *Ancient Art and Ritual*.
First Balkan War.
Fall of Adrianopole.
Sinking of the *Titanic*.

1912–13

Leo Frobenius, *The Voice of Africa*.

1913

William Carlos Williams, *The Tempers*.
F. S. Flint, ‘Imagisme’.
Ezra Pound, ‘A Few Don’ts by an Imagiste’.
Pound takes over literary editorship of the *New Freewoman* (later *The Egoist*).
Yeats awarded first *Poetry* prize.
*Poetry and Drama* magazine founded (until 1914).
Chronology


Roger Fry opens Omega Workshops in London. Marcel Duchamp, *Bicycle Wheel*.

Second Balkan War.

Woodrow Wilson elected to the US presidency. 1914

Robert Frost, *North of Boston*.

Wyndham Lewis, ‘Our Vortex’; *Enemy of the Stars*.

Amy Lowell, *Sword Blades and Poppy Seed*.


Stéphane Mallarmé, *Un Coup de dés* (posthumously).


Carl Sandburg, ‘Chicago’.

Gertrude Stein, *Tender Buttons*.

Clive Bell, ‘The Aesthetic Hypothesis’.

*Blast* magazine founded (second and final issue 1915).

*The Egoist: An Individualist Review* (formerly the *New Freewoman*) founded (until 1919).

*Little Review* founded (until 1929).

*Vanity Fair* magazine founded (until 1936).

Irish Home Rule Bill passed by Parliament. Archduke Franz Ferdinand is assassinated, triggering the commencement of the First World War. 1915


F. S. Flint, ‘The History of Imagism’.


Ezra Pound, *Cathay*.

Wallace Stevens, ‘Sunday Morning’.

291 magazine founded (until 1916).

*Blast*, 2 (War Number).

Marcel Duchamp begins work on *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (*The Large Glass*) (until 1923).

Kasimir Malevich, ‘From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Realism in Painting’.

Vorticist exhibition at the Doré Galleries, London.

D. W. Griffith, *The Birth of a Nation*.


Italy declares war on Austria.

1916

H.D., *Sea Garden*.

Robert Frost, *Mountain Interval*.

Tristan Tzara, *The First Celestial Adventure of Mr Antipyrine*.

W. B. Yeats, *Responsibilities and Other Poems*.

*Wheels: An Anthology of Verse* (annually until 1921).

First Dada performances at the Cabaret Voltaire, Zurich.

Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*.

Easter Rising in Dublin.

First Battle of the Somme.

Battle of Verdun.

1917

T. S. Eliot, *Prufrock and Other Observations*.

D. H. Lawrence, *Look! We Have Come Through!*

Mina Loy, ‘Songs to Joannes’.

Edna St Vincent Millay, *Renascence and Other Poems*.


Ezra Pound, *Homage to Sextus Propertius*.

William Carlos Williams, *Al Que Quiere!*

*391* magazine founded (until 1924).

*The Blindman* magazine founded (2 issues, April and May).

*Dada* magazine founded (until 1919).

*De Stijl* magazine founded (until 1932).
Guillaume Apollinaire’s *The Breasts of Tiresias* staged in Paris.

Sergei Diaghilev’s *Parade* staged in Paris.

Marcel Duchamp, *Fountain*, excluded from the first exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists, New York.

Opening of the First Independents Exhibition at the Grand Central Palace, New York (Williams reads ‘Overture to a Dance of Locomotives’).

United States enters First World War.

Rupert Brooke, *Collected Poems*.


Tristan Tzara, ‘Dada Manifesto 1918’.

*The Liberator* magazine founded (until 1924).

Novembergruppe Draft Manifesto.

Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*.

Lytton Strachey, *Eminent Victorians*.

Marie Stopes, *Married Love*.

Armistice (end of First World War).

Enfranchisement of women aged 30 and over in Britain.

Weimar Republic proclaimed.

Influenza pandemic.


Pound edits and publishes Fenellosa’s ‘The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry’.

Kurt Schwitters, *Anne Blume: Poetry*.

H.D., ‘Notes on Thought and Vision’ (published posthumously).

André Breton and Philippe Soupault, *The Magnetic Fields*.

*The Chapbook* magazine (originally the *Monthly Chapbook*) founded (until 1925).

*Littérature* magazine founded (until 1924, two series).
Walter Gropius, ‘Programme for the Staatliches Bauhaus in Weimar’.
KOMFUT, ‘Programme Declaration’.
Kasimir Malevich, ‘Non-Objective Art and Suprematism’.
J. M. Keynes, The Economic Consequences of the Peace.
Frederick Mott, War Neuroses and Shell Shock.
Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht are murdered.
Treaty of Versailles.
Volstead (Prohibition) Act passed by US Congress.
American Communist Party founded.

1920
T. S. Eliot, Ara Vos Prec; The Sacred Wood.
Ezra Pound, Hugh Selwyn Mauberley.
William Carlos Williams, Kora in Hell: Improvisations.
Contact magazine founded (until 1921; revived 1932).
The Dial magazine founded (until 1929).
The ‘Festival Dada’ takes place in the Salle Gaveau, Paris.
Francis Picabia, ‘Cannibal Dada Manifesto’.
The Société Anonyme is established in New York.
Jacques Maritain, Art and Scholasticism.
League of Nations created.
Nineteenth Amendment grants American women the vote.

1921
H.D., Hymen.
Aldous Huxley, Crome Yellow.
Marianne Moore, Poems.
William Carlos Williams, Sour Grapes.
Broom: An International Magazine of the Arts founded (until 1924).
Second Pan African Congress (London); ‘Pan African Manifesto’.

1922

E. E. Cummings, *The Enormous Room.*
Thomas Hardy, *Late Lyrics and Earlier.*
James Joyce, *Ulysses.*
Claude McKay, *Harlem Shadows.*
Edith Sitwell, *Façade.*

*The Criterion* magazine founded (until 1939).
The *Fugitive* magazine founded (until 1925).


Bronislaw Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific.*


British Broadcasting Corporation founded.

Creation of the Irish Free State.
The Soviet Union is formed.

Benito Mussolini is appointed Italian premier.

1923

Mary Austin, *The American Rhythm.*
T. S. Eliot, ‘*Ulysses, Order and Myth’.*

D. H. Lawrence, *Birds, Beasts and Flowers.*


Ezra Pound, the Malatesta Cantos.
Jean Toomer, *Cane.*

Gertrude Stein, ‘If I Told Him: A Completed Portrait of Picasso’.

Wallace Stevens, *Harmonium.*

William Carlos Williams, *Spring and All.*
Chronology


1924
H.D., Heliodora, and Other Poems.
Marianne Moore, Observations.
André Breton, ‘First Manifesto of Surrealism’.
T. E. Hulme, Speculations.
Saint-Jean Perse, Anabase.
Francis Picabia and René Clair, Entr’acte.
I. A. Richards, Principles of Literary Criticism.
Marianne Moore wins Dial Award and takes over editorship of The Dial (until 1929).
Lenin dies.
First Labour government elected in Britain.
Indian Citizenship Act passed in US.

1925
Countee Cullen, Color.
Nancy Cunard, Parallax.
Ford Madox Ford, No More Parades.
Langston Hughes, The Weary Blues.
Hugh MacDiarmid, Sangschaw.
Ezra Pound, A Draft of XVI Cantos.
William Carlos Williams, In the American Grain.
Virginia Woolf, Mrs Dalloway.
Alain Locke, ed., The New Negro.
Sergei Mikhailovich Eisenstein, Battleship Potemkin.
Scopes trial, Tennessee.

1926
Hart Crane, White Buildings.
Hugh MacDiarmid, A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle; Penny Wheep.
Fire!! magazine founded.
Crisis symposium, ‘The Negro in Art: How Shall He Be Portrayed?’
Louis Aragon, *Le Paysan de Paris*.
Bauhaus opens in Dessau.
General Strike in Britain.

1927
Langston Hughes, *Fine Clothes to the Jew*.
Gertrude Stein, ‘Patriarchal Poetry’.
Louis Zukofsky begins “A” (completed in 1978).
*American Caravan* founded (yearbook until 1936).
*transition* magazine founded (until 1938).
Wyndham Lewis, *Time and Western Man*.
Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*.
Alan Crosland, *The Jazz Singer*.
Fritz Lang, *Metropolis*.
Charles Lindbergh flies *The Spirit of St Louis* from New York to Paris.

1928
Robert Frost, *West-Running Brook*.
D. H. Lawrence, *Collected Poems*.
William Carlos Williams, *Voyage to Pagany*.
W. B. Yeats, *The Tower*.
Ezra Pound includes Louis Zukofsky’s ‘Poem beginning “The”’ in *The Exile*.
Dziga Vertov, *Man with a Movie Camera*.
Enfranchisement of women over 21 in Britain.

1929
Countee Cullen, *The Black Christ and Other Poems*.
Ezra Pound, ‘How to Read’.
I. A. Richards, *Practical Criticism*.
Edith Sitwell, *Gold Coast Customs*.
Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*.
*Documents* magazine founded (until 1930).
André Breton, ‘Second Manifesto of Surrealism’.
Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill, *The Threepenny Opera*.
Eugene Jolas et al., ‘Revolution of the Word’.
Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí, *Un chien andalou*.
Chronology

Wyndham Lewis, _Paleface: The Philosophy of the Melting Pot._
Wall Street crash.
Censorship of Publications Act (Ireland).

1930
Samuel Beckett, _Whoroscope._
Basil Bunting, _Redimiculum Matellarum._
Hart Crane, _The Bridge._
T. S. Eliot, _Ash-Wednesday._
Hugh MacDiarmid, _To Circumjack Cencrastus._
Ezra Pound, _A Draft of XXX Cantos._
William Empson, _Seven Types of Ambiguity._
Sigmund Freud, _Civilization and Its Discontents._
Allen Tate et al., _I’ll Take My Stand._
Death of D. H. Lawrence, in Vence.

1931–2

1931
Gertrude Stein, _How to Write._
‘Objectivists’ issue of _Poetry._
To Publishers founded by Louis Zukofsky.
Edmund Wilson, _Axel’s Castle._
Britain leaves the Gold Standard.

1932
W. H. Auden, _The Orators._
Sterling A. Brown, _Southern Road._
Wyndham Lewis, _The Enemy of the Stars._
T. S. Eliot, _Selected Essays._
F. R. Leavis, _New Bearings in English Poetry._
Michael Roberts, ed., _New Signatures._
Louis Zukofsky, ed., _An ‘Objectivists’ Anthology._
_Scrutiny_ magazine founded (until 1953).
Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party, ‘Decree on the Reconstruction of Literary and Artistic Organizations’.

1933
Wyndham Lewis, _One-Way Song._
Gertrude Stein, _The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas._
W. B. Yeats, *The Winding Stair and Other Poems*.  
*Minotaure* magazine founded (until 1939).  
The Objectivist Press founded (George Oppen, Louis Zukofsky, Charles Reznikoff, and William Carlos Williams).  
T. S. Eliot delivers Page-Barbour lectures at Virginia.  
Purge of Communist Party in USSR.  
Adolf Hitler becomes chancellor of Germany.  
Franklin Delano Roosevelt elected to the US presidency.  
Federal Emergency Relief Act passed in US.  

1934  
Hugh MacDiarmid, *Stony Limits and Other Poems*.  
Thomas MacGreevy, *Poems*.  
George Oppen, *Discrete Series*.  
Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading*.  
*Sewanee Review* founded.  
Max Ernst, *Une Semaine de bonté*.  
Virgil Thompson’s *Four Saints in Three Acts* opens on Broadway (sets by Florine Stettheimer, libretto by Gertrude Stein).  

1935  
Samuel Beckett, *Echo’s Bones and Other Precipitates*.  
William Empson, *Poems*.  
Marianne Moore, *Selected Poems*.  
Ezra Pound, *Jefferson and/or Mussolini*.  
Wallace Stevens, *Ideas of Order*.  
T. S. Eliot’s *Murder in the Cathedral* (verse drama) produced at the Canterbury Festival.  
Italy invades Abyssinia.  

1936  
Marianne Moore, *The Pangolin and Other Verse*.  
Michael Roberts, ed., *Faber Book of Modern Verse*.  

Chronology xxxi
Gertrude Stein, The Geographical History of America or the Relation of Human Nature to the Human Mind.
Dylan Thomas, Twenty-Five Poems.
International Surrealist Exhibition at the New Burlington Galleries, London.
MOMA stages exhibitions of ‘Cubism and Abstract Art’ and ‘Fantastic Art, Dada and Surrealism’.
Charlie Chaplin, Modern Times.
BBC Television commences broadcasting.
John Maynard Keynes, General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money.
Death of George V; Edward VIII abdicates; George VI accedes to the British throne.
Spanish Civil War begins.
Show trials in USSR.
League of Nations imposes economic sanctions on Italy.

1937
Denis Devlin, Intercessions.
David Jones, In Parenthesis.
Wallace Stevens, The Man with the Blue Guitar and Other Poems.
Picasso, Guernica.
Charles Madge, Humphrey Jennings, and Tom Harrisson start the Mass Observation project.
‘Degenerate Art’ and ‘Great German Art’ exhibitions open in Munich.
Sudeten crisis.

1938
Brian Coffey, Third Person.
Harriet Monroe, A Poet’s Life: Seventy Years in a Changing World.
Ezra Pound, Guide to Kulchur.

‘Exposition internationale du surréalisme’ at the Galerie des Beaux-arts, Paris.

Munich crisis.

House Un-American Activities Committee founded in US.

1939


Second World War commences.

1940

Gertrude Stein, ‘What Are Master-pieces and Why Are There So Few of Them’.

*The Bell* magazine founded (until 1954).

Charlie Chaplin, *The Great Dictator.*

British evacuation at Dunkirk.

1941

Charles Madge, *The Father Found.*


Japan attacks Pearl Harbor; United States enters Second World War.

1942


Patrick Kavanagh, *The Great Hunger.*

Wallace Stevens, *Parts of a World; Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction.*

José Garcia Villa, *Have Come, Am Here.*

1943

Hugh MacDiarmid, *Lucky Poet.*

Ezra Pound indicted for treason in the US.

1944

H.D., *The Walls Do Not Fall.*

T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets.*

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1945
Melvin Tolson, *Rendez-vous with America.*

H.D., *Tribute to the Angels.*

Pound arrested by FBI and imprisoned in Pisa.
End of Second World War in Europe and Far East.
Foundation of the United Nations.

1946
H.D., *Flowering of the Rod.*
Elizabeth Bishop, *North and South.*
Lorine Niedecker, *New Goose.*
Marcel Duchamp begins work on Étant donnés: 1 la chute d’eau/2 le gaz d’éclairage (until 1966).

1947
Gertrude Stein; *Four in America;* Stein’s *The Mother of Us All* is performed and published (posthumously).
Wallace Stevens, *Transport to Summer.*
Charles Olson, *Call Me Ishmael.*
India achieves independence.

1948
T. S. Eliot, Nobel Prize for Literature.
William Carlos Williams, ‘The Poem as a Field of Action’ (lecture).

1949
Formation of the Republic of Ireland.

1950
Wallace Stevens, *The Auroras of Autumn.*

1951
Langston Hughes, *Montage of a Dream Deferred.*
Lynette Roberts, *Gods with Stainless Ears.*
Wallace Stevens, *The Necessary Angel.*

1952
David Jones, *The Anathemata.*

1953
Charles Olson, first *Maximus* poems published.
Hugh MacDiarmid, ‘Towards a Celtic Front’.

1954
Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poems*.
Williams Carlos Williams, *The Desert Music*.

1955
Hugh MacDiarmid, *In Memoriam James Joyce: From a Vision of World Language*.
Ezra Pound, *Section: Rock-Drill de los Cantares*.
William Carlos Williams, *Journey to Love*.
Death of Wallace Stevens.

1956
John Ashbery, *Some Trees*.
Allen Ginsberg, *Howl and Other Poems*.

1957
Frank O’Hara, *Meditations in an Emergency*.
Situationist International formed.

1958
Georg Lukács, ‘The Ideology of Modernism’.

1959
Cid Corman publishes first twelve movements of Louis Zukofsky’s “A”.
David Jones, *Epoch and Artist*.
Ezra Pound, *Thrones de los Cantares*.

1960

1961
H.D., *Helen in Egypt*.
Thomas MacGreevy, ‘Moments Musicaux’ and ‘Breton Oracles’.

1962
George Oppen, *The Materials*.

1963
Death of William Carlos Williams.

1965
Basil Bunting, *Briggflatts*.
Death of T. S. Eliot.
David Gascoyne, *Collected Poems*.
Sylvia Plath, *Ariel*.
Charles Reznikoff, *Testimony: The United States (1885–1915)*.
Melvin Tolson, Book I of *Harlem Gallery: The Curator.*

1966
Louise Bennett, *Jamaica Labrish.*
Death of Mina Loy.

*English Intelligencer* magazine founded (until 1968).

1968
Lorine Niedecker, *North Central.*

1969
George Oppen awarded Pulitzer Prize for *Of Being Numerous* (1968).
Ezra Pound, *Drafts & Fragments of Cantos CX–CXVII.*
Louis Zukofsky, *Catullus.*

1970
Ted Hughes, *Crow: From the Life and Songs of Crow.*

1971
Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era.*

1972
David Jones, *The Dying Gaul and Other Writings.*
Death of Marianne Moore.
Death of Ezra Pound.

1973
Edward (Kamau) Brathwaite, *The Arrivants.*

1974
Tom Raworth, *Ace.*

1976
Charles Reznikoff, *Poems 1913–1936: Volume I.*

1977
Charles Reznikoff, *Poems 1937–1975: Volume II.*

1978
George Oppen, *Primitive.*
Louis Zukofsky, *80 Flowers* (posthumous).

1979

1980
Lyn Hejinian, *My Life.*

1982
Mina Loy, *The Last Lunar Baedeker.*
Tom Raworth, *Writing.*

1983
J. H. Prynne, *The Oval Window.*

1984
Okot p’Bitek, ‘Song of Lawino’ and ‘Song of Ocol’.
1985 Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths.*
1987 Kamau Brathwaite, *X/Self.*
1999 Lorna Goodison, *Turn Thanks.*
2011 Daljit Nagra, *Tippoo Sultan’s Incredible White Man Eating Tiger Toy Machine!!!
What, When, and Where was modernism? Is modernism a period or a paradigm, an era or a style? Is modernism solely the product of metropolitan modernity, or equally of local, even peripheral, spatialities? Is modernism an ‘international’ or even transnational phenomenon, or is it wedded to notions of cultural nationalism and regional identity? Does modernism mark a moment of avant-garde rupture with its late nineteenth-century poetic antecedents, or a refection and continuation of their preoccupations? Is Pound’s famous injunction, to ‘Make it new!’, a revolutionary or a reactionary call-to-arms? Arguably, these binaries are specious, and modernism is better understood, in the words of one of the great late modernist set-pieces, Wallace Stevens’s ‘Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction’ (1942), as ‘not a choice / Between excluding things. It was not a choice / / Between, but of’. After all, the emphasis in ‘Make it new’ falls as much on the ‘it’ of the tradition in need of renewal as on the innovation of the ‘new’ itself.

In what follows, modernist poetry is understood as having its roots in the fin de siècle even as it reflects and refracts the climate of the new century, as an affair of the city and imperial centre, and of what Scottish poet Hugh MacDiarmid termed the ‘stony limits’ of the periphery; and as a variegated field of formal experiments, whether iconoclastic rejections of the past or embattled recuperations of it.

Anglophone modernist poetry, like the Titanic, was launched and fitted-out in 1911–12, the product, as was the White Star Liner, of American, British, and Irish interests. In 1911, the American poet
H.D. (Hilda Doolittle) had re-encountered in London Ezra Pound, fellow-expatriate and former intimate, and been introduced to her future husband, the English writer Richard Aldington. In 1912, the recent poetry of this close-knit London-based, transatlantic nexus was christened *Imagisme* by Pound, who would vigorously proselytise on its behalf until exiting the movement in 1914 to enter the ‘Great London Vortex’ of Wyndham Lewis’s Vorticist movement, the short-lived but megaphonic mouthpiece of which was the magazine *Blast* (two issues, 1914–15).

In 1912 and 1913 poems by Aldington and, in Pound’s nomenclature, ‘H.D. Imagiste’, had appeared in the Chicago-based magazine *Poetry: A Magazine* (founded in 1912 by Harriet Monroe, for whom Pound acted as ‘Foreign Correspondent’). These foundational texts were swiftly followed in the latter year, again in the pages of *Poetry*, by a disingenuously disinterested ‘note’ (attributed to F. S. Flint) on the tenets of ‘Imagisme’, accompanied by Pound’s mildly pugnacious ‘A Few Don’ts by an Imagiste’. Yet Pound had already declared the arrival of *Les Imagistes* in a prefatory note to ‘The Complete Poetical Works of T. E. Hulme’, which he appended to his 1912 collection *Ripostes*, published shortly before Aldington’s ‘Three Poems’ appeared in *Poetry*. In so doing, Pound brings Imagism into being by means of what is tantamount to a performative utterance, while simultaneously acknowledging a precursor in the poetry and poetics of Hulme and his ‘forgotten school of 1909’ (which had included Flint and Pound), whose base of operations had been the Tour Eiffel restaurant off Tottenham Court Road in Soho. Imagism’s pre-history in Hulme’s splinter group (it had ‘seceded’ from the far more sedate Poets’ Club) is further substantiated by Hulme’s paper ‘Romanticism and Classicism’ (which may date from 1909 or, more probably, 1911–12), which advocates a proto-Imagist visuality and concreteness in the course of cheerfully writing the death-notice of ‘romanticism’. By 1908–9, Hulme and other members of the ‘school’, including the Irish poet Joseph Campbell, were experimenting – after the examples of Whitman and French *vers libristes* – with the rhythms of free verse. In a further regress, Hulme’s group had tangential connections with the Rhymers’ Club.
(1890–c. 1904), founded by W. B. Yeats and the Anglo-Welsh
Ernest Rhys. The latter gathering at the Cheshire Cheese pub in
London’s Fleet Street was – in the strong Celticism of a number of its
members and its affiliations to decadence – imbricated in the Irish
Literary Revival of the late nineteenth century, even as it looked
back both to the example of Baudelaire and French symbolism.

Imagism thus provides a self-declared point of origin for poetic
modernism as well as a micronarrative of the broader transnational
exchanges and tensions which would come to define the movement
after Pound. Unlike the Titanic, Imagism successfully crossed the
Atlantic, when Amy Lowell took the helm of what was now dubbed
‘Amygism’ by a disenchanted Pound. For all that the verbal and
emotional economy of the Imagist poem makes it the verse equiva-

tent of a techné of modernity like the telegram, however, Imagism is
also the product of its own prehistories: the Sapphic fragment and the
seventeenth-century Japanese haiku; the decadent and symboliste
literatures of the European fin de siècle; and the phenomenological
aesthetic – or ‘Significant Form’ – of Paul Cézanne’s canvasses.

Notwithstanding modernism’s almost compulsive preoccupation
with periodicity and placement – noteworthy examples include
Pound’s ‘Date Line’, his 1934 introduction to Make it New, and the
dateline with which James Joyce concludes Ulysses: Trieste-Zurich-
Paris, 1914–1921 – the history of modernist poetry, like its locations,
is far from easily fixed. Conventionally, 1922 (the publication date
of both Ulysses and The Waste Land) is considered the high
watermark of ‘high’ modernism, albeit that 1923 (the year in which
Stevens’s Harmonium, William Carlos Williams’s Spring and All,
Jean Toomer’s Cane, and Mary Austin’s American Rhythm appeared)
could be considered the annus mirabilis of American poetic
modernism. The publication history of Pound’s Cantos is perhaps
a surer indicator of the long march of modernism: inaugurated in
1917, with the publication of ‘Three Cantos’, the project comes to a
close of sorts in the Drafts and Fragments of Cantos CX–CXVII
(1969). Pound’s ‘poem including history’ is also a poem including
the history of modernist poetry. Moreover, expanding its temporal
parameters to encompass modernism’s prehistories, Flint’s/Pound’s
history of *Imagisme* places its practitioners in a ‘tradition’ which encompasses Sappho, Catullus, and Villon. In doing so, Pound and Flint arguably anticipate Wai Chee Dimock’s theory of ‘deep time’, according to which chronology – the domain of literary history – is ruptured by transhistorical trajectories (‘deep time’) which cut across national borders and periodising boundaries alike. For Dimock, the epic spiral or vortex of Pound’s *Cantos* constitutes a veritable blueprint for such temporal dynamics. Yet many modernist philosophies of history of the post-First World War period, including Spengler’s cycles and Yeats’s gyres, are no less compatible with our contemporary critical *zeitgeist*. Yeats’s *A Vision* (1925, 1936) and related poems, Eliot’s *The Waste Land* and, later in the century, David Jones’s *The Anathemata* (1952), Charles Olson’s *Maximus* poems (1950–c. 1970), Basil Bunting’s *Briggflatts* (1965), and Kamau Brathwaite’s *X/Self* (1987) are underpinned by historiographies which scramble a genealogical line of descent through substituting a synchronic for a diachronic model of literary history in which the past powerfully interpellates itself into the present. Arguably, a theory of ‘deep time’ is already implicit in modernist literary criticism; to take two very different examples, Eliot’s ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ (1919) and Van Wyck Brooks’s ‘On Creating a Usable Past’ (1918) are manifesto-essays which reveal modernism’s own radical reconfiguration of literary tradition and of its own temporal imaginary. Both Eliot and Brooks are resurrection men who pick among the post-war rubble of tradition for signs of life, checking the dead poets of the past (Shakespeare, in Eliot’s case, and Herman Melville in Brooks’s) for vital signs. Indeed *The Waste Land*, that monument of the ‘high’ modernism of the early 1920s, is assembled from the shards and fragments of the immediate post-war present, the early modern era, and of antiquity. The Imagist experiment itself, like its Vorticist successor, was a vector of both transhistorical and transnational exchange, like the London of the early twentieth century: imperial node and centre of operations for anticolonial nationalist and feminist movements, London was the hub both of established literary convention and its avant-garde discontents.
On the one hand, then, Imagism’s centenary brings modernist poetry into focus as a literary historical period, albeit one the legacy of which would continue through two world wars and into the era of decolonisation. On the other, the uneveness with which Anglo-American modernism would develop into its post-Second World War, postcolonial versions and subversions had been a feature of pre-First World War transatlantic modernism or proto-modernism too. In contrast to England’s Yellow Nineties, the United States experienced, at the turn of the nineteenth century into the new, American Century, the Gilded Age, in which the cultural veneer of the Genteel Tradition gilded the edges of the brash New World narrative of progress and nation-building. Where Europe faced imperial decline, with its last-gasp, Old World aesthetic of excess and enervation, America found itself on the cusp of empire. The absence, Stateside, of decadence would entail the belated absorption in the US of the poetics and postures of the fin de siècle – in the ‘riot of gorgeousness’ of Wallace Stevens’s *Harmonium* (1923), for instance, and in the figure of the queer black dandy who strikes his Wildean pose in a good deal of Harlem Renaissance writing of the 1920s.\(^\text{12}\)

The European art-invasion precipitated by the Armory Show (the *International Exhibition of Modern Art*, held in New York City’s 69th Regiment Armory in 1913) – which is often cited as an originary moment in American poetic, as much as visual, modernism – had prompted an exponential development of American modernist poetry after 1913. The phenomenon which Rebecca Beasley terms ‘interdisciplinary modernism’ is the product in part of the Armory Show, at which Gertrude Stein was introduced to the American reading public with the sale of her *Portrait of Mabel Dodge at the Villa Curonia* (1912) at the exhibition. According to Alfred Stieglitz, in yet another foundational dateline, the exhibition he mounted of Cézanne at his 291 gallery in Manhattan in 1910 had instantiated American Imagism. Indeed, Marsden Hartley, the poet-painter who was associated both with the German *Blaue Reiter* group of artists and with the Stieglitz circle, identified Cézanne and Whitman as ‘the prophets of the new time’, as the twin gurus of American modernism. Hartley’s claim signals a wider recovery of Whitman as a precursor
for what Harriet Monroe would term the ‘New Poetry’ (tellingly, *Poetry* magazine’s motto is taken from Whitman). For Van Wyck Brooks, a founding-editor of the New York little magazine *Seven Arts*, Whitman was a ‘precipitant’ for the poets of his generation, on both sides of the Atlantic. Whitman, whose self-appointed task was ‘To formulate the Modern’ (‘Thou Mother with thy Equal Brood’), and who, in ‘The United States to Old World Critics’ had taught ‘the lessons of the concrete’, would be venerated as a shamanic poet-chief and creator of an autochthonous American Imagism, having earlier influenced the development of Irish and British poetry from Yeats to D. H. Lawrence.¹³

II

If the origins of modernism constitute a *mise en abyme* or well-nigh infinite recession, its endings reveal other temporal slippages. When did modernism end, if indeed it has ended? Poetic modernism demands the longer view of a literary history that encompasses the movement’s origins and close imbrication with its antecedents, the modernist moment of the 1920s, and poetic modernism’s legacies and afterlives. Clearly, the later careers of poets such as Eliot, Pound, Stevens, and Williams are more than a footnote to the narrative of modernism. The First World War, although a defining event in that story, did not instantiate modernism, and neither did the Second World War bring it to its conclusion: on the contrary, the later conflict marks a moment of ‘transmodernism’.¹⁴ Likewise, the careers of poets influenced by first-generation modernism, and in particular by Eliot – W. H. Auden and other ‘Thirties’ writers, Dylan Thomas and poets associated with the New Romanticism of the 1940s – continued into the 1950s and 1960s. In America, the subterranean ‘Other Tradition’¹⁵ represented by Pound and Williams would emerge in the open or projective forms of the Black Mountain school and the New American Poetry of the 1960s as a whole. In its turn, the New American Poetry, especially in Donald Allen’s 1960 anthology of that title, would impact on the British Poetry Revival of the 1970s (vide J. H. Prynne and Tom
Raworth). The work of Louis Zukofsky and Stein would inform the so-called Language writing of the 1970s and ’80s (including Charles Bernstein, Susan Howe, and Lyn Hejinian) in its abjuration of lyric form and ‘voice’ in favour of procedural modes of composition. Marjorie Perloff’s 2001 study posits a Twenty-First Century Modernism, while Jahan Ramazani and others have charted the creolised manifestations and appropriations of modernism in the postcolonial poetries of Africa, India, and the Caribbean.

The complex spatial and temporal transmissions of modernist poetry thereby offer a model for what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari define as the fractal and motile operations of the ‘rhizome’. The history of modernist poetry as it is construed in this volume is, in effect, an antigenealogy, in which ‘Transversal communications between different lines scramble the genealogical trees’. Yet the fact that, uniquely, modernism in its critical reception is inextricably entwined with the evolution and institutionalisation of the discipline of English Studies makes it difficult to see the trees for the wood. Notwithstanding the genre-bending quality of modernist artworks – most evident in the modernist manifesto’s double function as artefact and polemic – Eliot’s influence on the New Criticism is a case in point of the way in which the multiplicity of poetic modernisms has been obscured. Eliot, or at least as the New Critics tended to construe him, secured poetry’s place as a privileged genre, and fostered the fetishised notion of the poem as an autotelic and impersonal artwork. With the eclipse of the New Criticism by poststructuralism at the turn of the 1960s, the narrow understanding of the modernist poem as a well-wrought urn arguably resulted in a lessening of critical interest in the modernist poets, some of whom, such as Stevens, would be recuperated by virtue of their recoding as belated romantics.

The subsequent opening up of the canon across the discipline of English has generated new or renewed attention to modernist poets whose gender and ethnicity differentiate them from the so-called ‘men of 1914’, to which the burgeoning critical interest in Mina Loy and Claude McKay, among many others, attests. One significant consequence of this is that the reiterated charge of modernism’s
elitism has been exposed as something of a red herring or false binary, as the phenomenon of ‘middlebrow modernism’ attests.\textsuperscript{19} Since the 1990s, what would become known as the ‘New Modernist Studies’, in line with English Studies as a whole, has tended to substitute the formalist preoccupations of earlier criticism with an increased attention to historical context. This has entailed the investigation of the materiality and textual transmission of modernist texts, including the editors, publishers, and magazine culture so crucial to the dissemination of modernist literature, and the emergence of new fields of enquiry, such as the ‘everyday’ and ‘eco-modernism’.\textsuperscript{20}

While these recent developments are to be welcomed, one corollary has been an attenuated attention to what might be said to constitute a modernist style. It would be reductive, even absurd, to claim that there is a dominant or definitive mode of modernist poetics; indeed, modernism problematises stable generic taxonomies, frequently dithering boundaries between visual and verbal art, prose and poetry. That said, modernist poetry’s formal self-reflexivity is clearly bound up with the ‘linguistic turn’ in the philosophy of language in the early twentieth century, as exemplified in the work of, most notably, Ludwig Wittgenstein and Ferdinand de Saussure, for both of whom language constructs the referential world rather than providing a ‘mirror of nature’.\textsuperscript{21} There is a difference, that is, between modernism and the broader ‘modern movement’.\textsuperscript{22} Both register the shock of the new in terms of content and push at the envelope of conventional form; nevertheless, there is a distinction to be made between, for example, the Edwardian verse of John Masefield and the early poetry of Mina Loy. To take another instance, the representation of the Great War in David Jones’s \textit{In Parenthesis} (1937), a mixed prose and verse narrative underpinned by the ‘deep time’ of the ‘mythical method’ common to many modernist works, demands to be differentiated from the ‘shell-shocked Georgianism’ registered in the lyric war poetry of Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen.\textsuperscript{23} In light of this, arguments for a continuum between modernism and a broader ‘modern movement’ are, arguably, untenable.
Part I of *A History of Modernist Poetry* considers the formal innovations and intellectual contexts of modernism through a series of chapters analysing poetic techniques and devices, mythography and ethnography, politics, gender and race, and material manifestations of modernism in the shape of the periodical. Part II assesses modernism’s origins in late nineteenth-century decadence, reconceived here as the matrix in which the aestheticism of modernism crystallises. Chronologically, this part of the *History* encompasses the period from the *fin de siècle* up to and including the First World War, registering the creative discrepancies that characterise the innovative poetries grouped under the umbrella term ‘modernism’. Individual chapters cover the burgeoning poetic movements of these years, among them the Georgian revolt and its avant-garde antagonists Imagism and Vorticism, and the seminal early work of major modernist poets, specifically Yeats, Pound, Eliot, and H.D. Part III extensively surveys the principal achievements in modernist poetry from the 1920s to the decolonising movements of the 1960s and after. This part of the *History* begins with the avant-garde writings of Stein and Loy. The chapters that follow encompass the mid-career and later poetry of Eliot and Pound and the New World modernisms of their contemporaries, Williams, Stevens, Marianne Moore, and Hart Crane, among others, and the Afrormodernism of the Harlem Renaissance. Due consideration is given to three important groupings in American poetic modernism: the Objectivism of the 1930s and after, and the Black Mountain and Beat Generation poets of the 1950s and 1960s. This part concludes with a consideration of modernism between the wars; the important contribution made by non-metropolitan poets to innovative writing of the period; and post-colonial poetry’s creative adoption and adaptation of modernism. The *History* concludes with an account of the aftermath of modernism and the challenges posed by the remarkable legacy bequeathed by poetic modernism to neo-avant-garde writers working in its wake.

The six chapters in Part I of the history provide essential intellectual and/or material contexts for understanding modernist poetry.
Fiona Green’s opening chapter on modernism and form addresses the formal demands and complexities characteristic of the modernist poetic artefact, using Pound’s early cantos, the Stevens of *Harmonium*, and Moore’s poetry of the 1920s and ’30s as exempla. Green intervenes in what can seem overly programmatic accounts of modernist poetics, noting that poems are legible as the fingerprints of individual makers. Drawing on Susan Sontag’s thinking about the closely related term ‘style’, the chapter seeks out these individuating aspects of form as signatures of the making self. Michael Bell’s chapter demonstrates that the mythic preoccupations, as much as the formal devices of modernist poetry, challenge its readers. Bell’s chapter traces the mythical turn taken by many modernist poets with reference to its romantic and post-romantic philosophical underpinnings, as articulated in the writings of Matthew Arnold, Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud, J. G. Frazer, and Martin Heidegger. Having differentiated between those modernists who deploy a ‘mythical method’ and those whose work embodies mythopoëia, Bell sets out some of the principal modalities of modernist myth-making by attending to a range of work from Yeats, Pound, Eliot, Stevens, H. D., and Lawrence, to Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath. Michael Tratner’s chapter investigates modernist poetry’s negotiations with the emergent politics of the twentieth century, with reference to the radical and the reactionary ideological discourses which inflect and, in some cases, deeply preoccupy modernist poetics. In Tratner’s analysis, politics did not cause the new art, although many poets were involved in political movements; rather, politics and art were implicated with each other as competing or complementary processes of change. The nexus of modernist poetry, sexuality, and gender is addressed in Georgia Johnston’s chapter, which offers a fresh appraisal of the ways in which sexuality and gender indelibly mark the work of modernist poets, male and female, canonical and neglected, specifically Yeats, Eliot, H.D., Stein, and Stevie Smith. Johnston examines the ways in which modernist poems deploy cultural mythologies to define sexuality, then reinscribe sexuality and gender through self-mythologising. The chapter emphasises the material and linguistic sexual politics of the period,
showing how modernist poetry extends gendered social organisation. Timothy Yu’s chapter turns to the topic of modernist poetry and race, interrogating modernist poetry’s fascination with racial discourses, from primitivism to modernist Orientalism. This chapter examines both representations of race in modernist poetry and, more broadly, how the explicit or implicit presence of racial others shaped modernist poetics in Pound’s and Moore’s ongoing romance with China and in the racial politics of the Harlem Renaissance. This part of the history concludes with Paige Reynolds’s chapter on modernism and periodical culture between the 1890s and the 1940s. Through a close examination of Poetry, Others, and Wheels, Reynolds investigates the broader parameters of the ‘little’ magazines which were synonymous with the dissemination of modernist poetry, and the relationship between print and performativity crucial to the circulation of modernist texts in these fora.

Vincent Sherry’s opening chapter to the second part of the History locates the origins of modernist poetry in the decadent movement of the late nineteenth century, repositioning the evident aestheticism of early modernism as part of a reconfigured conception of decadence. In Sherry’s analysis, the legacy of decadence – that of Charles Baudelaire and Théophile Gautier and the English poets Ernest Dowson, Lionel Johnson, and Arthur Symons – is present, in vivid particularity, in formative poems of Yeats, Eliot, and Pound, and continues to inform their major subsequent work. Sherry’s having established the ‘beginnings’ of modernism, Helen Carr’s chapter documents the plethora of modern schools and trends of poetry in the years preceding and into the early years of the First World War, interrogating the binary that obtains between the avant-garde and the modernity of the Edwardian and Georgian camps. Among the Edwardians this chapter considers John Masefield and J. M. Synge, as well as the poetry published during the period by Thomas Hardy; and among the Georgians, Rupert Brooke and Edward Thomas, paying due attention to the significance of Edward Marsh’s Georgian anthologies. The chapter also explores Imagism, from its beginnings in the Tour Eiffel group, in the work of T. E. Hulme and others, to its dissolution in ‘Amygism’ and the
emergence of the short-lived Vorticist movement. This chapter attends to the important function of magazines and anthologies in defining the character and direction of poetry in this period, the significance of London as a matrix of international exchange, and the social, political, and philosophical preoccupations that lay behind the changes in poetic form. Miranda Hickman’s chapter turns to the early work of three of the key modernist poets, all American expatriates, writing, in the case of Pound and H.D., out of the matrix of Imagism, or, in Eliot’s, developing a poetic idiolect independent of but parallel to the pre-war London avant-garde. In Hickman’s reading, each of these poets is committed to the surpassing of certain aspects of romantic subjectivist poetics towards a form of what Eliot famously termed an ‘impersonal’ poetics. Eliot, guided by Laforguian irony, bypasses Wordsworthian ‘emotion recollected in tranquillity’ in favour of ‘significant emotion’ constructed through the poem’s amalgamation of constitutive elements. H.D. develops a verbal and imagistic lexicon shaped by the poetry of Greek antiquity to push beyond the romantic expressivist lyric. Prompted by the poetry of the troubadours, Pound deploys masks in early dramatic monologues, then increasingly intricate personae in poems such as Homage to Sextus Propertius and Hugh Selwyn Mauberley, to supersede the limits of the romantic lyric ‘self’. Gregory Castle’s chapter supplements the preceding in its attention to Yeats’s contribution to the modernist idiom of this period, interpreting the Irish Literary Revival as a key movement in the development of European modernism and the rich non-metropolitan vein of (post-)colonial modernist poetries that extends through the twentieth century. This chapter maintains that Yeats’s symbolist modernism is inextricably bound up with Irish Revivalism, even when, in the 1920s and early ’30s, he appears to turn decisively away from it. This claim depends on a conception of the Revival that regards it as anything but a retrograde movement concerned with nostalgia or a pristine pre-colonial past; Irish Revivalism, understood as a modernist movement, both harmonises with the broader trend of modernism in Europe and interrogates its imperialist assumptions. Andrew Palmer and Sally Minogue conclude this part of the History by
addressing the particular rupture caused by the conflict of 1914–18 to
an emergent modernist poetics in the writing of those who experi-
enced it directly, and in Lawrence’s *sui generis* war poetry. Palmer
and Minogue contend that the ‘low’ modernism of First World War
poets is characterised by a ‘Whitmanesque’ common language, in,
for example, the dialogic poetry of Ivor Gurney and Mary Borden,
and in multifarious heteroglossia of David Jones’s *In Parenthesis*.

The eleven chapters of Part III take the history of modernist
poetry from the immediate post-war period to the decolonising
reception of modernism in the decades after the Second World
War. These chapters trace this narrative by providing analyses of
the major achievements of modernist poetry on both sides of the
Atlantic, and their enabling appropriation by postcolonial poets.
Charles Bernstein’s chapter opens this part with a bold reappraisal
of Gertrude Stein’s signal contribution, not just to the making of
American modernism, but to what Bernstein calls her ‘non-national’
modernism. Bernstein also draws attention to Stein’s construction of
a prose-poetry markedly distinct from the verse-modernism of many
of her contemporaries – especially the radically innovative *Tender
Buttons* (1914) – while aligning her practice, tangentially, with the
procedures of Williams, Stevens, and Loy. Loy is the subject of Sara
Crangle’s chapter, which recognises Loy’s importance to our com-
prehension of the development of modernist poetics, exploring her
complex negotiations with the historical avant-garde. Crangle’s
chapter emphasises gender and intimacy in Loy’s writings. Her
best-known poetry sequence, ‘Songs to Joannes’ (1917), a collage-
work that conjoins narratives of desire, abjection, and transcendence,
is akin to poetry by Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, who,
like Loy, has recently been recovered as an exemplar of a distinct
branch of Dada aesthetics based on the centralisation of the female
body. Alex Davis and Lee M. Jenkins’s chapter on Pound and Eliot
between the wars assesses these American poets’ ‘high’ modernist
masterpieces: Pound’s early and middle *Cantos*; Eliot’s *The Waste
Land*, ‘The Hollow Men’, and *Ash-Wednesday*. The chapter consid-
ners Pound’s epic ambitions for his long poem and his crucial devel-
opment, for the history of modernist and postmodernist poetry, of
verbal montage and a documentary poetics. Noting Pound’s almost co-creative shaping of *The Waste Land*, Davis and Jenkins discuss the profound influence of Eliot’s poem, including its reception in popular culture and in postcolonial poetry. In their co-authored chapter, Bart Eeckhout and Glen MacLeod draw attention to American poetic modernism as a tradition of the ‘new’ which developed in tandem with, but also in contradistinction to, the Anglo-American expatriate modernism of Pound, Eliot, and H.D. Arguing that the modernists who lived and worked in the United States may be reckoned of equal importance to their expatriate counterparts, Eeckhout and MacLeod contend that Williams, Stevens, Moore, Crane and others produced an alternative strain of modernism that gained critical attention as the twentieth century progressed, and which was profoundly influenced by the revolution in the visual arts as it was introduced to America, primarily in New York, by Stieglitz’s *291* gallery, the Armory Show, and New York Dada. Stephen Matterson’s chapter continues to explore the crucial American grain of modernist poetry with reference to the later work of poets discussed in the previous chapter, such as Stevens and Williams. Tracing the ways in which American poetic modernism develops into the post-war decade, Matterson tracks the redefining of 1920s modernism both by key modernists themselves and by a coming generation of poets. Redefining modernism entails attending to the development of lyric towards new narrative and sequential possibilities and political engagements: to a fresh sense of the personal of which Robert Lowell’s *Life Studies* (1959) is an example, in its shift from the supposed impersonality of 1920s modernism, or to a radical reorganising of lyric economy that will initiate the ‘post-modern’, as in Olson’s seminal essay ‘Projective Verse’ and its poetic counterpart, ‘The Kingfishers’.

Mark Whalan’s chapter describes the modernism of the Harlem Renaissance poets, foregrounding both the experimental idioms and the subversive re-appropriations of conventional poetic forms of African American poetry and its problematic yet productive relationship to ‘white’ modernism. Whalan examines the poetry of African American modernity with reference to the work of Claude
McKay, Countee Cullen, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Langston Hughes. As Whalan observes, writers such as Jean Toomer and Melvin Tolson drew heavily on Anglo-American avant-garde poetics to represent the geographic and temporal multiplicity of African American identity and its saturation with both the violence of history and its dynamic potential for reinvention. Mark Scroggins’s chapter maps the contours of experimental American poetry in the 1930s, with reference to the ‘Objectivist’ grouping of Louis Zukofsky, George Oppen, Carl Rakosi, and Charles Reznikoff, with which Lorine Niedecker and the British poet Basil Bunting would subsequently be associated. For the most part Jewish and committed to a leftist political programme, the Objectivists wrote a variety of intransigently modernist poetries, building largely on the innovations of Pound and Williams. Their leftism put them at odds with the literary establishment, while their modernist poetics put them at odds with Marxist literary circles, although in the last three decades the Objectivists have become central influences for formally experimental and politically engaged poetry. Jason Harding’s chapter on later Eliot and Pound analyses the manner in which their texts are shaped by the context of the Second World War. In his analysis of Four Quartets (1944), The Pisan Cantos (1948), Rock-Drill (1955), Thrones (1959), and Drafts and Fragments (1969), Harding teases out poetic continuities and new departures while embedding these works in their social and political contexts from the 1930s into the post-war period. Adam Piette further investigates the impact on modernist poetries of modern warfare from the 1920s, through the inter-war period, and into the years of the Second World War. The chapter thus draws fresh attention to the continuing imbrications of modernist poetics and conflict, with reference to a wider range of poets than heretofore has usually been considered in this context, including Robert Graves, Wyndham Lewis, David Jones, W. H. Auden, Denis Devlin, J. F. Hendry, David Gascoyne, Charles Madge, and Lynette Roberts. Eric Falci’s chapter counters the still widespread assumption of modernist poetry as a supra-national and hence placeless phenomenon by attending to the regionalist modernisms
of a number of British and Irish poets who write at a productively peripheral tangent to the metropolitan ‘mainstream’, among them Hugh MacDiarmid, Thomas MacGreevy, David Jones, and Basil Bunting. Falci focuses on modernist poetry’s local affiliations and regional attachments to redress the longstanding emphasis on its metropolitan base and international range. This chapter links modernist poetry’s insistence on regionality to two larger historical matters: the attenuation of the British empire over the course of the twentieth century, which reshaped the relationship between the metropolitan, imperial centre and its peripheries; and the quick creep of global capitalism, whose technological, ideological, and institutional advances made for an increasingly connected social and economic world, and which dialectically produced an attention to, and fascination with, the particularities of local spaces. Jahan Ramazani concludes this part of the History with a further reconfiguration of the relationship between centre and periphery with reference to the uses of modernism in the writings of a trio of postcolonial poets – Karen Press, Lorna Goodison, and Daljit Nagra – who recuperate modernist poetics to an aesthetics of decolonisation. Although the ‘writing back’ narrative has cast postcolonial literature as largely antagonistic towards modernism, in recent years scholars have begun to explore the ways in which postcolonial writers have instead affiliated themselves with modernism, in creative and often subversive ways. As Ramazani demonstrates, the intersections between postcolonial and modernist poetries are vividly displayed in their verbal textures and imaginative structures, making them less available for dichotomous literary histories. A History of Modernist Poetry concludes with Anthony Mellors’s lively chapter on poetic modernism ‘after modernism’, which offers a wide-ranging consideration of the multiple legacies of the modernist revolution. The coda to this History thus sounds less the finale of modernist poetry than the continuing relevance of the poetics of modernism to many of the most exciting poetries of the recent past and present day on both sides of the Atlantic.
Notes


6. Hulme had invited two members of the Rhymers’ Club, Ernest Radford and Ernest Rhys, to attend his new group; there is no evidence that they took up the offer. Florence Farr, Yeats’s collaborator in his experiments in chanting verse to the accompaniment of a psaltery in the early years of the century, was a member of the Tour Eiffel group; see Ronald Schuchard, The Last Minstrels: Yeats and the Revival of the Bardic Arts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 260.


PART I
CHAPTER I

Form in Modernist Poetry

Fiona Green

Artists and critics pretend to believe that it is no more possible
to get the artifice out of art than it is for a person to lose his
personality. 

Susan Sontag

‘Have had busy spring . . . and have blocked in four cantos’, wrote
Pound to John Quinn in June 1922. Two weeks later he wrote again:
‘having got five cantos blocked out, I am ready for [a] vacation’.1
The Malatesta Cantos – four, in the end – would be published in The
Criterion the following year. That Pound should have described his
hard work on them in this way is telling: whether ‘blocked in’ and
‘blocked out’ signal the rough assembly of weighty stuff or the
sketchy draft of some unfinished scheme, they sound like a match
for the grand design that is projected, though never quite realised, in
the Malatesta Cantos, the Tempio Malatestiano whose raw materials
(‘Ten slabs best red, seven by 15’) take some e
ff
tort to shift: ‘grnnh!
rrnnh, pthg’ (Canto IX).2 And there is a yet more obstructive sense
at work in Pound’s rendering of compositional labour. To block
something in can mean not letting it out; an unwelcome thought
blocked out is willfully obscured, not allowed to come through. It is
the formal aspects of poetic composition that make this kind of block.
By organising and foregrounding the acoustic and visual stuff of
language and so drawing attention to its materiality, poetic form
waylays transparent utterance.

Modernist verse is thick with hindrances of this kind: borrowed
and otherwise estranged idioms and vocabularies, diversions of tone
and voicing, broken metrics and revived rhythms – these formal
particulars turn verbal art back on itself to recast lucid medium as
densely worked artefact. This figuration may seem to appeal to a formalist paradigm according to which verbal opacity and structural autonomy serve as measures of aesthetic value. The high modernism canonised under the aegis of the New Criticism brought with it rubrics of self-sufficiency and impersonality whereby a poem could be claimed to stand apart from the circumstances of its making, its autotelic form blocking out history and ideology and freeing it from the hands of its maker. The new modernist studies has reverted, in its historicist turn, to the complex and various ways in which works of art bear the marks of their production in and passage through time, so to undo claims to their self-sufficiency, along with any monolithic conception of modernism itself.³ At various points in this critical plot, poetic form has itself been alleged to smuggle ideological baggage, whether in arguments for the progressive potential of modernist innovation, or whether, conversely, formal self-reference comes to figure as alienated retreat, claims to historical immunity being themselves the products of their time.⁴

This chapter maintains that the formal inventions and habits of early twentieth-century poets are legible not only as marks of historical contingency, but also as the imprints of individual makers. It is prompted in part by the intriguing parallel between artifice and personality hinted at in the chapter’s epigraph, from Susan Sontag’s 1965 essay ‘On Style’, and also by the more commonplace observation that for all the cultural groundings, affiliative networks, and points of circulatory contact that poets such as Pound, Wallace Stevens, and Marianne Moore might have shared, there would be little chance of our mistaking one of them for another. Quoting Raymond Bayer, Sontag develops the following line of thought about individuality: “every work of art embodies a principle of proceeding, of stopping, of scanning; an image of energy or relaxation, the imprint of a caressing or destroying hand which is [the artist’s] alone.” We can call this the physignomy of the work, or its rhythm, or, as I would rather do, its style.⁵ This chapter seeks out such individuating features in a number of modernist poems and finds in them certain habits, character traits, and articulations that serve as traces akin to personality. My larger
suggestion is that to generalise about modernist form risks side-lining the very distinctiveness of modernist forms – that is, the variety and particularity of individual poetic practice that differs in important ways from the manifesto pronouncements through whose persuasive slogans it is often, and perhaps too readily, mediated.

Donald Davie finds it all too easy to lose the plot of the Malatesta Cantos. In ‘an ever more tangled web of alliances’, he says, ‘it is impossible to remember whose side Malatesta is on’. Pound’s many-minded condottiere hero shifts allegiance between quattrocento Italy’s warring city states, no sooner party to one treaty than he is bought in the service of another, no sooner the canny strategist than he is plunged in the thick of it, ‘up to his neck . . . / in the marsh’ (IX) or ‘“Caught like a hen in a coop”’ (VIII). A contractor and patron of artistic labour too, Sigismundo signs others – painters, architects – into his own service, to work on the design and building of the Tempio, ‘a shape of formal stability behind the sequence’, as Peter Nicholls puts it. Modernist scholarship has revealed Pound’s ‘monument of culture’ as itself the product of complex relations of production and patronage, The Cantos’s own making and transmission, and therefore the poetry’s meanings, as dense an imbroglio as those the verse constructs. Under these conditions, with action mediated and agency obscured among the Malatesta Cantos’ reams of proper names and personal pronouns, identity seems more than usually the product of, and vulnerable to, the press of circumstance.

The most prominent formal innovation of Cantos VIII–XI is the clutter of prose documents, especially of letters, which Pound assembles, as though to expose the raw materials of history and at the same time to make us intimate with the process of its composition. The Malatesta Cantos contrive to resemble their own scene of making as though the litter of the drafting table had been flung at the page in ‘scraps that flaunt their heterogeneity, with the archive labels dangling off them’. Yet in drawing us into this practice of composition, Pound also blocks us out. When critics refer, as they frequently do, to certain passages of the Malatesta Cantos as ‘blocks of prose’, they mean by this to register not merely shapes on the page – the prose justified to both margins – but also the forbidding objecthood
of the prose facades. Davie goes so far as to suggest that the insistent materiality of these documentary passages makes them illegible: ‘“reading” is an unsatisfactory word for what the eye does as it resentfully labours over and among these blocks of dusty historical debris’. Yet in and around the prose there is a more delicate texture of contractual obligation, alliance, and betrayal. The rhythmic fabric of Cantos VIII–XI has a less conspicuous materiality than do the prose frontages, and unlike that large-scale incorporation of documents, it is for Pound nothing new. Yet it is precisely in phases like this, I want to suggest, when rhythmic patterns have become matters of habit rather than invention, and so when form slips below the threshold of conscious attention, that it begins to stabilise into personal identity.

The rhythms of the early Cantos bear allegiance to a number of prosodic systems, while contracting themselves fully into service with none. As James A. Powell and Stephen J. Adams have shown, Cantos I and II call attention to their promiscuous involvements with Greek quantitative, Old English, and pentameter measures, most famously, as John Hollander heard it, in the ‘resonant accentual six-beat “Ear, ear for the sea-surge, murmur of old men’s voices”’, and in that ‘bright welter of wave-cords’ (II), which both instantiate and trope their memories and conjoinings of established metres. From this consciously rhetoricised welter of borrowings, certain rhythmic phrases emerge, as Adams puts it, as Pound’s ‘most recognisable quantitative fingerprint’, in adonic clusters such as ‘aforesaid by Circe’ and ‘bore us out onward’, Powell having identified a similarly Poundian signature in phrases scanning as Greek dodrans and aristophanean, such as Canto VII’s ‘Sound like the sound of voices’ and ‘shells given out by shells’. At the heart of both these quantitative clusters is the choriamb, two long syllables bookending two short, a shape underlined by verbal repetition as, for example, in ‘ply over ply’ (IV).

John Hollander memorably explains, in his account of the Wordsworthian ‘metrical contract’, that particular metres prompt particular expectations and arouse certain feelings not by nature but by convention. Hexameters sound stirring and manly because of their association with epic, and not, as Longinus had it, ‘the other way
around’. According to this argument, ‘the modern notion of a personal meter that flows, like rhetoric, like personality, from the source of the self’ is as much a convention as any other. To suggest, as I will go on to do, that the rhythms of the Malatesta Cantos are in some sense personal is not, however, to buy into Pound’s powerful version of this modern convention. You need not believe in ‘absolute rhythm’, in the exact and immediate correspondence between rhythm and self-hood, or rhythm and feeling, to concur with Marianne Moore, in her 1931 review of Pound, that ‘a man’s rhythm’ “will be, in the end, his own, uncounterfeiting, uncounterfeitable”. Rather, the association of a particular rhythmic pattern with a particular individual, like the matching of certain metres with corresponding feelings in the larger scale of literary history, is an artifice that accrues over time. In the long range of literary culture we might call this the power of tradition; in the work of an individual poet we could call it force of habit.

Habits are patterns of behaviour that, once consciously or unconsciously acquired, and repeatedly practised over time, become ‘second nature’. In this way, explains Ulrika Maude, habit has been understood as constitutive of selfhood. Just as behaviour settles into habit over time, so over time we come to know someone by their habits. A particular gesture, turn of phrase, or way of doing things (be it irritating or charming) will not instantly betray identity unless you have seen or heard it plenty of times before. So too with rhythm. Those Poundian signatures – ‘aforesaid by Circe’, ‘shells given out by shells’ – that rhetoricise their own borrowed craft in Cantos I–VII, have a more shadowy presence in the Malatesta Cantos, not least because the newly hewn blocks of prose stand in the limelight. But they do their work nonetheless, in associations carried over from those earlier Cantos, and by intimating, amid the Malatestas’ convoluted plots, baffling roll calls, and untethered pronouns, the presence of someone familiar.

Conventions and habits are at their most tenacious when they are least noticed – that is, when they come to seem natural. In the Malatesta Cantos, Pound’s rhythmic signature, now established as habit, is less inclined to foreground itself in moments of self-reference. As low profile patterns that come and go amid the
‘boisterousness and disorder’ of Sigismundo’s world, habitual rhythms sometimes bring with them associations picked up in their passage through Cantos I–VII. Choriambics gather, for example, at the festival in Rimini marking the visit of Francesco Sforza and Bianca Visconti in Canto VIII:

Under the plumes, with the flakes and small wads of colour
Showering from the balconies
With the sheets spread from windows,
With leaves and small branches pinned on them

‘Under the . . . ’ might recall Pound’s recent collaboration with Eliot; but if ‘sheets spread from windows’ look a bit like a typist’s drying combinations ‘Out of the window perilously spread’, the rhythmic signature – ‘small wads of colour’, ‘sheets spread from windows’, ‘leaves and small branches’ – bleaches Pound’s sheets in the bright sea air associated with previous usage (‘glitter of sun-rays’ (I), ‘suntawny sand-stretch’ (II)). Elsewhere, in the thick of Malatestian manoeuvres, with readerly effort focused on the labour of sense-making, such fleeting rhythms will not bring themselves fully to attention; yet still, routine phrases like ‘some sort of treaty’ (VIII), ‘pay for his cattle’ (VIII), intimate a guiding presence in unfamiliar territory. You may not know which side Sigismundo is on, but it sounds, in these dense traffickings, as though someone you knew were on your side.

If familiar rhythms gather into personal presence over The Cantos’s long haul, they can also stabilise identity in more intense moments. With the allied and opposed actions of the Malatesta Cantos’ condottiere lined up in the anaphoric schemes of the verse, the thread of narrative is easily lost. To make things harder, certain passages are strewn with stumbling blocks in the form of personal pronouns:

Sforza Francesco, wattle-nose,
Who married him (Sigismundo) his (Francesco’s)
Daughter in September,
Who stole Pèaso in October (as Broglio says ‘bestialmente’),
Who stood with the Venetians in November,
With the Milanese in December,
Sold Milan in November, stole Milan in December
Or something of that sort,
Commanded the Milanese in the spring,
the Venetians at Midsummer,
The Milanese in the autumn,
And was Naples’ ally in October,
He, Sigismundo, *templum adificavit*
In Romagna, teeming with cattle thieves,
with the game lost in mid-channel,
And never quite lost till’50
and never quite lost till the end, in Romagna,
So that Galeaz sold Pèrsaro ‘to get pay for his cattle.’ (VIII)\(^{24}\)

The more these lines labour to clarify – ‘Who married him (Sigismundo) his (Francesco’s)’ – the less you know who did what with whom, until the rhythmic texture begins to regather. There’s the ghost of it running through ‘Milan in November, . . . Milan in December’, and then this, the still centre of the Malatesta Cantos: ‘He, Sigismundo, *templum adificavit*. Set apart from the surrounding squabbles by indentation, and by the distinct face of the italics, this line attends carefully to Sigismundo’s name. It is not mere courtesy that makes Pound pause over the pronoun; it is that ‘He, Sigismundo’, has the choriambic imprint we have come to recognise as Pound’s own. That same rhythm returns to offer, in Marianne Moore’s good phrase, ‘firm piloting of rebellious fluency’, even when the lines speak of loss: ‘lost in mid-channel’ modulates into the aristophanean clusters established in Canto VII (‘sound like the sound of voices’), in ‘And never quite lost till ’50 / and never quite lost till the end’, so to anticipate Sigismundo’s demise while never quite letting him go.\(^{25}\)

That ‘He, Sigismundo’ should betray a Poundian signature, and that his, Ezra Pound’s, familiar rhythms should find resting places in and around the Tempio Malatestiano is in keeping with readings that construe that building as a point of stillness lifted from the debris of historical circumstance. Pound hoped, in his research on Sigismundo, to discover the kind of chaos against which the Tempio’s monumental order might stand out: ‘If I find he was TOO bloody quiet and orderly it will ruin the canto. Which needs a certain boisterousness and
disorder to contrast with his constructive work.’ Commentators have followed Pound’s lead here, claiming that Sigismundo’s ‘lasting monument’ is achieved ‘in spite of endless political and military distractions’, or, as in Peter Nicholls’s fine rendering, ‘its construction gives purpose to the whole social order’. Yet at the same time, Pound’s rhythmic habits make Sigismundo’s monument and the historical blocks of prose less distinct than they might at first seem.

History enters the Malatesta Cantos by way of letters, and these come most thickly when Sigismundo’s sequestered postbag delivers him into the hands of his enemies. In parts, these letters do have the unwieldy heft of undelivered messages (recall those ‘Ten slabs best red, seven by 15’), but they also do more than mutely signal their own objecthood. Even the most routine epistolary business – this over a hold-up with the delivery of Veronese marble – is infiltrated by its translator’s singular rhythm:

I learned how it happened, and it has cost a few florins to get back the said load which had been seized for the skipper’s debt and defalcation; he having fled when the lighter was seized. (IX)

The prose of the Malatesta Cantos may present itself in blocks, but if the ear as well as the eye is open to its surfaces, it will not so readily pass for raw stuff whose function is merely to instantiate ‘prose’. That we catch a particular rhythm here might also give pause to those readers who would characterise The Cantos’s innovation as a ‘collage’ technique akin to cubism in whose edge to edge arrangements ‘time . . . becomes space’. All rhythms, of course, occur in time. More importantly for my argument, to recognise the rhythms of the Malatesta letters as Pound’s – even, perhaps, to hear them at all – you have to have grown accustomed to them over time, at least over the time it takes to read from Canto I to Canto XI. So whereas in other respects the form of The Cantos might appear to abolish chronology, from the perspective of rhythmic habit, chronology is its essential dimension. At the end of Canto XI, Sigismundo Malatesta, sidelined and powerless, makes light of his troubles in a contract with his steward, assigning permission for the playing of jokes. It comes sealed with Pound’s rhythmic signature: ‘They put it
all down in writing’ (XI) is the sign of a subjectivity made up and put
down in the drift and gather of rhythmic habit. Whether we hear
that line as a borrowing from the Greek, as a metric broken and made
new, or as somehow ‘modernist’, it sounds most of all like Ezra
Pound.

In 1985 Marjorie Perloff asked, provocatively, ‘Pound / Stevens:
whose era?’ Whereas prominent Poundians (Davie, Hugh
Kenner), she argued, have followed the poet’s lead in attending
closely to versification, Stevensians give it scant attention. Among
Pound’s critics, Perloff asks us to note ‘[Herbert] Schneidau’s
emphasis ... on the how rather than the what of poetic discourse’,
whereas with Stevensians – as, in this view, in Stevens – ‘thought’
takes precedence over ‘technique’ or ‘method’. More recent his-
toricist readings have done much to query the inward cast of Stevens
criticism, yet in these too the route to outward circumstance has
tended to go by way of reference (the things the poems are about)
rather than by way of form (the things the poems are). The
question is, where is the form in Wallace Stevens? My suggestion
in what follows is that we may find it, in several senses, in character.

Among the curious personages gathered in Harmonium is this
odd pair:

HOMUNCULUS ET LA BELLE ETOILE
In the sea, Biscayne, there prinks
The young emerald, evening star –
Good light for drunkards, poets, widows,
And ladies soon to be married.

‘Prinks’ sounds like a coinage special to early Stevens, so it’s a small
surprise to find it belonging also in the OED. The official definitions
do not disappoint: prinks means more or less what you’d want it to
mean – to adorn or smarten up, to walk daintily or mincingly, and in
some archaic, now rare usages, to wink. The evening star could be
thought quite sensibly to wink, and someone called ‘La Belle Etoile’
would surely mince – perhaps even primp as she made her toilette.
Stevensians in search of family resemblances in the wider oeuvre will
skip off from prink to ‘princox’, whose saucy pertness makes a
compatible brother to a mincing Venus, while the local soundscape
of ‘Homunculus et La Belle Etoile’ recruits prink, homunculus, and drunkard into a more motley crew. But ask a child how a star would ‘prink’ and they might well sing ‘prinkle prinkle little star’, so to remind you that an emerald as adornment for the sea is a bit ‘like a diamond in the sky’. Jeremy Prynne’s ‘playful over-reading’ of ‘Twinkle, twinkle little star’ speculates on how that little poem might resonate in the little minds for which it was made, and offers, among other gems, that ‘the dark blue of the sky has already disclosed itself to them by the repeated reference to “ink”’. ‘Prinks’ has that darkening middle too, while also keeping a last blush of sunset in the ‘pink’ running through it. Other star poets have shown their true colours in the evening sky: John Clare’s ‘ruddy light’ ‘gilds the milkmaids ruddy face’, while the bulky Shakespearean ‘sunken sun incarnadines’ belongs unmistakably to Longfellow. Only in early Wallace Stevens would a starlit sea ‘prink’.

We know Harmonium for its colourful wordplay, and the poet of Harmonium for his own tendency to prinking, to adornments that read like vanities – at least from the perspective of a later, barer aesthetic, and especially, as Lee Jenkins convincingly argues, in the view of those prominent Stevensians whose readings are tinted by their own preference for the austere over the fecund, the larger whole over the ‘preliminary minutiae’. Eleanor Cook, the first critic to take Harmonium’s nonsense seriously, reminds us that the argument of ‘Homunculus et La Belle Etoile’ owes something to Theseus’ speech in A Midsummer Night’s Dream, in which ‘The lunatic, the lover, and the poet, / Are of imagination all compact.’ Theseus continues:

And as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet’s pen
Turns them to shapes

Stevens’s poem hopes in its second half that scholars in search of Platonic forms might find them as readily in the fecund light of Venus as under the fleeting shadow cast by philosophy’s ‘gaunt fugitive phantom’ – in other words, that her emerald light might reach, with the poem’s rhyme, from the first line’s ‘prink’ to how
scholars should ‘think’. Stevens’s poem speaks discursively, then, and by means of this intertextual reference, of form as a bodying forth; but what does that look like in practice? In this poem, as is characteristic of *Harmonium*, the forms of things are bodied forth not so much from imagination, as from characters – from the sounds and arrangements of words.

By this light the salty fishes
Arch in the sea like tree-branches,
Going in many directions
Up and down.

This light conducts
The thoughts of drunkards, the feelings
Of widows and trembling ladies,
The movements of fishes.

So Stevens speculates on the power of Venus to organise the unruly desires she also prompts. Squaring things off into stanzas is the poem’s outward mode of conduct, but the verse is also directed from the inside, when its words trope its rhetorical schemes. Somewhere in range of the ‘salty fishes / Arch’ is the erotic charge of a salty arching body, its sculptural form raised under the sign of Venus.† ‘Arch’ finds linear shape in syntax and sound too: ‘Arch in the sea like tree-branches’ has about it a suggestion of chiasmus (arch-sea-tree-branch), a small scheme found also across the larger span of the two stanzas, framed with ‘the salty fishes’ and ‘the movements of fishes’. In such small ways, ‘in many directions / Up and down’, the *Harmonium* poems will turn the sounds and meanings of words outward into structuring forms.

It’s worth reflecting too on the outward arrangements Stevens made for his poems when they first appeared in public. ‘Homunculus et La Belle Etoile’ was one of a group first published in *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse* in 1919 under the title ‘Pecksniﬃana’. If Stevens had liked that name just for its sound, that would in itself indicate a Pecksniﬃan way of doing things. Dickens’s Mr Pecksniff ‘was in the frequent habit of using any word that occurred to him as having a good sound, and rounding a sentence well, without much care for its

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† Arch

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*Form in Modernist Poetry*
meaning’. But it is Pecksniff’s profession, especially his manner of conducting it, that matters most for Stevens: ‘The brazen plate upon the door (which being Mr Pecksniff’s, could not lie) bore the inscription, “PECKSNIFF, ARCHITECT”’. Dickens’s arch tone prepares his reader to detect a brazen lie in that inscription, even before we are told that that the designation is a sham (Mr Pecksniff, we can already guess, ‘had never designed or built anything’).

Perhaps as a member of Pecksniff’s establishment, an apprentice piece like Stevens’s ‘Exposition of the Contents of a Cab’, in which ‘Harness of the horses shuffled / Like brazen shells’, wonders about the hollowness of its own figurative vehicles – about whether it might itself be sham façade and jingling form rather than the ‘exposition of contents’ its title promises.

Mr Pecksniff’s sayings lack content, but he specialises in a soothing tone that makes repetition seem the bearer of profound import:

‘A gentleman taken ill upon the road, has been so very bad up stairs, sir,’ said the tearful hostess.

‘A gentleman taken ill upon the road, has been so very bad up stairs, has he?’ repeated Mr. Pecksniff, ‘Well, well!’

. . . Mr Pecksniff’s manner was so bland, and he nodded his head so soothingly, and showed in everything such an affable sense of his own excellence, that anybody would have been, as Mrs Lupin was, comforted by the mere voice and presence of such a man.

The poems Stevens published under Pecksniff’s name test the viability of forms built on the repetition and rearrangement of words and parts of words – graphic characters – and they also, like this passage, think about whether there’s anything of substance in the character of utterance – that is, in tone. When Eleanor Cook says with typical pith that ‘Homunculus et La Belle Etoile’ is ‘all arch and charm’, those words all but sound out Stevens’s chiastic habit; but she also means us to hear ‘arch’ and ‘charm’ as references to tone. In the matter of tone, as in other regards, Dickens’s bogus architect favours elevation: “And I tell you, Sir,” said Mr. Pecksniff towering on tiptoes among the curtains, as if he were literally rising above all worldly considerations.’ Though he never builds anything,
innumerable ‘elevations’ are produced in Pecksniff’s name by apprentices whose rents he pockets and whose work he passes off as his own: “You see,” said Mr. Pecksniff, passing the candle rapidly from roll to roll of paper, “some traces of our doings here. Salisbury Cathedral from the north. from the south. From the east. From the west. From the south-east. From the nor’west. . . . Plans, elevations, sections, every kind of thing.”  Of course, an elevation is not in itself an embodied form: a tone says nothing without words to carry it, and a plan is not a building, even when, as with those views of Salisbury Cathedral, it attempts to render things in the round.

Here is Stevens trying out his own elevations in another poem of 1919, called ‘Architecture’:

Let us fix portals, East and West,
Abhorring green-blue North and blue-green South.

Published under the title ‘Architecture for the Adoration of Beauty’ in the Little Review almost a year before the Pecksniffiana group, this largely neglected poem anticipates the thinking of that group, and of Harmonium, from whose second edition it would eventually be excluded, about whether form can be founded on tonal elevation, or structure built on finishing touch:

What manner of building shall we build
For the adoration of beauty
Let us design this chastel de chasteté,
De pensée . . .
Never cease to deploy the structure . . .
Keep the laborers shouldering plinths . . .
Pass the whole of life earing the clink of the
Chisels of the stone-cutters cutting the stones.

With ‘What manner’ this opening question supplies its own answer: a ‘chastel de chasteté’ is a tautology whose elaboration belies the high sounding purity of which it speaks. For all its indications of hefty material (‘shouldering’), there is something lightweight about this stanza’s ‘plinth’ and ‘clink’ (recall Pound, for contrast: ‘grnnh! rrnnh, pthg’), if only because Stevens’s habitual anagramming compels us
to read ‘thin’ in ‘plinth’. That small-scale inward reshuffle is scaled up in the chiastic ‘stone-cutters cutting stones’, and even when Stevens’s poem asks, as if robustly, ‘how shall we hew the sun / Split it to make blocks?’ the waylaying medium seems confected from archness, as though to raise itself up on nothing but vocal style.

So it is throughout. In a poem called ‘Architecture’, ‘cantilenes’ might be mistaken for outwardly projecting ‘cantilevers’, but the OED reveals them as silly prattle; and if ‘buttresses of coral air / And purple timbers’ sound like more lofty musical modes (choral airs and richly toned purple timbres) all these forms amount knowingly, like Pecksnifflan elevations, to castles in the air.

‘These are the pointings of our edifice’, Stevens’s poem lustily proclaims, those pointings not just towers proudly ‘Push[ed] up, . . . / To the cock-tops’, but also just gestures of beginning. Dickens’s sham architect has a way with pointings too: ‘some people likened him to a direction-post, which is always telling the way to a place, and never goes there’; but lest we go over well-trod ground in thinking of Harmonium as a books of beginnings, we should also recall that ‘pointings’, to an architect, are the facings or fillings of exterior joints (they keep mortar watertight). The pointings of an edifice, then, are not just its cocky elevations or gestural beginnings, but its finishing touch. By adding ‘the magical effect of a few finishing touches from the hand of a master’ to his pupils’ constructions, Mr Pecksniff contrives to gain credit for the whole; perhaps Stevens thought that the pieces grouped as ‘Pecksniffany’ amounted to insubstantial structures suspended between airy elevation and outward finish. If so, the prize he was awarded for them must have felt more than usually like ill-gotten gains.

Since Hugh Kenner’s complaint that ‘there is a great deal of language in [Stevens’s] poems with no one speaking it except the grave impersonal voice of poetry’ much has been written on Stevens’s part in the development of lyric, and on those personae, masks, or mere ‘nodes in the monologue’ that crop up throughout his oeuvre. Pecksniff is not one of the ‘improbable folk’ named in the verse or called on to speak it, but he does help us think freshly about genre. To conceive of Harmonium as part of a novel would perhaps
seem less plausible than the book’s usual designations as preliminary to a grand lyric project or as a sideshow to Shakespearean comedy. Yet in certain ways Stevens’s peculiar cast do seem oddly Dickensian. Both writers find play in the joint between character as graphic form and character as made up – or the make up of – person, with those senses of ‘character’ jointly deriving from material impressions made on the surface. Yet for all their knowingness about made-up people, Dickens and Stevens populate their books with characters in the more innocent sense – with odd, extraordinary, eccentric persons. Mr Pecksniff and La Belle Etoile are brazen constructions, but they’re more than just ciphers. Perhaps the later, sparer poetry does speak with a grave impersonal voice, and perhaps its Canon Aspirin and the rest are just ‘nodes in the monologue’. To that extent we might dare to say that the Stevensian grand poem lacks character. The preliminary minutiae, on the other hand, are stuffed with it.

Marianne Moore’s 1923 review of Harmonium speaks of Stevens’s ‘nicely luted edges’. When in 1934 she came to review A Draft of XXX Cantos, she reverted to the same trope to say of Pound, ‘the edges of the rhetoric and of sound are well “luted”’.\textsuperscript{50} This small coincidence might conjure an unlikely meeting between Crispin, ‘lutanist of fleas’ and Sigismundo, composer of love poems in praise of Isotta (‘Go with your lutes, awaken / The summer within her mind’ (VIII)).\textsuperscript{51} Actually, Moore had in mind a quite different kind of luting, involving the use of cement or some other muddy compound ‘to render air-tight a joint between two pipes, to coat a retort, etc., and to protect a graft’.\textsuperscript{52} Perhaps the term recurred because of Moore’s own formal preoccupations with joints and grafts. Having experimented, in some of her early poems, with syllabic metres, in the 1920s Moore favoured a free verse form that was flexible enough to accommodate the masses of prose quotations she grafted into the poetry. After the hiatus of the mid–late twenties, when she devoted herself to organising other people’s words as editor of The Dial, in the great poems of the thirties Moore brought syllabics back into play with her ‘hybrid method of composition’.\textsuperscript{53} Hence the recognisably Mooreish stanza: a mathematically organised poetic object deriving from an eclectic body of
prose documents, in which technical idioms and scientific vocabularies consort with speech rhythms, and lineation is more than usually oblivious to syntax and sense units.

This is Robert T. Hatt, Assistant Curator in the Department of Mammals, American Museum of Natural History, on pangolins:

The long tailed pangolin suggests a shuffling of parts of an artichoke, a skunk, and an octopus, yet cannot be converted into a table delicacy or a comforting coat collar. The tail, second only in usefulness to an elephant’s trunk is, on demand, a coat of mail, a broom, a prop.\textsuperscript{54}

Such a creature seems ready-made for the poet who would encounter it in 1935, Hatt’s description seeming oddly to pre-empt the procedure it would undergo in becoming a poem. The pangolin is already made of other things, and, though it is adaptable and functional, it doesn’t convert into an object of easy consumption, nor into a mere accessory. If that’s how you make, and what you can and can’t make, of a pangolin, it is also how Moore would make her 1936 poem ‘The Pangolin’, a textual object of shuffled parts, adaptable to certain rhetorical purposes, yet hard to consume in all its complexity, and hardly a source of comfort in the kinship it proposes between its ‘true ant-eat- / er’, and man, ‘the prey of fear’.\textsuperscript{55}

It is often observed that the exoskeletons of Moore’s armoured animals resemble the part-organic, part-mechanical syllabic grids of her visually arresting stanzas.\textsuperscript{56} ‘The Pangolin’ in particular, ‘made / for moving quietly’ is well fitted to an environment in which line units go unsounded – syllabic versification, unlike accentual metre, doesn’t move through the reading ear. Drafts of certain poems in the Moore collection at the Rosenbach Museum show Moore counting syllables and marking rhymes with coloured pencils, but long before she gets to the drafting table, her syllabic habit makes her a particular kind of reader, one sensitive to and distracted by the materiality of prose. As anyone who has settled to counting Moore’s syllables will know, once attracted to syllable units, the reading eye and ear find themselves caught by the surfaces of prose language and momentarily blocked thereby from its sense, so that even the most transparent passage of scientific writing swarms with replicating patterns and
coincidences. Read under this influence, Moore’s second source text, from Richard Lydekker, positively crawls with ‘ans’ and ‘ants’:

THE PANGOLINS
FAMILY MANIDAE

Stranger even than the armadillos are the Edentates commonly known as pangolins, or scaly ant-eaters, which may be compared in appearance to an animated spruce-fir cone furnished with a head and legs. These creatures constitute a family by themselves, in which there is but a single genus — *Manis*, and, like the remaining representatives of the order, they are confined to the Old world. . . . Their internal anatomy is of a different type; and the joints of the backbone lack the additional articular processes characterising most of the American Edentates.²⁷

The drift of this passage from Lydekker is to distinguish Old World Edentates, pangolins, from the New World armadillo, yet though the genus ‘manis’ is only remotely connected to his American cousin, when caught in type and scrutinised by the syllabifying eye, its kinships multiply, so that *ans* and *arms* cluster into the materials of a poetic stanza:

Another armoured animal — scale
lapping scale with spruce-cone regularity until they
form the uninterrupted central
tail-row. This near artichoke
with head and legs and grit-equipped giz-zard, the night miniature artist-engineer, is Leonardo’s
indubitable son?

The joints of the pangolin’s backbone, according to Lydekker ‘lack the additional articular processes of the American Edentates’, but the poetry retrieves and articulates syllabic joinings that go on to propose *armour* and *artichoke* as close cousins to *artist-engineer* Leonardo. In this way the two aspects of Moore’s compositional method — her fabricating hybrids of prose origin, and her syllable counting — join up in a readerly–writerly circuit, the outcome of which is not so much verse that sounds prosy, but rather to make prose poetical before it reaches the drafting table, by recovering its
density and putting its syllabic components at cross purposes to its
discursive logic. We might go so far as to speculate that the syllable
that starts this poem was also the syllable that generated its larger
figurative fabric and moral argument, in the kinship of three
creatures – pangolin, man, and ant – all of which share an ‘an’.

Susan Sontag writes, of style:

> Of course, when we employ the notion of style historically, or group
works of art into schools and periods, we tend to efface the individuality
of styles. But this is not our experience when we encounter a work of art
from an aesthetic (as opposed to a conceptual) point of view. Then, so
far as the work is successful and still has the power to communicate with
us, we experience only the individuality and contingency of the style.

The same surely applies to poetic form. ‘Make it new!’; ‘absolute
rhythm’; ‘a continual extinction of personality’: these and other
pronouncements were deeply embedded in and involved with the
formation, promotion, and circulation of early twentieth-century
poetry. But lifted out from those contexts and held up as rubrics
under which to describe the ever-widening range of works now
known as modernist, they will tend to distort encounters with
individual poets, and iron out the differences between them.
Pound’s rhythmic form works as hard in lapsing into old habit as it
does when announcing its own breaking and remaking of established
forms. Stevens’s early poetry read under the impersonal auspice of
the later work, or according to pronouncements in it that project
forward most readily to that barer aesthetic (‘imagination is the will
of things’, say), will inevitably make Stevens’s prinkings seem
lightweight aestheticisms. But this is to miss the characters that
lend Harmonium its substantive forms, and so, in the end, to miss
that book’s character. Moore’s poetry is less tractable to slogans –
one reason, perhaps, why she tends to keep a lower profile than the
other two. Instead, distortions can come in the tempting alignment
between armoured animal, defensive verse form, and conservative
person. A more venturesome practice emerges if you remember that
Moore’s poems begin to take shape while she is reading, and that her
habit of syllabics makes the textual ground she explores thoroughly
unfamiliar. To follow that intrepid example would be to get at poetic
form by way of poetic practice, especially when there is stuff in the way – when, as in one of Stevens’s strangest ‘Anecdotes’, the ground is ‘full of blocks’.  

Notes
4. For a lucid account of such arguments, see Marianne DeKoven, ‘The Politics of Modernist Form’, New Literary History, 23.3 (1992), 675–90.
5. Susan Sontag, ‘On Style’, in Against Interpretation and Other Essays (London: Eyre and Spottiswood, 1967), 28. Sontag goes on to say that ‘the problems raised by the concept of “style” overlap with those raised by the concept of “form”, and their solutions will have much in common’: ibid., 34; at several points she uses the terms interchangeably.
11. See, for example, James A. Powell’s reference to ‘passages which are at least (and only) as to prosody, prose, blocks of quotation . . . whose poetic function depends on their very “proseness” becoming an object’: James A. Powell, ‘The Light of Vers Libre’, Paideuma, 8 (Spring 1979), 21.
12. Davie, Studies in Ezra Pound, 109. Marjorie Perloff concurs that the prose passages are there for their proseness or objecthood, to be looked at as cubist surface rather than read: Marjorie Perloff, The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage (Princeton: Princeton University Press,
Rainey’s historicist and bibliographic research is animated by its dispute with this kind of formalist approach.


18. Maude quotes Félix Ravaission: ‘following Aristotle, that “Habit is an acquired nature, a second nature that has its ultimate ground in primitive nature.” So habit, he suggests, is constitutive of the self’: Ulrika Maude, ‘Beckett and the Laws of Habit’, *Modernism/Modernity*, 18.4 (2012), 815. My thinking about habit is indebted to this article, and to Lisa Schoenbach, ‘“Peaceful and Exciting”: Habit, Shock, and Gertrude Stein’s Pragmatic Modernism’, *Modernism/Modernity*, 11.2 (2004), 239–59. Schoenbach’s excellent article contrasts habit in Stein with shock in Pound: ‘rhythms and repetitions are far more important in Stein than are pronouncements; her vision of literature is expressed more through a logic of duration than it is through such world-altering Poundian cries as “Make it new!”’: *ibid.*, 245. My argument is that whatever his pronouncements, in Pound’s practice, new inventions drift, by repetition and over time, into old habits.

19. Hollander puts it like this: ‘perhaps the test of the canonical status of a metrical mode is the inability of anyone working within its range and age of power to see that it rules not by divine right but, as Milton’s Satan said of God, by convention’: Hollander, *Vision and Resonance*, 196.


31. Perloff poses this question as the title of ch. 1 of *Dance of the Intellect*.
42. Stevens, *Collected Poems and Prose*, 52.
43. Dickens, *Chuzzlewit*, 33.
45. Dickens, *Chuzzlewit*, 41, 82.
47. Dickens, *Chuzzlewit*, 11.
48. Ibid., 79.
52. *OED*. These lutes have different roots, in Latin ‘lut’ (mud), and in French ‘lur’ (estringed instrument).


58. Heather Cass White speculates ‘that “manis”, a word that visually resolves into “man is”, should be a synonym for “pangolin”... is the sort of coincidence that might have given rise to the poem in the first place. I have no evidence that it did’; White, ed., Adversity and Grace, xxi.

My reading develops this hunch: not only are ‘pangolin’ and ‘manidae’ synonymous, but placed above one another as they are in Lydekker, and read by an eye that syllables catch, they foreground the shared ‘an’ that generates the poem, and starts it.


61. ‘Colloquy with a Polish Aunt’, Stevens, Collected Poems and Prose, 68.

62. ‘Anecdote of the Prince of Peacocks’, ibid., 46.
The widespread turn to myth by modern writers is more commonly acknowledged than understood partly because it has no single genesis or meaning. The present chapter, therefore, will discriminate some of its principal manifestations through their historical and philosophical contexts. Historically speaking, modernist appreciation of myth descends from a European romantic tradition in which literary creation and a national or folk spirit were intimately associated; yet it also constitutes a distinctive new phase reflecting philosophical and political shifts, as well as other cultural and intellectual developments around the turn of the twentieth century.

The modern valorising of myth was partly in response to the waning of religious belief and authority. In the anglophone tradition, a classic argument is set out in Matthew Arnold’s *Literature and Dogma* (1873). A literal belief in the Biblical story of human origins had become widely untenable due to the growing prestige of scientific protocols of thought, a new knowledge of the age of the earth, the evolutionary origins of its inhabitants, and the impact of modern scholarship on Biblical studies. But Arnold argued that the Bible, far from losing its truth value thereby, had acquired a new and more intrinsic significance. It was the literary achievement of the Hebraic people articulating a development of moral consciousness which was their peculiar contribution to human culture. Literature bearing this weight of cultural meaning, and seen as the primordial production of a complex of values drawn from ancestral experience, is effectively myth.

Myth, in other words, may denote a falsehood, or it can be the fundamental narrative of a culture, and it can be both at once. Some
important orders of value are not susceptible to a criterion of objective truth and Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803) had influ-
entially argued that, as well as the universal truths of mathematics and philosophy, different human cultures produced incommensurable formations and human types. For Arnold, the Bible represented a contribution to moral culture that matched the Hellenic articulation of aesthetic beauty and philosophical truth.

The positive valuing of myth, then, could be an acknowledgement of cultural relativism, and it was acquiring precisely such a new significance as anthropology began to shed the pre-scientific and imperialistic premises of the Victorian era to become a major modern discipline in which the human as such is placed under question. But the full recognition of this potentiality still lay in the future, and the ambivalent truth value of myth at the time was compounded by the ambivalence of its cultural placing: it was at once the characteristic mark of tribal or archaic peoples thought of as ‘primitive’, yet also a feature of the classical cultures which represented a high point of civilisation. Only perhaps poetry, conceived as a specialised imaginative domain, could accommodate this dual perception. As T. S. Eliot was to surmise: ‘The artist, I believe, is more primitive, as well as more civilized, than his contemporaries . . . and he only uses the phenomena of civilization in expressing it.’ But one of the defining features of the period we now think of as modernist is precisely the breakdown of the contrasting categories of the ‘primitive’ and the ‘civilised’. An inaugural text in this regard was Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness (1899), which, perhaps significantly, was a realist prose fiction. Conrad’s novella exposes the connection between a sordid reality and a characteristic form of nineteenth-century idealism.

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900), who opposed all forms of idealism, articulated a philosophical basis of modernist mythopoeia by arguing the connection between archaic modes of sensibility and a highly sophisticated understanding of the aesthetic. In The Birth of Tragedy (1872) he reversed the meaning of classical culture as it had been understood in the eighteenth century by J. J. Winckelmann (1717–68) and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832). The
classical beauty and order they had associated especially with the god Apollo was not a reflection of the ancient Greek character but precisely the opposite: it was the artistic dream that the Greeks needed to impose on their destructive, orgiastic nature which they at the same time honoured in the god Dionysus. The aesthetic remove from common reality – what Nietzsche called ‘dream’ – is the condition under which these two opposed, yet necessary, powers could be accommodated. Without Dionysus life is hollow, withered and degenerate, yet Dionysus alone would represent a destructive collapse of civilisation into animal nature. In Nietzsche’s view, the Western tradition since Socrates and Plato had suffered a progressive domination by the Apollonian order along with the loss, repression, and denigration of the Dionysian power. In effect, Nietzsche combines two aspects of myth which often appear separately in the period: it is at once a highly avant-garde, philosophically sophisticated embrace of modernity, and a nostalgic rejection of it in favour of a ‘primitive’ form of life.

While Nietzsche was a quite conscious resource for a number of modernist writers, few of them would have been aware of their own contemporary, Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), who, while seeking to articulate philosophically a critique that was even more elusive and against the conventional grain than Nietzsche’s, was closely paralleled in the literature of the period. Heidegger had a comparable invocation of the archaic and of art as unveiling the truth of things, but his focus was quite different. Nietzsche had argued that European thought since Socrates was mistakenly preoccupied with epistemology, the problem of knowledge: what we know and how we know we know it. For Nietzsche, the pursuit of knowledge rests on a prior, but unexamined, question of value: we seek to know what it interests us to know. Rather than the common-sense assumption that we place value on existing objects, he proposed that we unwittingly create a world of objects formed by our values. In this radical philosophical sense, man is an inescapably mythopoeic animal.

But Heidegger argued that in claiming the priority of value over knowledge, Nietzsche had overlooked something even more fundamental: what he named as Being, and which his translators always
capitalise to indicate its specialised meaning. For him, we are so caught up in an instrumental and value-laden response to the beings around us that we have lost a sense of the mystery of Being as such: the sheer presence of all beings, animate or inanimate. True myth is attention to Being. Moreover, with respect to artistic expression, Nietzsche had further claimed in *The Birth of Tragedy* that the gradual predominance of realism in European art signalled the loss of a true sense of the aesthetic and therefore of the mythopoeic imagination on which it depends. Heidegger likewise privileged poetry, and in remarkable late lectures he drew on mysteriously auratic poets such as Friedrich Hölderlin, Georg Trakl, and Rainer Maria Rilke to show the unveiling of Being in language. For both of these thinkers, the archaic mode of thought and feeling characterised by myth was not something belonging just to the remote past, but was the unacknowledged condition of our present being. The privileging of myth, therefore, was not a regression to the past, but a true understanding of the present by reflection on the past.

Aristotle’s well-known use in the *Poetics* of the word ‘myth’ to signify an action had made it central to narrative and drama. The modernist generation, however, inherited a growing focus on not just the content, but also the modality of myth. Myth when considered as a way of being in the world had a close kinship with poetry, and especially as this had been conceived since the European romantic period. Writing in 1800, both Friedrich Schlegel and Friedrich von Schelling had advocated the creation of a ‘new mythology’ as the basis for a modern poetry to rival that of the ancients. For them, mythology was a necessary condition of the poetry they desiderated. More emphatically, a number of early twentieth-century writers recognised, with varying degrees of explicitness, that mythology need not precede poetry because mythopoeia, or myth *making*, is precisely the *proprium* of poetry as such. Myth lies not in remarkable figures or stories but in a way of responding to the world, and the poet, in a radical understanding of the Greek meaning of the word, is the primordial world-maker. At the same time, the conjunction of ‘responding’ and ‘making’ in this last sentence points to an inescapable ambiguity: does the poet, as
representative of the human mind as such, create a world by *imposing* a vision on reality or by *responding* to what is there? There is no escaping the ambiguity of ‘vision’ in this respect, but there can be significant difference in the spirit of looking. The difference between the masterful and the responsive, as partly reflected in the contrast drawn here between Nietzsche and Heidegger, can be seen also in the poetry of the period.

While the combined frame of reference provided by Nietzsche and Heidegger helps to illuminate a wide range of modernist poetry, there are other important developments in the understanding of myth: along with the establishing of anthropology as an academic discipline came the Freudian tradition in psychology. For the most part, the poets’ interest in anthropology was not an informed reflection of the contemporary discipline so much as a parallel reaction against Victorian anthropology from within its premises. The third edition of Sir James Frazer’s multi-volume (and highly influential) *The Golden Bough* was produced over the first decades of the century, culminating in the abridged version of 1922, the *annus mirabilis* of anglophone modernism. Frazer was still in a Victorian mental world for which myth represented a superstitious phase of culture from which mankind had happily, if not yet completely, released itself. But as John B. Vickery has pointed out, his readers in the modernist generation were entranced instead by the mythopoeic wealth he had revealed. Indeed, although *The Golden Bough* was outdated even in its own day, it helped to found a whole school of criticism, or way of looking at literature, for which Jessie L. Weston’s study of the Fisher King legend became one of the most famous through its impact attested by T. S. Eliot in his ‘Notes’ to *The Waste Land.*

Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) similarly straddles the historical epochs. He was immensely interested in ‘primitive’ peoples and artefacts, he adopted anthropological terms such as ‘fetish’ and ‘taboo’, and he explained the deep structures of the psyche through such mythic figures as Oedipus and Elektra. Most importantly, however, despite his concern to give psychoanalysis scientific status, he was in the grip of what was effectively a contemporary myth shared with Frazer. His necessarily speculative scheme of the id, ego,
and superego suggested the fragile control by the civilised principle over a permanently rebellious, and cunningly deceptive, life of the instincts. In that respect it paralleled the ideology of colonialism in which it was, in Rudyard Kipling’s phrase, the ‘white man’s burden’ to be the ever beleaguered and resented upholder of civilisation.\(^5\)

Freud and Nietzsche represent two opposite attitudes with a widespread impact on modern thinking, yet which are not amenable to rational argument or proof, so that they are in themselves a priori world views, or myths. In this radical sense of the word, one’s own myth is always the hardest to recognise as such since it always appears as common-sense reality. In contrast to Freud’s tragic view of civilisation as dependent on the repression or sublimation of instinct, Nietzsche thought that habitual repression and sublimation were themselves the cause of those evils of violence and predation that Freud attributed to the instincts as such.\(^6\) Tragedy for Nietzsche was a mode of affirmation even – or rather, especially – in the face of destruction. Similarly, one of Freud’s major breaks with a disciple was with Carl Gustav Jung (1875–1961) who emphasised the positive wisdom of the unconscious. Jung espoused the notion of a collective unconscious in which the experience of the race was sedimented into mythic archetypes.\(^7\) Hence, whereas Freud saw religion as the anachronistic survival of a primitive illusion, Jung could see its mythic status more positively as a guide to wisdom. Similarly, Freud never quite escaped a ‘symptomatic’ conception of art, while Jung could appreciate the positive achievement of the artistic imagination, albeit in a very different spirit from Nietzsche. Hence, while Freud has had a powerful impact on modern thought generally, Jung has often proved the more sympathetic figure for creative writers and for the academic myth criticism of the mid-twentieth century which followed in the wake of the modernist generation.\(^8\)

Given the myriad different invocations of myth by poets in the modernist period, this chapter seeks not to cover them all, but to suggest an analytic spectrum of some of the principal modes of mythopoeia to be found in their work. For this purpose, the focus is primarily on the imaginative modality, rather than the content, of the poetry.
W. B. Yeats is perhaps the most exemplary and historically encompassing instance as he lived to become a mature poet of the nineteenth century before converting himself into a modern, and maybe even a modernist. His early poetry combined a contemporary symbolist aesthetic with a romantic Celticism, both of which converged on a melancholy longing for the unattainable whereby myth opened the way to a dream world. Yet even in early poems like ‘The Stolen Child’, the romantic dream is recognised as a dangerous seduction and, after his intensive reading of Nietzsche from around 1902, his use of the word ‘dream’ took on a new philosophical complexity. It remained a primary term in his dramatic examination of myth in his verse while the analytic word ‘myth’ was mainly reserved for his prose. The romantic image of the Celt – as analysed, for example, by Matthew Arnold – was different from the assumed norm of English common sense: the Celt was dreamy, melancholy, poetical, and unworldly. Around the turn of the century, however, Yeats began to claim the Celt as not a marginal but a central figure. In the light of books such as The Golden Bough these same qualities of the Celt now represented for Yeats the primitive and essential humanity that was being destroyed by modernity. A comparable universalising of the Celt can be seen in two later poets: Robert Graves and Edwin Muir. Graves’s interest in Welsh mythology contributed to the theory propounded in The White Goddess (1948) whereby all poets, whether consciously or not, are in thrall to the female principle. The figure of the Goddess – who, like Dionysus, was an enemy to Apollonian order and clarity – raised this principle to the level of what Jung would call an archetype:

All saints revile her, and all sober men
Ruled by the God Apollo’s golden mean—
In scorn of which we sailed to find her
In distant regions likeliest to hold her
Whom we desired above all things to know,
Sister of the mirage and the echo.

In a different way, Edwin Muir’s boyhood experience of a pre-modern Orkney way of life gave him a standpoint from which to
assess the modern world in which he subsequently lived, and to bring an inward appreciation to classical myth.

But Yeats was unsurpassed in his realisation of the mythopoetic process as such, for there is a crucial difference between using myth and being mythopoeic. Yeats’s greatest poems do philosophical work between their lines: as with any conjuror, you have to attend not to what he says, but to what he does. In ‘Easter, 1916’, for example, his overt mythologising of the Irish rebels is signalled in the title, but the truly mythopoetic action lies in the gradual shift whereby the initial distinction between the revolutionaries’ dream and the solid everyday reality begins to shimmer until their dream becomes constitutive of reality. The rebels are finally named only when their names have become the legendary formula of a changed world whose sublimity still evades easy judgement:

MacDonagh and MacBride
And Connolly and Pearse
Now and in time to be,
Wherever green is worn,
Are changed, changed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born.

The true choice now is not between dream and reality but between rival dreams as the bearers of reality. That is the mythopoetic standpoint as Nietzsche understood it, and Yeats’s late poem ‘Lapis Lazuli’ is a summary enactment of the Nietzschean affirmation of a mythopoetic art in relation to history and politics. Life and art, initially placed in opposition, are shown over the course of the poem to be not just inseparable but mutually dependent. Yeats’s gradual unpacking of the line ‘All perform their tragic play’ is perhaps the subtlest statement in the European tradition of the power of the aesthetic as based on its elusive ontological status; the same blend of poetic power and cunning kept Yeats largely free, at least as a poet, from the dark underside of myth in the mid-twentieth century: its co-option by right-wing politics.

Not so with his friend and collaborator, Ezra Pound. When Pound came to England in 1908 Yeats was the one established poet
he admired, even as he set out explicitly to modernise his elder, and he was a contributory factor in the radical modification of Yeats’s poetic voice. Yet despite this productive friendship, their underlying difference highlights a fundamental divide in modernist mythopoeia. Yeats’s life and oeuvre reflect his dictum that we make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry.\(^{15}\) His great poems, such as ‘Easter, 1916’, are dramatic reveries turning on the radical division and uncertainty of his own commitments. By contrast, Pound’s greatest project, \textit{The Cantos} (published cumulatively in volumes between 1925 and 1969), despite the frequent subtlety and power of its parts, often depends structurally on the allusive presentation of historical figures and episodes who are meaningful only in a monolithic interpretation which reduces them in effect to an inarguable doctrine. The mode is often denunciatory, and can be splendidly so, as in Canto XLV, where Pound attacks the modern financial system by invoking, with poetic and historical authority, the medieval ban on Usury as a ‘sin against nature’. But Pound accepted the anti-Semitic association of capitalist finance with Jews as well as the Nietzschean critique of Christian compassion:

\begin{verbatim}
Compleynt, compleynt I hearde upon and day,
Artemis singing, Artemis, Artemis
Agaynst Pity lifted her wail:
Pity causeth the forests to fail,
Pity slayeth my nymphs,
Pity spareth so many an evil thing.
Pity beouled April,
Pity is the root and the spring. (XXX)\(^{16}\)
\end{verbatim}

In the now unavoidable light of Pound’s pre- and war-time support of Mussolini’s fascism, the medievalising and mythopoeia of these lines suggest a deliberate blindness to contemporary reality. As the intended mythic sweep and historical compression hardened into dogma, Pound, with his extraordinary generosity and talent, became the tragic centre of poetic modernity. The positive lesson of modernist mythopoeia in writers such as Yeats, and most notably James Joyce, is that of living with an internal scepticism about one’s own
beliefs. These writers recognise that the radical premises of any world view are inarguable: we can usefully reason about them, but they cannot be based on reason. By the same token, however, a different temperament draws on myth, not to question, but to authorise its own outlook. In the mind of the fascist, myth boosts, rather than checks, dogmatic confidence. As T. S. Eliot observed, Pound’s Hell was only for other people.17

Eliot himself lies revealingly between these possibilities. He is the poet most commonly associated with modernist myth owing to his use of the Fisher King fertility motif in The Waste Land. Yet when he spoke, apropos Joyce’s Ulysses but with manifest reference to The Waste Land, of ‘using’ the ‘mythical method’ to make ‘the modern world possible for art’, he made it clear, albeit inadvertently, that he was not himself exercising a mythic sensibility.18 A mythopoeic imagination does not use myth as a method — it is it. And in his case the difference represented two opposed possibilities. His mythic allusions in The Waste Land made the ‘modern world possible for art’ by providing a satiric and plangent contrast with, rather than a mythopoeic transformation of, the modern. Or, to put the point in stronger and more substantive terms, the fertility that is notionally celebrated in the Fisher King myth is belied by the poem’s snobbishly inflected sexual distaste:

The typist home at teatime, clears her breakfast, lights
Her stove, and lays out food in tins.
Out of the window perilously spread
Her drying combinations . . .19

The truly mythic power of the poem lay in the way its jaundiced and class-bound vision of modernity gained such widespread acceptance. Yet Eliot was right from his point of view to resist internalising a properly mythopoeic sensibility for this would displace the religious belief to which he was more truly drawn. In retrospect, the real function of the myth in The Waste Land was to provide a place-holder for Eliot’s later religious faith. His Four Quartets, meanwhile, is a remarkable example of both modernist poetry and religious sensibility. The four poems are not
expressions of faith so much as dramatisations of doubt so that they embody a spiritual experience that is not dependent, for the reader, on a religious belief and in that respect, ironically enough, he comes closest to the self-reflective mythopoeia of other modernists even as he continued to reject the blend of humanism and aestheticism on which they drew.  

The understanding of poetry as in itself a form of mythopoeia helps to explain how modernist poets modified the influential legacy of late-nineteenth-century aestheticism. The notional posture of the aesthete was to espouse art as an alternative domain to common life. This, as Eliot pointed out, may not be fully coherent, and ‘art for art’s sake’ was in itself perhaps one of that century’s powerful myths. But it had a philosophical articulation in Arthur Schopenhauer’s pessimistic philosophy in The World as Will and Representation (1818), whereby all human aspirations are essentially illusions created by the impersonal process of Nature. The knowing, controlled illusion of aesthetic creation then provides the only escape from this humiliating condition. Schopenhauer had little impact on the mainstream philosophy of the day but his pessimism struck a deep chord with artists and writers, including Thomas Hardy, who, although he was not a modernist and had a Victorian intellectual’s austere rejection of the comforts of myth, was one of the great poets of modernity. Nietzsche, however, responded to Schopenhauer as a philosopher and, while accepting his nihilistic model, reversed its meaning. For Nietzsche, aesthetic creation is not a voluntary alternative to, but the inevitable centre of, human existence. Moreover, it became a mode of affirmation of life through a celebration of the creative capacity.

The modernist poet who most embodies – indeed flaunts – the aestheticist roots of modernist world-making is Wallace Stevens. Stevens’s play with language recalls the textual self-sufficiency of late-nineteenth-century French symboliste poetry, and the conscious display of the aesthete, although both are transposed into a fully American idiom. When we realise, like Joyce, the illusory nature of deep meanings behind appearances, the textures of experience are newly vivid and precious:
Call the roller of big cigars,  
The muscular one, and bid him whip  
In kitchen cups concupiscent curds.  
Let the wenches dawdle in such dress  
As they are used to wear, and let the boys  
Bring flowers in last month’s newspapers.  
Let be be the finale of seem.  
The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream.  
(“The Emperor of Ice-Cream’’)²²

At the same time, while he achieves a remarkable variety of mood and tone, his poetry is largely devoted to celebrating the poetic principle itself. His poetic oeuvre has the deliberate self-limitation that would be expected in a philosophical argument and its stylishness is a necessary means of lending his theme its characteristic sense of iridescent life. Even so, the effect in the longer term is to leave some readers hungry in a way that invites turning to the other aspect of mythopoeia: the recovery of a primordial fullness of being and an unalienated relation to the world.

So far, the emphasis has been on myth as a self-conscious ordering, the masterful rather than the responsive potentiality of myth, and, as the vocabulary here implies, there may be a conventionally gendered dimension at work. The striking cases of mythic ordering mentioned so far – Ulysses, The Waste Land, The Cantos and Yeats’s personal mythology of historical recurrence – all have a distinctively masculinist tinge even when the overt ideology of the work may deny this. In contrast, one might think of the more responsive mode of mythopoeia as feminine. For example, H.D. (Hilda Doolittle), who was the sometime fiancée of Pound and then a close friend of D. H. Lawrence, sought, like the early Pound, to catch a mythopoeic response to the natural environment in poems such as ‘Oread’:

Whirl up, sea—  
Whirl your pointed pines.  
Splash your great pines  
On our rock.  
Hurl your green over us—  
Cover us with your pools of fir. ²³
The invocation of the natural elements of trees, wind, and sea catches a moment of intense emotional identification to which the title gives a mythic signature by imagining a nymph as the appropriate locus of response. The poem is typically brief, in the spirit of Imagism, as it records a fleeting response which is then left alone, not made the basis of any more ambitious or encompassing structure. Much of H.D.’s poetic oeuvre is fragmentary and, in so far as Virginia Woolf’s narrative prose might also count as modernist poetry, it often has a similar quality of intense local responsiveness within works whose tight artistic organisation insists on its own aesthetic arbitrariness, its implicit refusal of the grand claims of mythic ordering and permanence to be found in some of her famous contemporaries. Her highly wrought artistic structures ultimately reflect a similar sense of the transitory.

In this context, D. H. Lawrence is an interestingly mixed case. Lawrence had a strongly feminine sensibility, as is evidenced not least in his unfortunate tendency towards compensatory masculinist assertion. His work is pulled between a Nietzschean prophetic imperative and a more contemplative recovery of the primordial condition that Heidegger called attention to Being, or what Lawrence himself called the ‘fourth dimension’.24 Lawrence’s supreme ability was to catch the quick of life in language and an important part of the secret was that, although his writing is always recognisable, he avoids what would more conventionally be called ‘style’. His poetry is notably informal, and he drew an explicit distinction between what he called ‘poetry of the present’ and ‘poetry of the eternal’.25 In contrast to the exquisitely wrought lyrics of Keats and Shelley, he affirmed the value of a different kind of poetry that reflects the momentary passing of experience and, we might add, seeks to offer a participation in the experience itself rather than a verbal artefact. Of course, he knew very well that there is no escape from the condition of linguisticity, no unmediated relation to the world. But Lawrence constantly braved this paradox, and his mytho-poetic imagination was most significantly manifest in the intuition of otherness, and of Being, that he manages to convey dramatically, and most crucially so in the implicit drama of his language.
For example, when they are read naively, Lawrence’s numerous poems devoted to encounters with living creatures seem to claim a directly sympathetic insight into these different life forms, but the verbal action is typically more complex. These poems enact a struggle between, on the one hand, the inevitable anthropomorphising imposed by the very fact of language and human thought, and, on the other hand, a recognition of the irreducible otherness of such different centres of life. In other words, the attempt to identify sympathetically with the other here is a dramatic feint by which its radical otherness is brought into awareness. In ‘The Blue Jay’ the narrator speaks in highly anthropomorphic terms of the jay and to his dog but then, through the bird’s indifference to him, he is struck by its completely alien being:

Every day since the snow is here
The blue jay paces around the cabin, very busy, picking up bits,
Turning his back on us all,
And bobbing his thick dark crest about the snow, as if darkly saying:
_I ignore those folk who look out._

You acid-blue metallic bird,
You thick bird with a strong crest
Who are you?
Whose boss are you, with all your bully way?
You copper-sulphate blue bird!

It is no accident that the recognition of the bird’s ungraspably alien nature comes through imagining it using human speech, for difference can only be experienced in relationship, just as relationship depends on difference — a truth that bears upon the human sphere as well as the cosmic. At the core of Lawrence’s oeuvre is the recognition of how human life is impoverished when it loses its relation to the non-human. But that includes the non-human dimension within the human, which is why the ultimate value of the encounter with these overtly alien forms of life is to revive the sense of radical otherness in relation to our fellow human beings too. For Lawrence, the mythopoeic imagination was a transcending of the habitual human viewpoint, a recovery of the impersonal mystery of Being within every human being.
Lawrence’s meditation on the impersonal, or non-human, dimension of life, which was the philosophical ground bass of his oeuvre in all its genres, had its culmination, and perhaps its supreme test, in the poems through which he approached his own extinction towards the end of a long illness. In poems such as ‘The Ship of Death’ and ‘Bavarian Gentians’ he drew particularly on his experience of the Etruscan tombs, which had impressed him with their bright images of the life to which the Etruscan dead were thought to be proceeding. Indeed, all conceptions of the afterlife, which Freud saw only as illusory wish-fulfilment, or ‘merely’ mythical, may be seen from an anthropological viewpoint as concentrated images of the living values espoused in the given culture, as mythical expressions of its positive conception of life. The good Christian death of earlier centuries, although a resignation to the will of God, had the value of agency in its deliberate preparation and positive acceptance. Likewise, in these poems Lawrence imagines not just a passive extinction but approaching death in a positive spirit as the last great experience of life. He will construct his own funeral ship or carry his torch into the underworld, and invites others to do the same.

Reach me a gentian, give me a torch!
Let me guide myself with the blue, forked torch of this flower
Down the darker and darker stairs . . .

Have you built your ship of death, O have you?
O build your ship of death, for you will need it.

Modernist myth is itself a difficult construction that is open, in principle, to everyone but which few will manage. If life, as Keats thought, is a ‘vale of Soul-making’, post-religious modernity requires that this be done without benefit of clergy, and these late poems of Lawrence are a remarkable instance of modernist myth as an elusive and demanding successor to religious faith. There is also a special aptness in Lawrence’s image of a hidden underground life. For in his everyday surface life he refused to acknowledge the gravity of his illness, referring only to a persistent cold and avoiding medical examination till nearly the end. Yet in his poetic imagination
he was not in denial, he was preparing himself profoundly for his last journey by actively embracing it.

The greatest modern poems on this theme must be the *Duino Elegies* (composed 1912–22) of Rainer Maria Rilke. Just as Lawrence, after rejecting his Christian upbringing, still referred to himself as ‘a passionately religious man’, so Rilke might be classed as religious in having a comparably intense sense of natural piety realised in the language of poetry.30 His mythopoeia, too, was not just a collection of poetic motifs but a form of life. In this regard, he exemplified the conception of language and poetry expounded by Heidegger, whose own discursive prose constantly approaches the poetic as he unfolds the significance, for example, of a phrase from Hölderlin: ‘poetically man dwells upon the earth’.31 Man does not merely exist, but dwells; and language is the significant medium in which this occurs. Heidegger rejected the common conception of language as an instrumental system of expression and communication within which poetry is a specialised function. In contrast, he saw the instrumental functions of language, however dominant in apparent practice, as the secondary domain dependent on its radical condition as the poetic medium of human being and the unveiling of Being.32 It partly follows that the language of poetry will distance itself from commonsensical and instrumental registers as is notably the case with Rilke. The distancing is not just by the formal properties of verse, the traditional signals of poetic status, but by producing within an otherwise ordinary, colloquial idiom allusions, images, and affirmations that resist common understanding and allow the intuition of a radically different one gradually to emerge. Over the course of the ten elegies, pain and death take on the positive value of giving gravitas to human life:

And yet, were they waking a symbol within us, the endlessly dead, 
look, they’d be pointing, perhaps, to the catkins, hanging
from empty hazels, or else
to the rain downfalling on dark soil-bed in early Spring.–

And we, who think of *ascending*
happiness, then would feel
the emotion that almost startles
when happiness *falls.*

(X)33
Once again, this recognition has forebears in the great world religions, but Rilke avoids any too direct invocation of religious archetypes as his mythopoeia lies in producing a modern equivalent not dependent on supernatural faith.

The opposite risk in Rilke’s idiom is of mystical obscurity in contrast to the robust realism with which Lawrence’s verse is constantly freighted. This aspect of the Lawrencean tradition of ‘nature’ poetry was consciously developed by Ted Hughes, but with an instructive difference. Although Eliot’s view of poetry as tapping the most primitive sources is echoed in many modern poets, Hughes is perhaps the most intensively focused example. His best-known poetry about animals seeks to bring forth their absolute difference; even the thrushes in the suburban garden are revealed at close quarters as violent predators:

Terrifying are the attent sleek thrushes on the lawn

Whereas Nietzsche and Lawrence sought the mutuality of Apollo and Dionysus – the civilised and the primordial – Hughes speaks most characteristically for the repressed life. So in this case, while Lawrence’s self-reflective humour made the limits of his human perception part of the internal drama of the poem, Hughes’s focus on the shocking non-humanity of these creaturely beings is ultimately more anthropocentric; hence, perhaps, the mixed reactions to his poetry. Insofar as he expresses a given response to the world, Hughes’s verse has a unique power. But insofar as it expresses a view of the world, it may become emptily rhetorical. Keith Sagar, as an intelligent admirer, acknowledges such moments of relative failure but sees them as minor blemishes in a major achievement because he is convinced of Hughes’s overall view. This ambivalence lies at the heart of Hughes’s most ambitious attempt at creating a myth. Drawing on worldwide anthropological sources he formed, in *The Life and Songs of Crow* (1970–72), the figure of Crow. The characteristic intensity of the figure, which compels some readers, is for others too much of a willed construction, a conscious attempt to create a myth, rather than truly mythopoeic.
Hughes showed his sensitivity to myth in his *Tales from Ovid* (1997), a dramatised translation of episodes from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, a work that has been a primary resource for English poetry since medieval times. Pound made a suggestive remark about Ovid which bears on the distinction between mythopoeic imagination and the deliberate use of myth. He said that Ovid ‘walk[ed] with the people of myth’ as if to say he was still close to them but no longer of them. This seems to place Ovid on the cusp between a world of myth and a world to which myth had become a usable poetic resource – usable, that is to say, under poetic conditions. It may be that the mythopoeic imagination, whether in the Nietzschean or the Heideggerian mode, remains an ever-present possibility for a poet but may be pre-empted by a too conscious recourse to mythic motifs. In this respect, Hughes’s wife Sylvia Plath provides an illuminating instance in her poem ‘The Arrival of the Bee-box’.

The poem contains no explicitly named mythic or classical allusion but it presents a frightening intensity of alienated emotion embodied in the bees contained within a wooden box. The poem is in the American ‘confessional’ mode which invites the reader to use knowledge of the poet’s life and personality in responding to it. Plath’s blonde locks and her episodes of emotional instability will be known to readers. Of course, even in the most confessional mode the poet’s personal presence is still a dramatic persona and to that extent it is potentially, as it became in Yeats, the creation of a personal myth. In this poem, the speaker attempts to contain the bees emotionally and intellectually within a series of imagistic allusions with powerful resonances in Western tradition: ‘the swarmy feeling of African hands’ and ‘like a Roman mob’. At the same time, these images, which seem to be thrown defensively over the bee-box, only intensify the emotion even further while expanding its order of significance until the speaker concludes:

I wonder if they would forget me
If I just undid the locks and stood back and turned into a tree.
There is the laburnum, its blond colonnades,
And the petticoats of the cherry.
They might ignore me immediately
In my moon suit and funeral veil.
I am no source of honey
So why should they turn on me?
Tomorrow I will be sweet God, I will set them free.

The box is only temporary.37

Knowing the containment in the wooden box cannot last, the female speaker imagines herself turning into the living, but insentient, wood of a tree in which her feminine attributes are placed out of reach by passing into a different mode of being. The ‘blond’ locks of the laburnum are reified and masculinised while the ‘petticoats of the cherry’ suggest a desperate self-alienation. And we may surmise that the cherry blossom will after all need to be fertilised by the bees. The poem produces from within its own emotional dynamic the impulse that might be supposed to lie behind Ovid’s story of Daphne turning into a laurel tree when pursued by Apollo. The last verses then anticipate the releasing of the bees only when the speaker’s femininity, and indeed her humanity, are closed down. The only really secure container is the coffin, which is itself quite temporary in the larger scheme of things. Plath’s poem, with its hysterical emotion contained by sardonic wit, and its compulsive longing for insentience, enacts in entirely modern terms an Ovidian metamorphosis which invites, but cannot be reduced to, psychoanalytic explanation. Ovid’s myth takes on a vivid new life with Plath’s dramatically spontaneous rediscovery of the mythopoeic in everyday modernity. She too walks with the people of myth as her highly self-conscious poem seems to recreate its primordial emotion. Her mythopoeia is a striking instance of the creative dynamic between the sophisticated and the primordial in a poem that has fully absorbed the example of modernism.

Notes


10. Arnold expressed this in his *On the Study of Celtic Literature* (1867).


35. See, for example, the reservations expressed about the formal achievement of *Cave Birds* in Keith Sagar, *The Art of Ted Hughes* (2nd edn, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 184–5.
In the early twentieth century, the political landscape of English-speaking countries, and indeed of the entire world, underwent a remarkable number of quite radical changes. Two new political systems emerged – communism and fascism – and many predicted that one or the other of these systems would take over the entire world. At roughly the same time, women gained the vote in England and the US, which promised a radical change in the body politic of those countries. In England, the 1918 act granting women the vote also removed a property requirement for voting, thereby bringing in large numbers of working-class voters as well. The net result of that act was that the number of voters in the 1922 election was treble the number who had voted in the 1908 election. It is hard to imagine what it must have felt like to have two-thirds of the voters be persons who had never been allowed to vote before. A new party emerged, representing those new working-class voters, and that new party – the Labour Party – grew from a small start in 1896 into the largest party in England by 1922. Other immense political changes were occurring: Ireland gained independence, beginning what seemed to many to be end of the English colonial system, hastened by the rise of pan-African and Indian Independence movements. In the US, immigration of a million persons a year seemed to be reshaping the country.

And then the First World War left in nearly everyone’s mind a vision of vast horror without any clear sense that the victors were morally superior to the losers, even though the terms of the peace were quite draconian. So the ‘War to End All Wars’ seemed simply to mark the End of All Previous Politics, but with no real vision of
what might come next. The new political movements, which brought
millions of people into new political parties, swept into the void,
creating immense hopes and equally immense fears.

Newspapers in the first two decades of the century were full of
dire predictions of what these changes would bring, and the various
movements were often merged together. Thus, a 1913 article in the
*New York Times* titled ‘Suffrage Appeals to Lawless and Hysterical
Women’ concluded that ‘women suffrage, if carried to its ultimate
conclusions, could not but destroy those same sacred institutions
which Socialism aims at’. A 1907 London *Times* editorial was
equally hysterical about the results of the expansion of the vote:
‘Once remove the barrier [to] adult suffrage. ... Is the dyke strong
enough to withstand the pressure of the oncoming flood? ... A
FTER THAT THE DELUGE.’ The English women’s suffrage
movement itself promoted the imagery of an unstoppable deluge by
calling its journal *Time and Tide* (as in ‘wait for no man’).

The sense of apocalyptic change about to occur within England
and America could not help but be reflected in the arts, and
modernism certainly produced numerous apocalyptic images.
T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* creates vivid images of an untenable
dryness everywhere, and ends with a ‘voice of thunder’ preceding
some kind of rain – as if there is about to be a deluge. I am not
suggesting that Eliot is directly alluding to any particular ‘tide’,
rather a sense that something ominous is about to wash over the
world – a sense of apocalypse he shares with political discourses.

To see politics in these poems we would usually try to find direct
references to political movements or some published statements by
the poets about politics. There are in fact many such references:
Eliot’s allusion to falling towers in *The Waste Land* is footnoted by
him as a reference to political events in the East, which seems to be
the Russian revolution; W. B. Yeats wrote poems naming martyrs
and leaders of the Irish independence movement; Ezra Pound praises
Mussolini in *The Cantos*; Louis Zukofsky copies out passages from
Marx in ‘A’; Mina Loy writes a feminist manifesto. But searching
out these specific allusions to politics in the words of modernist poets
will never settle how far such references indicate that whole poems
ought to be seen as serving political purposes. When is an allusion to a political event simply scene-setting? And should we say that poets are apolitical if they don’t directly allude to the same kinds of events? These references allow us to say that there certainly were political ideas in the minds of some modernist poets, but not to say that there is any particular relationship of modernist poetry and politics.

Perhaps what is most problematic is that the allusions to politics in modernist poems and in statements from modernist poets point in all directions: Pound declares himself a fascist; Eliot calls himself a monarchist; Yeats speaks of restoring an Irish aristocracy; Hugh MacDiarmid and Zukofsky support communism; Gertrude Stein seems at times to support several different sides. So is politics simply a part of the many varied systems of values which poets bring to bear?

There is another way to understand the connection between poetry and politics in the early twentieth century, which is by seeing that politics itself in the early twentieth century developed a distinctive aesthetic dimension. I do not mean that politics became merely aesthetic in the sense of creating illusory images rather than policies. Rather, the sense of imminent and radical change meant that politics needed to generate images of a new reality, of new cultural forms. Politics itself was driven to reject ‘realism’ because it was necessary to develop policies for governing bodies that had never existed before and which were going to exist in a matter of a few years. Politics became ‘aesthetic’ in the sense of seeking to produce representations of imaginary social structures.

And the images of the future had decidedly poetic qualities. For example, all the early twentieth-century movements sought to alter the kinds of bodies which make up and govern the state. Communism would eliminate the upper classes; fascism would eliminate the non-Aryan races; adult suffrage would bring in women and workers; decolonisation would turn government over to the ex-colonised; immigration reform in the US in the 1920s sought to restore the ‘original’ ethnic heritage of the country. Even when groups used to governing (such as upper-class men) stayed in power, they felt they had to alter their speech and imagery to engage
other kinds of persons (women and working-class voters, for example). Movements often devoted less energy to defining policies to be put in place and much more energy to defining the kind of persons they thought should control or at least have a large say in the government. The vast expansion of suffrage led to projections that politicians would have to appeal to the ‘crowd’, and theories of the ‘crowd mind’ emerged, most derived from a French writer, Gustave Le Bon, who said that the crowd ‘is perpetually hovering on the borderland of unconsciousness’ and declared that a ‘crowd thinks in images, and the image itself immediately calls up a series of other images, having no logical connection with the first’. Le Bon rather remarkably presents two of the basic formal features of modernist literature – the image and the stream of consciousness – as essential traits of the crowd mind. What this shows is not that politics had to speak in modernist forms, but that there was a general sense that some new form of communication was emerging as a corollary of the new political structures, and in particular as the voice of the new kinds of persons who were entering the political arena.

Hence, there emerged a politics of imaginary institutions and imaginary bodies, a politics of cultural mixture or of rejection of cultural mixtures, of an effort to reach beyond consciousness, of concerns about language itself as no longer able to perform its previous functions, of utopian hopes and fears of the end of all civilisation. And there emerged a poetry similarly breaking with realism, invoking and mixing together myths from the past and from multiple cultures, juxtaposing fragments of past and imaginary future structures, creating visions of strange new kinds of bodies, exploring the unconscious – in other words, modernism. Politics did not cause the new art, though many poets were involved in political movements, but politics and art were implicated with each other as competing or complementary visions of what was impending in the near future. Words and art became political in new ways, because any cultural object was either supporting or resisting cultural change.

One common trope of poetry at least since romanticism played a particularly large role in early twentieth-century political movements: the idea that humans had lost their relationship to
nature. Almost every movement declared in one way or another that the current social order had caused humans to lose some of their natural qualities, which would be restored with the radical new forms of government proposed. Probably the most common such claim was the representation of the movement as saving the nation from biological degeneration. Such a claim was most evident in fascist literature, with Jews identified as the degenerate race that had to be removed to restore human nature. But the sense of degeneration was much broader. William McDougall, a Harvard professor of psychology, wrote in the *New York Times* in 1911: ‘As I watch the American Nation speeding gayly, with invincible optimism, down the road to destruction, I seem to be contemplating the greatest tragedy in the history of mankind. . . . When the primal stock is extinguished there is an end of the civilization it created.’

McDougall was arguing for restrictions on immigration, which the US put in place in the 1920s, in particular to keep out eastern Europeans, but the fear of change in the biological makeup of the nation was also prevalent in comments about expanding the vote. A 1911 article suggested that the vote should never be expanded to the poorest because ‘while opportunities to progress should be offered to all classes and peoples, equality between all men was not only impossible but undesirable. . . . Mental characteristics of the majority of the peasant class throughout Europe are essentially the same as those of primitive communities.’

As the vote expanded, it could then seem that cultures that had been called ‘primitive’ were mixing in with the European, and it became important to try to imagine what might result. So Picasso’s modelling his modernist paintings on African masks was not unrelated to political changes. We might even see political ramifications in Marianne Moore’s famous call, in her poem ‘Poetry’, for poets to try to show us ‘imaginary gardens with real toads in them’. It was important politically to try to imagine new structures in which real natural bodies could exist.

The movement most directly invoked in claiming that modern society was leading and should lead to a new human biology was eugenics, an outgrowth of Darwinian theory. Eugenicists proposed controlling the breeding of ‘undesirables’ and encouraging
the breeding the ‘best people’; they believed that morality and intelligence – indeed, entire personalities – derived from the ‘blood’ that people inherited. To see such notions seeping into modernist poetry, consider how an article in a 1920 issue of the *Eugenics Review*, quoting eugenicists W. C. D. and C. D. Whetham, is strangely similar to Yeats’s vision of the world in his poem ‘The Second Coming’. Here is the article:

Great men are scarce; the group personality is becoming indistinct and the personality of the race, by which success was attained in the past, is therefore on the wane, while the forces of chaos are once more being manufactured in our midst, ready to break loose and destroy civilisation.\(^7\)

And here is Yeats’s poem:

The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity.

The eugenicists speak of ‘group personality’; Yeats refers to a ‘blood-dimmed tide’; both are alluding to a collective genetic quality. When Yeats ends his poem with the vision of a ‘rough beast slouching toward Bethlehem to be born’ he is creating a Second Coming as a new biological basis for humanity.\(^8\) We cannot pin down Yeats’s ‘rough beast’ to what any particular political movement was advocating, but we can see that his poem is picking up on anxieties and projections in politics which were as uncertain and vague as his ‘rough beast’.

The vague projections of possible social changes in modernist poems led to many of them having political ramifications unrelated to the actual political beliefs or allegiances of the poets. One place to see this is the remarkable influence of modernist poetry on postcolonial writers. There was in effect a second efflorescence of modernist writing in English when African and South Asian nations broke free of colonial rule – once again, a moment of definite, radical change in the composition of the persons who would govern the state. That moment of postcolonial revolution was anticipated
during the modernist era in movements such as the Pan-African Congress that first met in 1919 in Paris and then in England in 1921. A Pan-African Manifesto countered eugenicist arguments by claiming ‘absolute equality of races, physical, political and social’.9 Marcus Garvey called for ‘Africa for Africans’ – in other words, an end to colonialism – which led to strong reactions, as the New York Times reported in a 1921 article entitled ‘Negroes: A Problem in South Africa’. The article cites a Johannesburg paper which ‘protested against the movement to induce delegates of the native races to the so-called Pan-African Congress in Paris to [support] Garvey’s declaration of hostility to European rule in Africa, and warns the native to put no faith in Marcus, whose propaganda, it says, can only lead to ruin’.10 Modernist poetry could have raised similar concerns about equalising races when it incorporated Indian, Chinese, and African texts and allusions, but critics tended to interpret these borrowings as serving to reveal the expansive genius of European writers. Later postcolonial writers such as Derek Walcott and A. K. Ramanujan saw modernist mixtures of culture in very different terms, crediting Eliot with providing poetic methods useful for pursuing political ends, even though the ends the postcolonial poets represented in their poems often seemed antithetical to ends Eliot would have supported.

One could, of course, simply say that poetic techniques – or artistic techniques in general – are apolitical and can be used for many ends. But the methods developed by modernist writers, the methods often used to define the movement, seemed to many postcolonial writers to have direct political implications. This is a general point that can be made about European modernism in all the arts, and Charles Pollard, writing in particular about Eliot’s relationship to Caribbean poets, has made the broader claim quite eloquently:

Consider . . . how many of the distinctive innovations of European modernism – Eliot’s structural use of fertility myths, Matisse’s shockingly bright colors, Picasso’s cubist dislocations, and Stravinsky’s dissonance and asymmetrical rhythms, to name a few – were deeply influenced by the non-European cultural forms being brought back to
Paris and London by colonial anthropologists, ethnographers, missionaries, and administrators. These modernist strategies of ‘making it new’ by making it exotic and of substituting aesthetic for political domination clearly implicate European modernism in the cultural imperialism of its age, but these strategies do not irrevocably bind all of modernism’s aesthetic innovations to colonialism’s ideology. Subsequent postcolonial writers have transformed these strategies into different forms of innovation and inclusiveness that bring together the cultural fragments left by colonialism.¹¹

What Pollard is indicating is that modernist artworks had political consequences due to their innovations in form which were at times unrelated to the politics held by those who constructed those works. When modernist poets bring non-European cultural forms into their poetry, they are initiating a mixing of cultures that has political effects. Pollard emphasises just this mixing of cultures. But there are other features which postcolonial writers found useful as well. Kamau Brathwaite says in History of the Voice that he and other Caribbean writers learned from Eliot to use colloquial speech – the ‘riddims of St. Louis’, which inspired them to use lower-class dialects.¹² When Lil in the second part of The Waste Land speaks in Cockney English to explain that her teeth have gone bad because of ‘them pills I took, to bring it off’, she creates an image of an uneducated person whose body has been destroyed by poverty and doctors, and her dialect provides a model for using language of those consigned to lower-class status in colonial countries.¹³ Eliot was not in any way in favour of enfranchising people like Lil, but his poem, for all its stature as high art, has ended up serving as a model for poets who wish to support movements to challenge the hegemony of upper-class culture. The Waste Land mixes high- and low-class voices, European and Indian myths and languages, allusions to dozens of literary, religious and even anthropological texts, and its dominant image, as the title indicates, is of a dead world, but with hints of resurrection throughout. Is the mixture of classes and cultures the cause of death or the potential cure?

Some modernist poems seemed to recognise the confusing politics of their own formal experiments. In ‘Cubes’ Langston Hughes writes
that in Paris, ‘In the days of the broken cubes of Picasso’, he met an ‘African from Senegal’ who was brought there to ‘amuse’ the French. ‘For fun’ they introduce the man to ‘sick’ European culture, with the result that he carries ‘disease’ back to Senegal with him. Hughes connects Picasso’s cubes to this small story by saying:

It’s the old game of the boss and the bossed,
  boss and the bossed,
  amused
  and
  amusing,
  worked and working,
Behind the cubes of black and white,
  black and white,
black and white.14

Hughes implies a corrupt politics behind cubism: while it can seem simply amusing (or aesthetic) to bring African cultural forms into European art, as Picasso does, it is an expression of European power and generally destructive. Yet Hughes’s own poem is constructed as a cubist array of words on the paper, with repetitions creating geometric patterns of black and white on the page. He is thus joining a movement he has condemned, but, as the critic Seth Moglen concludes, ‘Hughes will [not] reject a tainted modernism. . . . For modernism, he suggests, can perhaps alone reveal to us the “disease” that has brought it into being.’15

Modernist poetry and art can thus have conflicting political implications, but that does not mean they are apolitical: such conflicts are inherent in the poetics of early twentieth-century politics. There is an instability in the attempt to envision new cultural forms, new political systems, new human bodies: the actual effect of the changes one advocates can end up serving completely unexpected ends, in particular because one is trying to change the mind that is creating the new vision, the poet’s own mind. As Mina Loy writes in ‘Aphorisms on Futurism’ in the 1920s, ‘CONSCIOUSNESS cannot spontaneously accept or reject new forms, as offered by creative genius; it is the new form, for however great a period of time it may remain a mere irritant—that moulds consciousness to the necessary amplitude for holding it.’16
Loy may be attempting to credit great geniuses with creating new forms of consciousness, but even those geniuses cannot know what they are creating: each’s own ‘consciousness’ will be altered from whatever it thought it was doing. ‘New forms’ have the potential to press a person or an entire culture to go beyond what could previously be understood or conceived even by those creating those new forms.

Loy provides a striking example of the attempt to understand how a new form of consciousness gets created from the mixing and rearranging of old forms in a poem which is in effect about the creation of her own body and mind from the mixture of the cultures of her parents. ‘Anglo-Mongrels and the Rose’ characterises her parents as bringing together nearly all the various cultural and political elements circling about the movements of the early twentieth century. Her mother is

Conservative Rose
storage
of British Empire-made pot-pourri
of dry dead men

This Rose is thus a living version of Eliot’s poem *The Waste Land*, a collection of fragments of the ideas of dead men and dying British culture. And this Rose, though Conservative, is drawn to the political challenge to Empire,

whirling itself
deliriously around the unseen
Bolshevik

Rose’s whirling avoids contact with the Bolshevik but does not avoid contact with another alien cultural force, Loy’s father, described as

Exodus
Oriental
mad to melt
with something softer than himself
clasps with soothing pledges
his wild rose of the hedges

Loy’s father is a Hungarian Jew, but she represents him as bringing to the dry dead ideas of British Empire all that is in the Orient and the
ancient past (Exodus). Out of this combination arises Loy herself, whom she characterises using a term from eugenics: she is ‘Mongrel Rose’ who starts life as a strangely nonhuman body, ‘A clotty bulk of bifurcate fat / out of [Rose’s] loins’.\textsuperscript{17} The body that will eventually produce this modernist poem thus starts as a mere ‘clotty bulk’ of ‘fat’ that bears only one distinct mark: it is bifurcated, divided, unable to be a single coherent thing because it is attached to Empire, Bolshevism, Judaism, and the Orient. It is partly of aristocratic blood and partly a mongrel mixture.

Loy is of course being satiric, mocking her parents and herself, but her poem gets at the crucial politics surrounding modernism: that which has been left out of our conception of the cultural norm, that which seems a political and cultural challenge to what we are, is eerily attractive and about to replace or merge with ‘us’, creating a new kind of human being who will take over the political systems we have known.

Modernist poetry has in the last few decades not been thought of in such political terms: that is due to the historical canonisation of the art form in the 1950s, when instead of feeling that cultural and political change were imminent, European and American politicians were deeply devoted to resisting and denying change. During those years, communism and fascism were demonised, women’s movements slipped underground, and even the decline of imperialism seen in such things as India achieving independence could be interpreted as a return to traditional European culture – as cutting off the ties to the ‘foreign’. In other words, modernism was canonised as part of the 1950s’ vast defence of a universal Western liberalism. To achieve that goal, modernism was recast as an art of abstraction, created by individual geniuses escaping from everything as mundane as politics.

The canonisation of modernism as abstraction, as an art of pure form, is one with a loss of belief that a truly radical change in culture is imminent. In the ’50s that largely took the form of a strong belief that the Western world needed to be preserved. But by the 1970s there emerged a new sense of political and cultural change: the local wars and local revolutions around the world...
shattered any sense of a unified ‘third world’ and eventually broke up the ‘second world’ communist bloc; the rise of civil rights, feminist and queer movements suggested that all states would contain diverse collections of different kinds of persons; and the advent of computers and the internet multiplied the kinds of writing and publishing available. These changes seemed to mark the demise of any total political system anywhere. There have continued to be momentous changes, to be sure, but many changes at once in various parts of the social order. What early twentieth-century politicians and modernists believed they faced — and what postcolonial politicians and writers also seemed to experience — was a vast and singular change about to happen, that would transform human nature, bringing new kinds of humans into political power. In recent decades, we no longer envision the imminent arrival of a new overall culture and a new kind of human being; instead we now tend to conceive of human beings as constantly changing and never settling in any one form at all, even reaching the extreme possibility of changing bodies at will via virtual existence. Postmodernism is a literature of such constant change, permeated by a sense of instability and uncertainty and yet also full of a sense that the fluctuations are just part of everyday life. Perhaps there will be another phase of modernism, when a distinct ‘new’ total social order and distinct ‘new’ type of new human being becomes imaginable and seems about to be brought into reality by political change. Or perhaps we will continue floating in our constantly shifting cultural seas, and modernism will just seem an ethereal historical moment of impossible dreams.

Notes

The concept of ‘gender’ relies upon cultural systems that eroticise individuals. Gender invokes a binary with sexuality – even if the sexuality and gender are collapsed into each other so as to seem unitary. Patriarchy, for example, attempts that collapse: to equate male with masculine and female with feminine. The binary occurs because gender, in its very construction, interprets sex through roles, through relationships, and, in Western modernist culture, through the clichés of masculine/feminine dichotomies. In addition, gender often seems to promulgate itself as a theoretical concept rather than a historical one. Gender has been demarcated as performance and as kinship, to give two examples of influential theoretical emphases. Yet the concept of gender does fluctuate historically. Within the modernist period, Virginia Woolf’s narrator in A Room of One’s Own observes that ‘if an explorer should come back and bring word of other sexes looking through the branches of other trees at other skies, nothing would be of greater service to humanity’, indicating that, in modernist literature, neither gender nor sex in this period was fully stable. Woolf’s narrator makes that remark, aside, while discussing the new form Mary Carmichael might give a novel, new simply because of her gender, illustrating a literary interrogation of gender through changing textual patterns. This same provocative repudiation of rigidity in both gender and textual forms is in evidence in Ezra Pound’s bold cry ‘Make it new!’, his short-hand command to create new textual forms and, arguably, given Pound’s own experiments with family configurations, new forms of gender. These and other experiments within the specifically literary methodology of textual formation created an approach to
gender that conflicted with the emerging social science theories. The literatures represented gender as changeable, not static, while social sciences were concurrently creating models of normative fixed gender formation.

With sophistication, in this period, poets misalign sex and gender, exposing gender in terms of its own construction, highlighting the power of rigid gender construction to kill individuality. By textualising gender roles, they simultaneously reveal and hide sexuality, and they code and double sexuality that would be perverse in terms of authorised gender. An emphasis on sexuality as opposed to gender makes sense; this is after all the era of ‘libidinal currents’ that Joseph Boone recognises in the fiction of the period.²

It behooves an accurate understanding of gender in this period to read both sex and gender, since these poets worked hard to separate them. Joseph O. Aimone does just that in his rereading of W. B. Yeats’s ‘Crazy Jane’ sequence of poems (which appeared in Yeats’s Words for Music Perhaps in 1932). Aimone challenges prevailing readings of Crazy Jane’s gender by reading her sexuality as male. Aimone makes a solid, exciting case for Crazy Jane representing a ‘transvestite homosexual’. He identifies a watercolour of ‘Crazy Jane’ by Richard Dadd and hypothesises that this picture could be a referent for Yeats since it was exhibited in London in 1913, noting that ‘a close look at the painting [will] unsettle any conviction that the figure represented is simply a female’.³ Quoting sections from the poems that give him a case for this reading of Crazy Jane as a transvestite, he notes Crazy Jane’s lines ‘A woman can be proud and stiff’ and ‘Love has pitched his mansion in / The place of excrement’.⁴ Because of his readings of the male sexuality of the figure, which produces a transvestite gender rather than a woman’s gender for Crazy Jane, Aimone argues that Yeats’s own masculinity is complicated; he suggests that two types of masculinity appear in Yeats’s oeuvre: a ‘repressed masculinity’ where Crazy Jane’s ‘homosexuality reflects the repressive’ as well as an ‘early, sensuous, and decadent masculinity’. Aimone’s reading emphasises the difficulties of reading sexuality/gender identifications. As Aimone concludes, ‘Jane passes’ as a woman.⁵
Aimone’s arresting reading signals the sexual duplicity represented in this era of radical changes in roles, relationships, and cultural expectations. His reading makes clear the difficulties of reading gender in modernist poetry, since the normalising effects of gender make difficult a realisation of sex outside gender’s historical conception. At least in this series of poems, sexuality would seem to be a matter of barely visible reference for Aimone, multiply elusive because, all the while, his reading coexists with an equally complicated reading of Crazy Jane based on her gender as a woman. Equally valid is Elizabeth Butler Cullingford’s reading of Crazy Jane as ‘an erotic and licentious female figure’. Reading Jane as a woman emphasises gender, rather than sexuality, since Crazy Jane and the Bishop struggle about normative sexuality and desire, a struggle in which Crazy Jane, a woman unapologetic about her sexuality, states that “Love is all / Unsatisfied / That cannot take the whole / Body and soul”. The two positions revolve around women’s gender in terms of unacceptable and acceptable attitudes towards her body. The Bishop, urging Crazy Jane to move from the body to the “heavenly mansion”, reminds her of her age, that “Those breasts are flat and fallen now, / those veins must soon be dry”. Crazy Jane, in contrast, places her sexual desires and sexual acts in nature: she and Jack meet under ‘the oak, for he / ... Wanders out into the night / and there is shelter under it’; in another poem, she is “Naked” with “The grass my bed”. By placing the body in nature, she infers that the sexual acts are natural ones, not (as the Bishop would label them) perverse. This reading of the forceful contrast of societal positions on gender is as potent in these poems as is Aimone’s reading of elusive and revelatory sex. Aimone’s argument reveals that reading sex and gender in modernist poetry must identify palimpsestic layers, which might be so conflicting as to seem to cancel each other.

On the surface these poems relate an anxiety surrounding individual sexuality, which would be subverted when pressed
into conformity by institutionalised culture. The Bishop’s moralising shaming works as a metaphor for the regimentation that any woman (or transvestite homosexual) could expect to endure at the hands of modernist cultural hierarchy. While the Bishop tries to insert normative definitions of women’s sex/gender roles, Crazy Jane defends her body, stating that her ‘body makes no moan / But sings on’. Repudiating conformity, Crazy Jane is a misfit, a social outcast, longing for ‘Jack the Journeyman’, her lover, also an outcast.

These tensions between individual sexuality and social gender, and the duplicitous invisibility of sex, can be identified in more modernist poetry than the ‘Crazy Jane’ series, which I will show through poetic use of death, mythic iteration, and linguistic repetition. My analysis will show that the tensions appear in so much of the poetry that it can be identified as a specifically modernist poetic marker of an early twentieth-century cultural struggle – a struggle between the poets and the social sciences, whose models defined normative genders out of varying individual sexes and varying sexual actions. Through their documentation of ‘abnormal’, the social sciences of this time reinscribed an expectation of individual regulation within a collective scheme. Cristanne Miller makes the point that ‘there was increasing pressure for stricter normative and more sexually focused categorization’ in the early part of the century. Social scientists narrated heterosexual sexuality and gender as normative, even while these social sciences recognised (and – to identify the abnormal – relied upon) individual variations to the normative gender constructions. Internationally famous social science theorists of the period (all with various links to study of sexuality and gender) – Freud, Otto Weininger, Havelock Ellis, Francis Galton, and Cesare Lombroso – each classified and typed. In this way, they were able to identify, define, and essentialise (unattainable) heterosexual gender normativity of the individual, whether for psychoanalysis, sexology, eugenics, or criminology. Taxonomies of normality and medicalised difference produced (and reinvigorated) expectations of normative heterosexual sex/gender.
In the ‘Crazy Jane’ series of poems, Yeats sets up on the surface the normative gendered categories of early twentieth-century Western culture through his Bishop, and also defies them through Crazy Jane. The Bishop tries to force a normative feminine gender model on Crazy Jane, which reflects the social science reification of sex/gender societal expectations. By defining sex and classifying gender, social sciences (and the Bishop) emphasise an authoritative collective, to which an individual should conform.

Crazy Jane, of course, does not.

Modernist poetry amplifies these tensions between individual and collective, opposing the social sciences. The foregrounded tension marks a particularly literary paradigm in this historical period. The poetry magnifies the tension by creating deliberately unstable textual formations. Throughout the ‘Crazy Jane’ series of poems, for example, refrains interrupt a ballad formation. A refrain is an old type of textual formation, but when the refrain interrupts the stanzas, as in ‘Crazy Jane and the Bishop’, it satirises the idea of unity and established meaning. There, the (italicised) refrain ‘(All find safety in the tomb)’ occurs in each stanza and interrupts the sequence of lines that follow each other syntactically. This stanza –

Bring me to the blasted oak
That I, midnight upon the stroke,
(All find safety in the tomb.)
May call down curses on his head

– begins the poem, with the refrain interrupting the wish of the speaker to ‘call down curses’. The refrain is equally interruptive in each stanza, and it destabilises the concept of linear meaning.

Many cases of textual innovation intersecting with gender reinforce the point that a textual formation underscores the poetic concerns about tensions between gender and individual expression. Two examples already identified by critics come to mind. First, Susan Stanford Friedman notes that, by reforming the epic, H.D. (Hilda Doolittle) ‘feminized epic convention’. Second, David Ayers reads Nancy Cunard’s Parallax as ‘a new rhetorical form’, emerging from ‘Cunard’s reading of Eliot in terms of herself’.
He describes the poem as ‘a quoted voice within a quoted work’, and interprets Cunard as creating a ‘hybrid third person’, with characteristics of both male and female.\(^{14}\)

In poetry by T. S. Eliot, H.D., Stevie Smith, Wilfred Owen, and Gertrude Stein, sex, gender, individual, collective, and textual formation coalesce to make visible the fluctuation in gender prominent in the modernist period.

By representing the messiness of human life that cannot fit systemic expectations, modernist poets trouble a seemingly incontestable social science sublimation of an individual into a collective. Rather than mirroring social science understandings of gender, Eliot, Owen, Smith, and H.D. focus on individual exclusion from and rejection of institutional systems that prescribe gender in models and behaviour. They present misfits outside the culture. For example, Eliot’s famous 1917 character Alfred J. Prufrock fails in culturally masculine roles. But which is perverse, the man or the culture that enforces the model? The culture abases Prufrock, providing him with roles such as the Fool, rather than the acceptably masculine Prince Hamlet, or with dead figures for his models – such as Lazarus and John the Baptist, hardly attractive or desirable. He enters dream-like myth, which would allow him to fit gendered roles if he could interact with the myth as one might expect. In that dream-land, he ‘heard the mermaids singing, each to each’. Nevertheless, even in myth, he does not fit; he does ‘not think that they will sing to me’. He ‘lingered . . . / By sea-girls’ rather than with the ‘women [who] come and go / Talking of Michelangelo’, yet he cannot remain in his dream. He ‘drown[s]’ in response to the collective ‘human voices’ who ‘wake’ him.\(^{15}\)

For ‘Prufrock’, women who conform to gendered parameters of ‘braceleted’ arms and ‘settling a pillow or throwing off a shawl’ draw his desire, but deny him, saying ‘“That is not it at all, / That is not what I meant, at all.”’\(^{16}\) They parallel the sirens of the mermaids, who call to him, arousing his desire, waking him, only to ‘drown’ him. That language, that song – a mytic one, a patriarchal one – places the woman as the object of desire, which patriarchy has prefigured as entrapping, snaring, and killing. The man,
to adhere to the expected masculine relationship with the women of the culture, must enter into that society and be ‘drowned’. Of course this presentation of women is misogynistic, as Cristanne Miller points out that much of the men’s poetry is of this period, but it also places the perversion on the gendered models representing culture, not on the individual. In other words, the nonconforming individual is the oppressed figure, so much so that he is killed by the collective ‘human voices’, because of a rigid formulation of gender, and it is the collective at fault.

The inability to fit into a collective shatters an alignment of sexuality and gender. The self dies when confronted with societal expectations of conformity. The individual does not match the collective. Strikingly, Eliot, Smith, and Owen all use the metaphor of drowning to represent death caused by patriarchal gender expectations. Owen’s use of drowning is the most realistic, in that the man he describes in ‘Dulce Et Decorum Est’ is actually drowning from the reactions in his lungs to the gas in a First World War battle. The death also recurs in the narrator’s dream, where ‘before my helpless sight, / He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning’. Owen’s gassed man ‘drown[s]’, and, in response, the fellow soldier narrating the poem scourges patriotic masculinity in the last (broken) lines – ‘The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est / Pro patria mori.’ That literal, realistic death by drowning from gas represents the death from allying oneself with the patriarchal myth that it is glorious to die for one’s country. This repudiation of authority emerges, Lorrie Goldensohn suggests, from a ‘memory of fellow soldiers as helpless sacrificial victims’ which results in ‘looking at the higher leadership with hostility and suspicion’. The tension between individual soldier and cultural authority developed in the poetry to an erotic pitch, where ‘fraternity’ becomes ‘a libidinal battlefield energy deflected from heterosexuality and redirected towards a split of emotions that supports murderous ferocity towards one set of fellows [the commanding officers] and an expense of protective tenderness towards another’. Certainly, Owen’s poetry ‘remains impacted by conventional notions of manliness’, as Kathy J. Phillips points out, but these notions are
not the conforming gender identifications with group systemic values.\textsuperscript{19} Rather, Sarah Cole posits, they are of ‘an elevated nature, thereby casting out a protected sphere for the beloved body’.\textsuperscript{20} Owen rejects the gendered masculinity of the war-mongers when he repudiates conventional developmental models of masculinity in favour of the ‘fraternal’, going farther than the fraternal to produce ‘homoerotic fantasising’.\textsuperscript{21} Neil Corcoran, on Wilfred Owen’s ‘homoerotic fantasising’, clarifies the range of Owen’s erotic positioning, exposing once again how modernist poetry positions the erotic body to oppose theories of gender – here, conflations of masculinity with patriotism. Owen realigns gender by opposing war and systemic institutions with the personalised erotic. The sexual erotic expression takes precedence over a gendered one. Owen uses sexual eroticism against institutional forces of conformity.

Stevie Smith also uses the metaphor of drowning to describe the exiled individual who does not fit. In ‘Not Waving but Drowning’ she presents a ‘dead man’ who is both alive and dead, as he ‘lay moaning’. The societal figures of the poem misread the man as a ‘chap’ who ‘always loved larking’, since they think he was out in the water ‘waving’. The dead man, in agony, calls ‘no no no’, repeating that he was ‘not waving but drowning’.\textsuperscript{22} As in ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’, ‘Not Waving but Drowning’ insists on a divide between those in society who are able to conform and be in a group (‘They’) and the separated individual who has not conformed. As in ‘Prufrock’ and ‘Dulce Et Decorum Est’, the group is implicated, since the dead man ‘was much too far out all [his] life’, too different to be part of the group. Eliot’s and Smith’s positioning of the victim reinforces a realisation that the group kills. Smith puts ‘They said’ on one line alone, after their collective rushed misidentification of the death: ‘It must have been too cold for him his heart gave way.’ Without punctuation, the line suggests that the group wants, quickly, to find a natural cause of death. The dead man revises the meaning of ‘cold’ as a social one: ‘no no no, it was too cold always.’ The natural death of ‘gave way’ shifts blame from a society, even though it was what created ‘cold always’. That rhyme of ‘gave way’ and ‘cold always’
gives further poignancy to the man’s exile, since the meaning is so easily substituted, and, without the dead man’s voice, the truth would never be known. The multiplicity of doubled readings, using the same words but shifting causes and effects, reflects the ‘doubleness’ that Jane Dowson notes in women’s poetry of this period, when she suggests that the ‘modernist concept of the “persona”’ was ‘appropriated by some women to try out different masculine and feminine identities’. Smith’s poems (as does her nickname Stevie) continuously play with gender identities (as in her poem ‘Childe Rolandine’, with its substitution of the female for the Victorian male Childe Roland). In ‘Not Waving but Drowning’ the differentiation and collapse of the persona ‘I’ of the poem into the framing ‘he’, the dead man, also multiplies the gender positions.

Eliot, Owen, and Smith deliberately shifted an imposed relationship between individual and collective model by emphasising individuality and the death of the individual. The individual feels the oppression of the collective, both in society and discourse. That emphasis on individuality and death repudiates established social systems based on naturalised genders.

In The Waste Land, Eliot also undermines expected notions of Western masculinity and femininity by referring to male and female mythological figures. Eliot revives the impotent Fisher King, from the literary King Arthur legends, who cannot restore the land. Philomela, raped by Tereus, tongue cut out, is turned into a nightingale. Tiresias appears, both male and female in his body. Eliot’s self-conscious use of these myths creates a modernist signature through an iteration of myth, with, then, a new inscription of that myth. Eliot inserts mythological figures whose sexuality is already known, then reinscribes that cultural sexuality and gender through the new context of his urban modern poem. Tiresias looks on at the modern clerk and typist, apathetic figures who lose their individuality in their adherence to the expected sex/gender systems of heterosexual patriarchy. Their indifference replaces Zeus and Hera’s mythic struggles over sexuality that made Tiresias both male and female in the first place. Philomela’s rape is relegated to a picture (or a tapestry) ‘above the antique mantel’, a detail of
self-referential irony recalling Philomela’s weaving of a tapestry depicting her rape in order to communicate with her sister Procris. The Fisher King turns to Western canonical texts – ‘fragments’ of past literary texts, which ‘I have shored against my ruins’, both insinuating that poetry can hold off the waste of his sexual state, and simultaneously implicating these classic fundamental literary texts with the break-down of virile masculinity.24

H.D. also instantiates this modernist signature of reinscribing myth. She takes Greek mythic figures as many of her subjects in her 1924 collection Heliodora, figures such as Hermes, Thetis, Penelope (in ‘At Ithaca’), and Helen. The myths are rigid in their gendering, but H.D. rewrites them through the ‘I’ voice of these culturally entrenched figures. ‘Thetis’ is in the voice of the nymph who wants a son, with the poem insisting on the individual emotion when it presents the loss of Achilles. Penelope, instead of yearning for Ulysses, desires her suitors. In other words, the individual is returned from a historical account, in the poems defining her own sexuality in her own autobiographical voice.

In contrast, ‘Helen’ (in the same volume), is in the third-person, who ‘All Greece hates’ while she lives, ‘could love indeed the maid, / only if she were laid, / white ash amid funereal cypresses’.25 Unlike Thetis and Penelope, who present their own sexualities, for Helen the system is still defining the individual Helen and her sexuality through gendered conscription. And the collective wants her dead.

In 1961, however, with her epic poem Helen in Egypt, H.D. devises a Helen who might escape that murder at the hands of the collective. By the time she writes Helen in Egypt, H.D. has reworked the binary of gender between individual and collective so that the mythic narrative story of Helen becomes fractured, with one story the violent cultural story giving blame to the woman who causes a war, and the other a narrative of an individual who opposes the historical narrative. H.D. places Helen in Egypt, not Greece, and presents her as an individual, rather than part of the collective historical Trojan War. H.D. realigns the individual Helen against the group as an individual. The individual subjectivity is valorised
against the stigma and oppression of the collective. A doubled voice emerges from the lyrics, based upon a doubled imagistically mirrored text formation. This long poem depends on the image more than on narrative, so that, as Shari Benstock reports, ‘Dreams and reality, remembrance and ecstatic traces overlap as Helen tries to make “sense” of her situation.’

An alienated Helen comes back from death.

The tension between individual and collective is intense in this epic poem. Helen returns to life through memories of selves that do not seem to be herself. H.D.’s figure of Helen is really dead – dead not only to her earlier memories, but dead according to Greek mythology, on the other side of the river Lethe, river of forgetfulness. The figure of Helen marks an identity that no longer exists, since this woman’s ‘I’ has divided herself in response to war and the collective’s narration of her. She disappears from what would be designated as real in the narrative order from which wars can be produced. This marker, this Helen who is abject object, remembers bits of earlier lives – the life before Paris stole her away and the life with Paris on the battlements of Troy – but she is not those lives; she has forgotten who she is, and that Helen no longer exists.

Even though Helen is dead, death accomplishes that division from the culturally created woman who was called a curse, who could not return home, who left her husband for Paris – the Helen H.D. imagined in 1924. Helen in Egypt cannot remember, and when she does remember she dies again. Thus, through death and division, H.D. imagines two Helens, one in Troy and one in Egypt. H.D. can present one Helen created, in all her gendered stereotypes, as Helen of Troy, and another, an individual, dead in that life, as in Stevie Smith’s drowned ‘I’, who can escape, finally, the prescribed gendered subjectivity. Prose and poetry create reflections that are similar, so that separating Helen’s image of herself from the patriarchal narrative may be impossible. If she is read historically, through the imaginary of the patriarchy, Helen must be ‘a discordant element’. The Egyptian Helen is the Helen who fights for an identity outside war, even though that identity feels more illusion than real.
This alternate system of knowledge and memory presents a position outside a patriarchal system of history.

This use of myth suggests that, when modernist poets align gender and textual formations, they create a fluctuation in one when changing the other. Instead of presenting again the mythic figure as a historical heroic one, Eliot and H.D. create, to varying degrees, the historical mythic figure in a contemporary world. They represent myths of perverse individuals – those who do not fit the social (and gendered) mould because of individualised excoriated sexuality. In other words, they shift the group’s subjugation of the individual. They resituate the individual. Instead of using the collective to define and normalise the individual, their poetry positions the individual as the defining locus of meaning, looking askance at the collective. In this method, using textual (mythic) artefacts from the collective mythology of the culture, the poets insert cultural mythologies to identify ideologies of sexuality, then reinforce individual sexuality to create an alternative normative positioning through re-mythologising.

Positioning individual eroticised bodies against an exterminating collective gender was not the only technique used by modernist poets to oppose rigid social-science gendering models. H.D. shows that social science is not the only originator of gender models; poetry can also gender. She actively genders in order to contest patriarchy. Through texts documenting lesbian eroticism, H.D. genders by queering a patriarchal normative script. Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Susan Stanford Friedman contend that the cultural ‘ferocity of the taboo against same-sex relationships’ propelled H.D. to keep hidden texts of lesbian desire, that the published texts, with the heterosexual content, ‘frequently express her need to be delivered from the cultural scripts of romantic thralldom’. Their comments emphasise that gendering for H.D. is an act simultaneously within and against the context of a social system – here, patriarchy. Rather than having gender enacted upon the individual, by a system, H.D. genders a newly conceived system.

H.D.’s presentation of sexual desire in terms of Sappho gives an example of this gendering. Poems based on Sappho’s fragments
are spread throughout the 1924 *Heliodora*, incorporating fragments thirty-six, forty, forty-one, and sixty-eight. H.D. enlarges and expounds upon the fragments through a created voice of Sappho, as if the original poem were found and witnessed. David Ayers contends that H.D.’s lyrics based on Sappho are ‘not a translation’. Instead, he argues, H.D.’s ‘aesthetic goals related to the ideas of the Greek epigrams’ but represented, through ‘laconic detachment’, a ‘modern poetics’.  

H.D.’s additions present gendering based solely on desire – not, as with Thetis and Penelope, a commentary upon and distancing from expected types of femininity. In H.D.’s use of Sappho as a referent, Diana Collecott identifies ‘multiple meanings embracing aesthetics and intersubjectivity as well as sexual practice, with all that these involve for women in a patriarchal culture’.  

The desire emerging from Sappho’s fragments helps H.D. gender outside patriarchal terms. The desire in the poems is of a desiring woman wishing to love sexually a woman who (not desiring) would be like ‘snow in my arms’. The ‘I’, ‘eager for you’, asks if she should ‘press lips to lips / that answer not’. The desire in the poems is also that of a lover asking, ‘Is it bitter to give back / love to your lover / if he wish it / for a new favorite?’ The desire in the poems is for the ‘chance’ of death: ‘what can death loose in me / after your embrace?’ she cries. In other words, the agonies and sweetness of love embody the ‘I’, so that the gender of the ‘I’ changes with the situation. These are poems of the moment, of ‘your chance smile / and my scarf unfolding’, and the gender is of the moment too. H.D. challenges dominant cultural understandings of sexuality – and monolithic gender – as she reconfigures desire, when she appropriates Sappho’s writing into her own.

Gertrude Stein also opposes patriarchal rigidity with alternative gendering, continuously emphasising the sexual politics of the period, both materially and linguistically. One need only think of ‘Susie Asado’, ‘Ada’, or *Lifting Belly* to read the disjunction of individual experience and social expectation that Stein expresses through language deformation. Jane Dowson believes that
‘the avant-garde writers escaped the masculine/feminine dyad by destabilising conventional systems of representation’. She argues that poets such as Marianne Moore, H.D., Edith Sitwell, Stein, and Mina Loy ‘subverted “masculine” language’.

Stein’s ‘Patriarchal Poetry’ (1927) makes use of this deformation to present an alternative gender through language play.

The title alone marks this piece as an exposé of the gender system of patriarchy. Throughout the poem Stein references methodologies of the social sciences, such as categorisation, by presenting questions that define through difference. ‘What is the difference between Elizabeth and Edith’, the voice of the poem asks, and the formulation repeats across the surface of the poem, using inanimate objects, abstractions, and puns that could not possibly be categorised together: ‘What is the difference between a glass pen and a pen’; ‘what is the difference between right away and a pearl’; ‘what is the difference between ardent and ardently’; ‘What is the difference between a fig and an apple’. These questions appear like tag lines, separated, but referencing each other – spatially distant but grammatically calling out one to the other. These formulations mimic social-science models of classification and type, satirising that classification. If there is a difference between a ‘fig’ and an ‘apple’, then Elizabeth and Edith must be different from each other, rather than grouped as Woman. The categorisations range widely, and hilariously, as with ‘right away’ and ‘pearl’, but make the point that even the most nuanced of differentiations (‘glass pen’ and ‘pen’, for example) make the objects different, not the same. Stein connects the emotion of indifference to this categorisation when she plays syntactically on the words ‘Indifferently’ and ‘In differently’.

The language creates two entirely separate meanings, of course, just in the break to create two words out of one. Stein also both juxtaposes ‘Indifferently’ and ‘In differently’, and also separates them, with a line break – ‘Indifferently / In differently’ – castigating the systems that are indifferent to the difference, exemplifying the extreme difference in meaning that is apparent in even a small difference.

Referencing gender and associating it with type, Stein substitutes rhyming words one after the other to stand with the phrase
'Patriarchal Poetry.’ By substituting words that sound the same, she divides and conquers the phrase, holding it in abeyance, making it ridiculous. Through these variations – ‘at peace’, ‘a piece’, ‘in peace’, ‘in pieces’, ‘as peace’, ‘at peace’ – she writes ‘patriarchal poetry’:

How do you do it.
Patriarchal Poetry might be withstood.
Patriarchal Poetry at peace.
Patriarchal Poetry a piece.
Patriarchal Poetry in peace.
Patriarchal Poetry in pieces.34

Through this sort of listing, Stein calls to attention the act of regimenting social organisation of human sexuality, and imposes meaning that continuously substitutes for another meaning. Merrill Cole writes about Stein’s repetition as it ‘undoes metaphorical identities’, concluding that Stein moves beyond gender categorisation: ‘That we can so superimpose a contradictory sense implies neither the identity of feminine and masculine, nor the two genders as mutually exclusive, nor even Stein as patriarch, but rather the ability of the “human mind” to negotiate more than one register at once and think beyond sameness.’35

The poem ‘Patriarchal Poetry’ emphasises the material and linguistic sexual politics of the period. In contrast to the dehumanisation of categories, Stein’s references to sex are bodily and experiential, such as her repetitious and extended ‘Wet inside and pink outside. Pink outside and wet inside wet inside and pink outside’.36 Sexuality, as in the poetry of Eliot and H.D., is the modernist poetic mark that contravenes systemic systems of gender.

The First World War, urban development, and new family structures help explain complex changes in developments in early twentieth-century masculinities and femininities. The New Woman and suffragette defied traditionally defined womanhood, of course, and shell-shock countered expectations of masculinity. The violence of these sorts of social eruptions unsettled the unifying models of the early twentieth-century social sciences such as psychology and sexology, eugenics, and criminology.
The social science models do provide a useful context for the literature of the period. The lives and works of the literary writers, however, belie a notion of one-to-one literary reflection of social sciences. Differing from literature, the social sciences of the time created a methodology that incorporated and retained tensions between normal and deviant — methodology inherited from eighteenth to nineteenth-century theories of race. The social sciences claimed individuals as representative of types, defining both normal and deviant within social structures such as the family, race, and nation. Sexology, psychology, eugenics, and criminology all used the individual case history in order to elucidate a normative gender pattern to create a model of a collective. Then, once the theory was formed out of those individual stories, any individual’s gender was judged as normal or deviant in terms of the collective pattern.

By inserting individual sexualities, early twentieth-century poets were able to contravene the classificatory gender work of the turn-of-the-century social sciences. The deliberate misalignment between gender and sex emerges as a modernist literary paradigm, through which Yeats, H.D., Eliot, Owen, Smith, and Stein deliberately shifted, intensely and with determination, a social science collapse of the notions of sex and gender.

Notes

5. Amione, ‘Undressing Crazy Jane’, 244.
6. Neil Bartlett’s study of gay activity in London and its silencing is indicative of the difficulties in reading what has been made invisible. Bartlett tries to document gay culture in London in the twenty years between 1875 and 1895, and he suggests that ‘the active denial of the existence of [gay] culture in London... from Fanny and Stella to Bosie and Oscar, can be traced in the form of a heavy silence. All through these twenty years there was an intense scrutiny of the “underworld” of London’: Neil Bartlett, *Who Was That Man?: A Present for Mr Oscar Wilde* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 1988), 143. Rather than observing gender politics that are aligned with normative genders, critics like Aimone and Bartlett focus on analysing the process of the poetries and cultural acts that represent unrecognisable ones.


9. ‘Crazy Jane on God’, *ibid.*, 263.


11. For an example of this method working itself out, see *ibid.*, 70; Miller gives a good overview of the binary divisions between feminine and masculine incorporated into Weininger’s theories.


16. *ibid.*, 15, 16.


33. It is tempting to recall the publication of Saussure’s *Course in General Linguistics* (published ten years earlier in 1916), with its focus on the paradigmatic and syntagmatic axes of language, when reading this poem.
The centrality of non-European influences to modernist innovation has always been evident. Ezra Pound’s discovery of Chinese and Japanese poetry helped spark his radical poetic style. Confronting the ruins of European civilisation in *The Waste Land*, T. S. Eliot turned to the Upanishads to structure the closing fragments of his poem. African masks helped inspire Picasso’s revolution in painting. In these examples and many others, non-Western cultures provided alternatives to seemingly exhausted forms and traditions, offering different modes of seeing, feeling, and understanding that helped constitute the newness of modern writing and art.

For much of the history of modernism, and of its critical study, such influences have remained precisely that – texts, artefacts, and dead authors who provide passive inspiration for the active creative energies of European and American modernists. Hugh Kenner, following Eliot, spoke of Pound’s ‘invention’ of China, a term that highlights Pound’s own originality, but also perhaps acknowledges the fictive status of Pound’s ‘China’, a concept acquired at two removes (through Ernest Fenollosa’s study of Japanese versions of Chinese poems). While such mediations should remind us of Edward Said’s claim that the ‘Orient’ is ‘almost a European invention’, it’s not unusual to see scholars of Pound’s work continue to discuss the accuracy and depth of Pound’s knowledge of Chinese culture, with relatively little attention to the relationships of power implicated in such knowledge.

It was not until the late 1980s and early 1990s that students of modernism, driven in part by scholarship in ethnic studies and postcolonial studies, began to think about such currents of influence.
in terms of race and race relations. Michael North’s *The Dialect of Modernism* reframes black influences on writers like Pound, Eliot, and Gertrude Stein not as mere ‘primitivism’ but as modes of ‘racial masquerade’, framed by traditions of minstrelsy and dialect writing and steeped in contemporary debates about race and language. Our understanding of ‘modernism’ itself has been increasingly pluralised, expanding to include the work of writers of colour, from Houston A. Baker, Jr’s *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* to work on postcolonial Caribbean and African modernist writers. Yet it remains far from an accepted fact that ‘race’ is the proper lens through which to understand cross-cultural influences in modernism. In particular, Asian contexts of modernism are still rarely discussed in terms of race; Josephine Nock-Hee Park’s *Apparitions of Asia*, which places Pound’s and Fenollosa’s concepts of China in a longer history of US cultural and racial attitudes towards China, is one of the few works to have taken up this task.³

In this chapter, I explore the conjunction of modernism and race by focusing on moments in modernist poetry where race and culture are materialised or embodied, often unexpectedly. In Pound’s *Pisan Cantos*, the poet’s racist ideologies mix with remembered fragments of Chinese culture and the presence of African American voices in a prisoner-of-war camp. Marianne Moore’s fascination with chinoiserie becomes embodied in her response to the work of José Garcia Villa, a Filipino modernist poet whom Moore likens to ‘a Chinese master’.⁴ And in the context of the modernist vogue for African American culture, the poets of the Harlem Renaissance stage a debate about the proper forms for African American poetic expression. These are moments in the history of modernism where race and racial otherness, far from being mere influences, are implicated in or even constitutive of the modern, revealing the ways in which struggles over modernist aesthetics are often conditioned by racial discourse.

Perhaps the least interesting way to examine modernist poetry and race is to inquire into the racial attitudes of individual authors – where we will inevitably find racist sentiments, whether explicit or implicit – or to focus on those few poems that contain openly racist
sentiments, such as Eliot’s ‘Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleistein with a Cigar’. The questions critics raise about such texts – as Donald J. Childs puts it, ‘Is there antisemitism in the poem? If so, is the poem as a whole antisemitic? Whose antisemitism is it?’ – may be of interest, but they also tend to reinforce a unidirectional sense of ‘race’ that views race as a collection of bigoted attitudes held by the white majority, rather than as a set of power relations that are themselves productive of knowledge.

For instance: was Ezra Pound a racist and anti-Semite? Undoubtedly. As Michael Coyle observes, ‘Since the mid-1980s, scholars have been combing Pound’s voluminous correspondence . . . and have not surprisingly discovered the racism they expected’, from references to ‘deh KullUD race’ to anti-Semitic slurs. Late in life, Pound himself famously admitted to the ‘stupid suburban prejudice of anti-Semitism’ in a conversation with Allen Ginsberg. But to what end do literary critics pursue the ‘question’ of Pound’s racism? Even Pound’s harshest critics generally stop short of arguing that his work should be discarded as racist propaganda. Instead, the ‘debate’ over Pound’s racism over the past several decades has often been about how relevant Pound’s bigotry is to our reading of his work, from dismissals of his racism as largely incidental to his poetry to arguments that racism and anti-Semitism are foundational to Pound’s aesthetic. As with similar debates about Eliot’s anti-Semitism, framing the discussion in these terms has had the awkward practical effect of leading critics to evaluate just how racist Pound in fact was – examining, for instance, Pound’s depictions of African Americans in The Cantos to determine whether they are condescending or celebratory. Wendy Flory, in ‘Pound and Antisemitism’, counts the number of ‘antisemitic passages’ in The Cantos, remarking that there are ‘very few indeed’ and that the The Pisan Cantos contains only ‘three antisemitic passages, totaling thirteen lines’. This quantifying of racism may be useful if we are primarily interested in what Flory calls a ‘determination of guilt or innocence’ on Pound’s part, but it is far less helpful if we want to understand how racial discourse shapes Pound’s work.
Much of the existing criticism that treats race in Pound — and in modernism more generally — employs an understanding of racism that equates it simply with a negative or derogatory view of the racial Other. Within this framework it then becomes possible to ‘balance’ Pound’s racist views by pointing to neutral or positive images of Jews or African Americans in his work. Richard Sieburth’s argument for the centrality of African American figures in his introduction to The Pisan Cantos pivots on precisely such a balancing act: ‘Paternalistic though Pound’s view of blacks might have been (and today’s readers will no doubt wince at his insouciantly condescending use of the terms “coon” or “nigger”), these African-American “shades” nonetheless constitute the crucial informing presence (or absence, as the case may be) behind The Pisan Cantos’ — adding that Pound was an admirer of Langston Hughes. Michael Coyle extends this argument, asserting that the black soldier featured in Canto LXXX ‘appears at the head of a positive metonymic and Mnemosynic chain’. Jonathan Gill argues that Pound’s supportive response to Hughes’s outrage over the trial of the Scottsboro boys ‘should confound those who would blithely dismiss Pound as a racist’, and that in Pound’s statements on African American language, ‘the noise of racist interference cannot quite drown out a legitimate admiration’.

Yet race and racism can hardly be reduced to positive or negative attitudes or to the counting of offensive statements. Writing of race in Pound, Aldon Lynn Nielsen observes that ‘there has never been any such thing as a simple racism, a racism that is simply racist . . . all racism will appear inconsistent, riddled with internal contradictions, impossible to pin to one immutable set of assumptions about the world’. As sociological and cultural scholarship on race has shown, race is not merely a set of beliefs or ideologies, but what Michael Omi and Howard Winant call a ‘social formation’, an ‘unstable and decentered complex of social meanings constantly being transformed by political struggle’. ‘Race’, Omi and Winant argue, thus links the ‘micro-level’ of personal identity and attitudes to the ‘macro-level’ of economics and politics. Rather than reducing questions of race and racism to matters of individual biography (‘Was Pound a
racial?'), understanding race as a social formation allows us to examine critically how modernist poetry expresses and perhaps disrupts larger modern discourses of race.

Pound's *Pisan Cantos* provides a remarkable opportunity to witness the operation of racial discourses in modernist poetry, not only because they are one of the few places African Americans are directly depicted in Pound’s poetry, but because they bring such figures into dialogue with the greatest non-Western presence in Pound’s work: that of China. As is well known, Pound began *The Pisan Cantos* in 1945 while imprisoned by Allied troops at Pisa on charges of treason; held initially in an open-air cage, Pound could rely only on his memory and a copy of Confucius he had managed to carry with him to extend his massively allusive work. The result is a series of poems that take a strikingly personal turn, as Pound’s allusions are juxtaposed with anguished reflections and perceptions of his surroundings.

In the Disciplinary Training Center (DTC) at Pisa, Pound found himself surrounded by American soldiers and prisoners, many of whom were African American.\(^{15}\) Perhaps the most prominent among the African American presences in *The Pisan Cantos* is a soldier named Edwards, who earns mention by name after he makes a makeshift table for the prisoner Pound.\(^{16}\) The context of Edwards's first appearance, in Canto LXXIV, is frequently quoted, but is worth revisiting for the complex intersections of race and culture it reveals:

```
niggers scaling the obstacle fence
    in the middle distance
and Mr Edwards superb green and brown
    in ward No 4 a jacent benignity,
of the Baluba mask: 'doan you tell no one
    I made you that table'
    methenamine eases the urine
and the greatest is charity
    to be found among those who have not observed
    regulations
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Most critics comment on Pound’s equation of Edwards’s African American features with the traditional African masks that so
fascinated early twentieth-century artists and scholars, inspiring the mask-like faces of Picasso’s *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon*. Few, however, include in their quotations the two lines that precede the mention of Edwards. Edwards is introduced first not as an exemplar of African heritage, but against the backdrop of a mass of ‘niggers’ – marking Edwards’s race in a way that places him and Pound in a longer history of American racism. Pound’s respectful reference to ‘Mr Edwards’ is not simply an expression of gratitude – since that context is not revealed until several lines later – but a means of singling out Edwards as an individual from a racialised group. This simultaneous identification of Edwards with other black soldiers (referred to in racist terms) and separation of Edwards from them is the necessary first step to Edwards’s subsequent transformation into the ‘Baluba mask’, a pure, aestheticised figure who seems able to transcend humanity itself, entering a divine realm of charity. African Americans are, quite literally, the ‘middle ground’ that allows Pound’s personal encounter with Edwards to be abstracted into a moment of cultural transcendence and universality, just as the distance between Pound and the peaks of the Alps visible from his cell allow him to imagine that he is seeing China, ‘Mt. Taishan @ Pisa’.¹⁷

When Edwards reappears in Canto LXXXI, his transcendence is complete: rather than repeating Edwards’s name, Pound now refers to him only as ‘Benin’, after the region of Africa that was the source of a number of the African masks Pound had seen:

> What counts is the cultural level,  
> thank Benin for this table ex packing box  
> ‘doan yu tell no one I made it’  
> from a mask as fine as any in Frankfurt  
> ‘It’ll get you offn th’ goun’  
> Light as the branch of Kuanon¹⁸

While in Canto LXXIV Edwards’s racialised transcendence led to Christian charity, here it leads Pound to his central preoccupation with Chinese culture. Scholars have generally identified Kuanon as Pound’s term for Guanyin (or Kwan Yin), a figure associated with compassion and mercy in Buddhist (particularly Chinese Buddhist)
tradition. While the primitivist African mask achieves transcendence only through its embodiment in the African American soldier, the Chinese figure of Kuanon seems already to exist in a realm of textual abstraction, a metaphor comparable to a biblical allusion.

What we see in these passages, I would argue, is a map of racial formation and cultural hierarchy. The African American soldier’s act of kindness distinguishes him from the racialised mass and grants him cultural presence in Pound’s poem, but at the cost of detaching him from his historical reality and transforming him into a symbol of ‘African’ cultural purity. It is only on that plane that the figure of the black soldier can enter into dialogue with the other cultural allusions that make up Pound’s poem. Yet the repetition of the soldier’s speech continues to remind us of the middle ground of race, intervening between the poet and the pure realm of culture.

Chinese elements, in contrast, seem already to inhabit this rarefied realm. The image of pure ‘whiteness’ itself is associated with China at the opening of Canto LXXIV, as Pound offers a quotation referring to the legacy of Confucius: ‘washed in the Kiang and the Han, / what whiteness will you add to this whiteness, / what candor?’19 This idealisation of China is consistent with Pound’s orientalism: ‘China’, as Josephine Park writes, ‘was his paradiso terrestre’, a location that ‘enshrined a shared ideal’ that Pound hoped could renew American poetry.20 But the fact that Pound held a positive rather than a negative view of China – that he, as Zhaoming Qian puts it in Orientalism and Modernism, ‘did not seem to believe in Western cultural superiority’, valuing in China ‘the affinities . . . rather than the differences’21 – does not make his China any less an orientalist construction, structured by colonial relations of power and productive of knowledge detached from, and even hostile to, material realities. Pound made no secret of his disdain for modern China; he was, as Feng Lan notes, dismissive of neo-Confucian Chinese philosophy, and he regarded contemporary Chinese leaders with contempt.22 Early in Canto LXXIV, Pound makes one of his few references to a contemporary Chinese figure, the wealthy businessman Charlie Sung, whom Pound
seems to associate with the corruption of the government of Chiang Kai-shek:

but a snotty barbarian ignorant of T’ang history need not deceive one
nor Charlie Sung’s money on loan from anonimo
that is, we suppose Charlie had some\textsuperscript{23}

Although the ‘snotty barbarian’ may well be an ironic reference to Pound himself, the juxtaposition of this epithet with an actual figure of modern China suggests the degree to which Pound regarded modern China as a falling-off from its ancient heritage. A similar impulse may lie behind Pound’s condescending suggestions to Langston Hughes that he study anthropological writings on African culture; both cases posit an ancient cultural purity that has been corrupted and, indeed, racialised.\textsuperscript{24} Just as Pound marks the gap between the beautiful ‘Baluba mask’ of Edwards and the ‘niggers’ who are his peers, figures like Charlie Sung represent a falling-off from the pure ‘whiteness’ of the Confucian era – a falling-off that makes them susceptible to racial contamination. This is made shockingly evident in one of the only other references to Charlie Sung/Soong in Pound’s work. Pound’s Italian radio broadcast of 16 April 1942, collected in ‘\textit{Ezra Pound Speaking}’, names Soong as a major villain in the regime of Chiang Kai-shek:

Chiang Kike Chek is the prize buyer of gold bricks, and where did Soong git his money? Mrs. Chiang Kike is always flittin’ and floatin’ in Semite entourages. If Charlie Soong warn’t staked out by kikedom, you come here and tell papa. I can’t prove this assertion, but I await any disproof, and I don’t expect it to be forthcomin’.\textsuperscript{25}

The anti-Semitic charge of a government being backed by Jewish money is a common theme in Pound’s broadcasts, frequently levelled against the administration of Franklin D. Roosevelt; what is most striking in this repulsive passage is that the Chinese themselves, icons of purity in \textit{The Cantos}, have become racially marked by their alleged association with Jews.

While the literature on modernism has long recognised that African Americans offered a material ‘middle ground’ between modernist writers and their primitivist fantasies, there has been little
investigation of the question of such a ‘middle ground’ of racialisation in modernist poets’ orientalist idealisations. To explore this issue, I turn to another modernist poet whose poetics were centrally shaped by orientalism, Marianne Moore, and Moore’s encounter with an actual Asian contemporary, the Filipino poet José Garcia Villa. While Villa himself was a modernist pioneer, widely regarded as the Philippines’ first modernist poet in English, Moore’s reading of his work shows the delicate ideological work necessary to transform the material realities of US–Asian colonial relations into orientalist idealisations—a process that subtly registers, then erases, Villa’s racial difference.  

Born in 1908, Villa had already enjoyed a successful literary career in the Philippines before publishing his first American book, *Have Come, Am Here*, in 1942. *Have Come* marks itself as modernist writing in part through an ostentatious display of influences. Some of Villa’s ‘divine poems’ sound like Dickinsonian exercises: ‘Death, corollary to Life / But only by Chronology. / Death, the supreme Theorem – / Life, the Corollary.’ Others borrow strongly from the syntactic contortions of E. E. Cummings: ‘am so very am and / speak so very speak / and look my every hand / is for each all lovers’ sake’. Still others display a Hopkins-like revelling in alliteration and religious imagery: ‘O jewelled, pacing, night-displacing / Fire. O night’s nimble-dancing, No- / Saying lyre.’ But Villa’s most distinctive innovation was the technique he called ‘reversed consonance’, in which, as Villa describes it, ‘The last sounded consonants of the last syllable, or the last principal consonants of a word, are reversed for the corresponding rhyme’, as in this example:

It is what I never *said*,  
What I’ll always *sing*—  
It’s not found in *days*,  
It’s what always *begins*  
In half dark, half light.  

Reversed consonance, inventive yet so subtle as to be almost unnoticeable, would prove to be a crucial element in the reception—and the orientalisation—of Villa’s work in the US.
Have Come was reviewed in a number of major venues, including the New York Times, Poetry, the New Yorker, and the New Republic, but perhaps the most significant review was written by Marianne Moore in The Nation. Moore’s review begins by defending Villa against charges of obscurity – an objection often made against Moore’s own work. She reframes Villa’s difficulty as modernist impersonality and indirectness: ‘Mr. Villa is with great effect, at times, “deliberately aiming just beside the mark”’. She is particularly impressed with the technique of reversed consonance, which she finds ‘has been extended to content’ through the poems’ rhetorical reversals and understatements. In short, the traits Moore praises in Villa – difficulty, formal invention and control, indirectness – are some of the central traits of her own work.

They are also, not coincidentally, some of the same traits Moore deeply admired in Chinese culture. Like Pound, Moore adopted China as an ideal for her own work, but while Pound drew inspiration from Chinese philosophy and language, Moore was more interested in the aesthetic to be found in Chinese arts and crafts – ‘precision and detail, fastidiousness, brevity, concentration, wit, and wisdom’, as Cynthia Stamy describes it. Moore’s ‘Nine Nectarines’, an ekphrastic poem describing a Chinese plate, is one of her best-known works to focus on Chinese art. The nectarine ‘as wild spontaneous fruit was / found in China first’, an origin story that echoes Pound’s identification of China with cultural purity. The nectarines stand out in their unadorned simplicity, ‘Fuzzless through slender crescent leaves / of green or blue or / both, in the Chinese style’; they are a vision of uncorrupted perfection: ‘One perceives no flaws / in this emblematic group / of nine, with leaf window / unquilted by cruculio.’ But unlike Pound, who tends to identify Chinese values with particular historical or literary figures, Moore posits a generic ‘Chinese’ individual behind the porcelain: ‘A Chinese “understands / the spirit of the wilderness” / . . . / It was a Chinese who imagined this masterpiece.’ That ‘it was a Chinese’ who created this plate imagines a Chinese body between the abstraction of Chinese aesthetics and Moore’s reception – a ‘middle ground’ that suggests a possible arena for racialisation.
How does this help us understand Moore’s response to Villa? That Villa was Filipino went largely unmentioned by those who praised his work; apparently unaware of his earlier career in the Philippines, most critics presented him simply as a new ‘American’ voice. Moore does make mention of Villa’s Filipino origins, but in an odd fashion, distancing the information by putting it in quotation marks: ‘A new poet, “a young native of the Philippines”, this author.’ But Villa’s Asianness seems to appear in different form in the review’s most striking passage, as Moore compares Villa to a painter: ‘The delicacy with force of such writing reminds one of the colors of black ink from a hogs’-hair brush in the hand of a Chinese master. “The antique ant” is a drawing; the watermelon, yellow strawberry, giraffe, and leopard poems are, in effect, paintings; nor could reticence be more eloquent.’

As a ‘young native of the Philippines’, Villa is a puzzling, even disquieting figure, a reminder of US colonialism in Asia. As ‘Chinese master’, he becomes legible through the lens of modernist orientalism, an embodiment of ‘the Chinese’ behind the aesthetic of ‘Nine Nectarines’. The metonymic slide between the Filipino and the Chinese is also a mode of racialisation, lumping the two into a larger category of Asianness – although, as we will see in a moment, Filipinos could be and were racialised in entirely different ways.

The Filipino modernist could be accepted as a ‘Chinese master’ only as long as his innovations remained circumscribed by ‘delicacy’ and ‘reticence’. The very different reception of Villa’s next book, *Volume Two*, showed the limits of modernist orientalism. *Volume Two* introduced Villa’s notorious ‘comma poems’, in which Villa inserted a comma between each word:

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The, bright, Centipede,
Begins, his, stampede!
O, celestial, Engine, from,
What, celestial, province!
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While the subtle technique of reversed consonance could be subsumed within a ‘Chinese’ aesthetic, the more obtrusive comma poems seemed to upset the ideological balance that had won
approval for Villa’s first book. Critics, by and large, disapproved of the comma poems, and the more negative an evaluation of Villa was, the more likely his ‘foreign’ origins were to be highlighted. William Meredith, writing in *Poetry*, calls the poetic ‘tricks’ of the book ‘extravagantly bad’, even implying that Villa has a poor command of English: ‘the cavalier way Mr Villa uses the language’ indicates ‘an insensitivity to the conventional meanings and uses of words’.34 The most striking racialisation of Villa comes in a vicious review by Randall Jarrell in the *Partisan Review*, which proposes a kind of ‘fairy tale’ about Villa’s career:

> Once upon a time, in Manila or Guadalajara, as he sat outside a convent wall and listened to the nuns preparing a confection called *Angels’ Milk*, a little boy decided to go to New York City and become a great poet. There he wrote a book called, charmingly, *Have Come, Am Here*; after he had read the reviews of it he telegraphed to his parents, Vici, and said to himself, in his warm, gentle, Southern way: ‘What critics these mortals be!’35

For Jarrell, the fact that Villa is Filipino is central to his poetry, but where Moore aestheticises Villa’s Filipino origins into a ‘Chinese’ character, Jarrell reads the Filipino writer as a ‘Southern’, Catholic subject associated with Spanish colonialism (‘Manila or Guadalajara’), presenting his work as a fraud perpetrated by a conquering foreigner. Both Moore and Jarrell, of course, erase the history of US colonialism in the Philippines, which provided Villa with an English-language education. Instead, the phenomenon of a Filipino modernist poet was either assimilated to the US canon through orientalism or excluded from it through racism – both forms of racialisation through aesthetics.

While the case of Villa shows how racism and aesthetics can be intertwined – often to the detriment of the non-white writer – it also points towards the possibility of a more dialogic approach to race and modernist poetry, in which questions of ‘race’ serve as a terrain across which white writers and writers of colour negotiate aesthetics and politics. Such a dialogic approach moves away from scholarship that focuses on the racial views of the canonical (white) modernists
and towards a more inclusive map of literary modernism that recognises ‘modernism’ as arising in a range of racial, regional, national, and (post)colonial spaces. Of course, we must recognise that even such maps are not innocent of the operations of power. In Villa’s case, the modernist aesthetic of white metropolitan Anglo-American poets exerted a prescriptive power that paralleled the rise of an American-style educational system under the US occupation of the Philippines, and that same aesthetic helped regulate the reception of his work. In other cases, we can see other ‘modernisms’ emerging with greater autonomy, decentring the aesthetic claims of white modernists.

A narrow analysis of modernism in African American poetry, for instance, might find ‘modernism’ only in those poets who self-consciously employed the techniques of canonical high modernism, such as Melvin B. Tolson. The speech-driven, blues-inflected lyrics of Langston Hughes or the formalist verse of Countee Cullen or Claude McKay would seem to have little in common with the fragmented, allusive work of Pound and Eliot. Beginning in the late 1980s, however, scholars of African American literature began to argue for the poetry of the Harlem Renaissance as an alternative modernism, one that existed in critical dialogue with the work of the canonical white modernists. Houston A. Baker, Jr’s *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* is a pointed rebuttal to claims about the Harlem Renaissance’s ‘failure’ to produce modernist poetry; arguing that the concerns of African American authors were fundamentally different from those of white modernist authors, Baker highlights the Harlem Renaissance’s production of a ‘modern Afro-American sound’. Like Pound and Eliot, the writers and theoreticians of the Harlem Renaissance sought to create a self-consciously ‘modern’ writing that broke sharply with tradition; but while Pound and Eliot sought to distinguish themselves from what they perceived as exhausted modes of romantic and Victorian English poetry, Harlem Renaissance writers wrote against what Alain Locke called the ‘Old Negro’, a ‘stock figure’ of American popular culture characterised by stereotype and sentimentality. Calling artists the ‘advance-guard of the African peoples’, Locke calls for a ‘fuller, truer self-expression’
based on a more ‘scientific’ view of African American life – language that parallels other modernists’ calls for a more ‘scientific’ approach to literature.\textsuperscript{38} Cullen and Hughes offer divergent responses to this call: Cullen’s use of traditional form is a universalising response to the stereotypes of dialect writing, while Hughes’s adaptation of blues and jazz forms seeks a more authentic grounding for an African American vernacular. McKay, in this context, performs a kind of autocritique, turning away from his early dialect writing to write in a more formal, standardised diction.

In this framework, the Harlem Renaissance appears less as a ‘failed’ modernism than as an alternative modernism, one that responds to the distinctive aesthetic and social concerns of African American authors. Acknowledging the role of race in shaping divergent modes of modernism helps us reframe the idea of ‘influence’ into a more dialogic approach that examines the aesthetic and social terrain across which modernisms emerge. As Michael North argues in \textit{The Dialect of Modernism}, white modernists embrace dialect speech as an allegory for their own linguistic innovations at precisely the same moment that Harlem Renaissance writers are rejecting dialect writing as retrograde. But North’s framework also indicates that the idea of ‘dialogue’ between aesthetic modes rarely took the form of exchanges between peers across racial lines. Rachel Blau DuPlessis speaks of white modernists’ ‘aborted dialogue with African-American culture in which, after some acknowledging of the presence, and sometimes the speech, of one’s fellows, Euro-American writers construct their whiteness by refusing to imagine dialogue and thus invent a black semisilence’.\textsuperscript{39} Even when those dialogues are more direct – as in Moore’s review of Villa, or Pound’s correspondence with Hughes – such silencings continue to be strikingly evident.

DuPlessis’s formulation encourages us to read race in the work of white modernists not merely through racist sentiments, but more complexly, for moments of ‘aborted dialogue’ and racial silencing. Conversely, it invites us to read those ‘other’ black and Asian modernisms for moments in which they respond to the master discourses of canonical modernism. Scholars exploring Hughes’s
dialogue with white modernism most frequently point to his long poem *Montage of a Dream Deferred*, whose publication date of 1951 allows us to read it as a retrospective on both the era of high modernism and the heyday of the Harlem Renaissance. The language of ‘montage’ associates the poem’s fragments and rapid shifts with the distinctively modern technology of film, and Hughes’s brief preface to the poem sounds a series of modernist tropes, noting the poem’s ‘conflicting changes, sudden nuances, broken rhythms’. On the surface, then, *Montage* might seem to be a version of contemporary long poems like Pound’s *Cantos* or William Carlos Williams’s *Paterson*. But Hughes insists on the popular sources of these poetic techniques: the model is jazz, not Eliot.

In terms of current Afro-American popular music and the sources from which it has progressed – jazz, ragtime, swing, blues, boogie-woogie, and be-bop – this poem on contemporary Harlem, like be-bop, is marked by conflicting changes, sudden nuances, sharp and impudent interjections, broken rhythms, and passages sometimes in the manner of the jam session, sometimes the popular song, punctuated by the riffs, runs, breaks, and disc-tortions of the music of a community in transition.  

Here we have a sharp twist on the white modernist who finds his ‘sources’ in African (American) and Asian culture. Hughes reclaims those sources as part of African American culture, while also nodding to the role that Harlem played in both the black and white artistic imaginations in the early twentieth century. Hughes, in short, brings modernism ‘home’ to Harlem.

Like other modernist long poems, *Montage* employs a multitude of voices. But Robert O’Brien Hokanson argues that Hughes’s model, though much more attached to everyday speech, is actually more destabilising than those of white modernist poets, because the overarching voice of the poet appears only sporadically and is frequently subsumed in and dispersed by the poem’s quick cuts.  

Take the opening poem, ‘Dream Boogie’, for example, where the first voice is repeatedly interrupted by a voice that is marked as separate, but that seems to shift the direction of the main voice until they finally merge into the sound-words of the final lines:
Listen to it closely:
Ain’t you heard
something underneath
like a –

What did I say?

Sure,
I’m happy,
Take it away!

Hey, pop!
Re-bop!
Mop!

Y-e-a-h!12

Hughes’s form thus engages, and critiques, two different modernist modes: it grounds modernist experimentation in African American vernacular culture, but it also challenges any idea of a singular authentic voice that could speak on behalf of an African American community.

The complex aesthetics of Montage show that the study of race in modernist poetry goes far beyond understanding the racial views of canonical authors. It reveals the simultaneous existence of parallel modernisms, overlapping in some places and separated in others, engaged in uneven and abortive dialogue, responding to the different historical, social, and aesthetic conditions confronting white, black, and Asian modernist poets. It forces us to read race differently as it appears in canonical works like Pound’s Cantos – not simply as an index of Pound’s racism, but as a map of the racial hierarchies and relations of power that structure modernist invocations of Africa or Asia. And it makes us aware that racialised bodies often provide the ‘middle ground’ across which modernist aesthetics are negotiated.

Notes


8. Coyle identifies Eliot and Hugh Kenner with an earlier tendency in Pound scholarship to ‘separate the political and ethical failures of the man from the often astonishing brilliance of the poet’, while citing Robert Casillo’s *The Genealogy of Demons: Anti-Semitism, Fascism and the Myths of Ezra Pound* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988) as the most forceful statement that Pound’s bigotry and his poetics are inseparable: Coyle, ‘Race’, 413–14.


18. Ibid., 538–9.

19. Ibid., 445.


24. Pound particularly urged Hughes to read the work of Leo Frobenius and encouraged Hughes to maintain the purity of ‘authentic’ African American language; see Coyle, ‘Race’ and Gill, ‘Ezra Pound and Langston Hughes’, for further discussion of the correspondence.


36. Although Tolson has sometimes been read as a disciple of Pound who had little in common with other African American poets, Keith D. Leonard argues for a reading of Tolson as an author who ‘saw no inherent or unchanging opposition between ethnic affirmation and modernist formalism’: Keith D. Leonard, *Fettered Genius: The African American Bardic Poet from Slavery to Civil Rights* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006), 200.


The term ‘modernist periodical’ likely calls first to mind the little magazines that blossomed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and evolved in tandem with high modernism, magazines such as Blast (1914–15), The Crisis (1910–34), and the Little Review (1914–29). These non-commercial journals published the experimental poetry, fiction, and drama of lesser-known writers, and usually (though not always) gave voice to radical political, cultural, or social editorial positions. A number of little magazines offered innovative art and design, as well as advertisements, in their contents. Geared for ‘little’ audiences of elite readers, they generally had a short publication run, due in large part to the difficulties of financing such ventures.\textsuperscript{1} The category of the modernist magazine also includes mass market publications such as the ‘slicks’, commercially successful magazines with sizeable readerships.\textsuperscript{2} Although they published poetry and other creative writing, these magazines were considered fodder for the bourgeoisie whom the modernists expressly intended to shock or ignore. Yet as Lawrence Rainey reminds us, Vanity Fair (1914–36) was seriously considered by T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound as a venue in which to introduce The Waste Land, the modernist masterpiece that eventually found simultaneous publication in two little magazines, the English Criterion (1922–25) and the American Dial (1920–29).\textsuperscript{3}

The emergent field of ‘periodical studies’ encourages us to regard not only little magazines and the slicks as provender to nourish and enrich our understanding of modernism, but also other regularly published documents such as broadsides, chapbooks, yearbooks, and annual anthologies that manifest logics similar to the little magazine.\textsuperscript{4}
This capacious definition reveals that our understanding of the modernist periodical is in a productive state of flux, due in part to the rise of the digital humanities, which has allowed scholars to identify, curate, and publish online a rich array of modernist periodicals. For instance, once considered a medium for transmitting European high modernism, these publications are now increasingly understood as, to invoke Eric Bulson’s term, a ‘world form’ that moves across national boundaries, appearing in non-Western locations and in languages other than English or French.

Despite the evolving characterisations of the modernist periodical, these publications share one thing in common: they were crucial to the development and dissemination of modernist poetry. Thanks in part to their sheer number, and their radical diversity, these periodicals offered poets of different talents, commitments, and intentions a productive space in which to publish their work and expose it to interested readers.

This chapter focuses on anglophone periodicals that disseminated experimental poetry and were produced between the 1890s and 1940s, the heyday of literary modernism. I contend that the fragility of the modernist periodical — its tenuous publishing conditions, its shifting body of contributors and readers, its cultural marginality — rendered it a material form particularly suited to the development of modernist poetry. The unsteady conditions typifying the modernist periodical provided writers with a medium uniquely amenable to experimentation, one that encouraged poets to adopt different personae, to court assorted audiences, to concoct new forms, to hone individual poems. The generic instability and diversity that prevent scholars from securely defining the modernist periodical were in fact the very characteristics that allowed these poets to perform in them new voices before different reading audiences. But performance is not simply a provocative metaphor elucidating the relationship between modernist poets and periodicals — a fascination with actual poetic performance courses through these publications. In the poems, verse dramas, and editorials published in these periodicals, modernist poets puzzled out their understanding of the complicated
and contentious relationship between print and oral culture. Modernist periodicals expose the productive tension between the emergence of mass print culture and the long-standing practices of poetic recitation and performance, and they reveal the role this tension played in shaping modernist poetry. A source of both anxiety and pleasure, the relationship between print and performance, the lexical and the oral, not only inflected the content of these modernist periodicals but also, I will argue, influenced their form.

Scholars including J. L. Austin, Judith Butler, and Homi Bhabha have asked us to understand the performative as a means of both consolidating and destabilising identity. This understanding of the performative read in light of the periodical offers a provocative way of thinking about the evolution of modernist poetry, as well of modernist poets. In the tenuous form of the modernist magazine, these writers were allowed elements of the creative permissiveness that characterises improvisation, a tactic we most often associate with embodied performance rather than material text.

With good reason, Robert Scholes and Clifford Wulfman have labelled Ezra Pound the ‘Founder of Periodical Studies’, citing Pound’s deep involvement in a wide range of modernist little magazines including the *New Age* (1907–22) and *The Egoist* (1914–19). But this level of involvement, albeit in different manifestations, was characteristic of a number of the most prolific and forward-thinking modernist poets. A glance at the career of W. B. Yeats, another poet who truly understood the value of these periodicals, reveals how important they were for the advancement of his work. Early on, Yeats published in *fin-de-siècle* London periodicals that endorsed avant-garde aesthetics, such as *The Savoy* (1896) and *The Dome* (1897–1900). In his native Ireland, he contributed to the *Dublin University Review* (1885–87), the co-operative movement’s *Irish Homestead* (1895–1923), and the *Dublin Magazine* (1926–58), among others. In America, his poetry appeared in a variety of little magazines, including the *Little Review* and *The Dial*, where he first published ‘The Second Coming’, as well as in popular magazines such as *McClure’s* and *Harper’s Bazaar*. Throughout his life, Yeats used modernist periodicals of all stripes as a stage on which to test
early versions of his work, to advance his creative practice and critical theories, to promote his career and that of others, and to review the art of his contemporaries – even founding his own little magazines on behalf of Ireland’s Abbey Theatre.

Modernist periodicals also illuminate how Yeats’s reputation was summoned by other poets seeking to create a new idiom. His writing provided little magazines with a marketing tool indicating a commitment to innovation and excellence: Ford Madox Ford invoked Yeats to attract early readers to the English Review (1908–37), and Harriet Monroe did the same when she (reluctantly) awarded the internationally renowned poet Poetry’s first prize in 1913. Conversely, Yeats sometimes served in periodicals as a signifier for what the moderns hoped to reject. An essay on ‘Modern English Poetry’ published in the Poetry Review (1912–15) examined his work and concluded that ‘the poetry of the future was going to have to come from the younger generation’, and Laura Riding dismissed him in Epilogue (1935–38), her periodical in book form. In keeping with our understanding of the performative, the identity of Yeats was never secure in modernist periodicals. He could provide a tool for articulating regional values in the American South, as he did for the poets of The Fugitive (1922–25), and for embodying cosmopolitanism, as he did for writers publishing in the Irish journal The Bell (1940–54).

The radical diversity and tenuous cultural status of the modernist periodical allowed it to play a crucial role in the development of modernist poetry. A liminal material object situated between the sturdy book and the ephemeral performance, these publications offered poets a laboratory in which they could indulge a style of performativity enabling the advancement of modernist aesthetics.

Suzanne Churchill and Adam McKible have usefully introduced the notion of the modernist magazine as a ‘social forum’, as a document providing a ‘record of the large scale conversation’ about modernism. This perspective helps us to understand the valuable ways in which writers, editors, and others involved in the creation, production, and consumption of these magazines interacted. Attending to the unique modes of social interaction that
constructed these modernist magazines also invites us to consider how these printed objects captured and reflected the sociability that created them. The modernist magazine is not only a ‘social forum’, but also a ‘social form’. The social form of the magazine – the material embodiment of its interactive multivocality – manifests itself on the page in reviews and letters, as well as through the refrain of influence found among published poems, and in the ‘dialogue’ among and between the periodical’s poetry and its advertisements, letters, graphics, images, and content.\(^{16}\)

I would like to draw attention to the important place of live performance in the constitution of the modernist periodical. Performance offers a suggestive metaphor for considering the modernist periodical, one that keeps our attention on the interchange between the material form of the printed periodical and the ephemeral social conditions surrounding it. For instance, a performance and a periodical often require a collective of individuals with different tasks and talents, and both, while allowing for a supporting cast, offer audiences ‘stars’ in the spotlight – or what modernists like to call ‘individual talent’. The modernist periodical inhabits a liminal material space between the sturdy book and the ephemeral performance, and this ‘in-between’ condition, along with the periodical’s diversity and fragility, made it a productive laboratory for modernist poets. In particular, there is much to be gained from considering the preoccupation with poetic performance evident in these periodicals, their persistent interest in the execution and interpretation of spoken poetry performed by an artist before a live audience.\(^{17}\)

Many of the figures involved in the production of modernist periodicals valued poetic performance and saw its relevance to their journals. For instance, Harold Monro not only edited the *Poetry Review* (1912–15), *Poetry and Drama* (1913–14), and *The Chapbook* (1919–25), but also hosted readings in his Poetry Bookshop by Yeats, Rupert Brooke, F. T. Marinetti, and Edith Sitwell, among others, that were intended ‘to stimulate an interest in reading poetry’.\(^{18}\) Editorial offices also provided venues for impromptu poetic performance, such as the one observed by Mike
Gold in the offices of the American leftist journal *The Liberator* (1918–24), where the Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven recited her Dada poetry to the more formally conservative Jamaican poet Claude McKay. Poetic performance inflects not only the practices associated with these periodicals, but also their content and form. Many periodicals published poetry intended to be read aloud, verse drama for the stage, notices for and reviews of poetry readings, and advertisements for elocation lessons. The design of these periodicals, as well as their individual poems, sometimes conveyed visually the qualities of a live performance. Jerome McGann has identified the ‘performative typography’ of Pound’s ‘In a Station of the Metro’, asserting that the poem as published in *Poetry* calls attention to the act of writing, unlike the edited version which was ultimately published in book form. And in her study of the visual properties of poetry, such as Apollinaire’s calligrammes published in the Stieglitz circle’s journal *291* (1915–16), Johanna Drucker draws attention to the wobbly distinction between the performance of poetry as a real-time event and the ‘visual performance’ of poetry on the page or canvas. Through these critical lenses, the bold typography of the English Vorticists’ short-lived *Blast* might be interpreted as graphic shouting.

The commitment to poetic performance evident in these periodicals exposes some of the rich contradictions at the heart of modernist poetry. The inception of modernism coincided with the radical availability of print, manifest in part through the success of a large-scale, commercialised press directed towards the increasingly literate masses. The rapid rise of print culture allowed for the increasingly broad cultural authority of print media, and many modernists were concerned about its unchecked cultural authority. This anxiety helps to explain the didacticism and elitism inflecting modernist art and practice. More particularly, it might explain why these poets and periodicals, for all of their expressed commitment to aesthetic and cultural change, remained invested in maintaining the traditional authority of poetic performance. For instance, in his account of the relationship between the readings at Monro’s Poetry Bookshop and the little magazine *Poetry and Drama*, Mark Morrisson
detects Monro’s belief that poetry in performance might offer a utopian practice to restore the broader social significance of poetry, even as this practice and its origins in the verse recitation movement secured the authority of English elites. In this example, Morrison identifies what Maureen McLane has traced as ‘the longstanding literary romance with orality’ evident in late eighteenth-century English poetry to the present day. In their enthusiasm for poetic performance, these modernist periodicals reveal a nostalgia for the historical authority and relevance of bardic poets, minstrels, and troubadours, even as they seek to ‘make it new’.

The modernist periodical undermines the sharp distinction between a written poem, which fixes the poem in print, and a spoken poem, whose unique and repeated oral performance refuses that security. As a metaphor, performance lets us see the modernist periodical as an object in flux and open to improvisation and experimentation. But performance is not simply a metaphor for understanding the objectives and structure of the modernist periodical. It also provided a way for its editors and contributors to imagine and articulate their (sometimes conflicting and competing) visions for modernist poetry. By looking at the invocation of poetic performance in three modernist periodicals, we can begin to see the rich possibilities for understanding the performance of poetry on page and stage in these publications. In the American little magazines Poetry and Others, and in the English annual anthology Wheels, a deep commitment to poetic performance shaped not only the ethos, but also the form and content of these modernist periodicals.

Harriet Monroe, an editor powerfully committed to the necessity of rendering poetry material through publication, regularly imagined and articulated her understanding of the work published in Poetry: A Magazine of Verse (1912–present) as performed, as verbal. For Monroe, the notion of poetry as spoken and public was deeply embedded in her understanding of the genre. Early in her career, she gained renown for writing ‘The Columbia Ode’, a poem read aloud to inaugurate the 1892 Chicago World’s Fair, an event that presaged American modernism. But Monroe also recognised the
limitations of poetry as spoken art: it was necessarily ephemeral and could not survive beyond its public readings, and as a unique live performance, it would reach few individuals and therefore have less impact. As she began to imagine a forum to support and sustain experimental poetry, she articulated her concern through metaphors of orality: ‘In short, the vast English-speaking world says to its poets: “Silence.” How, then, to un-silence not just individual voices, but the entire prospects of a generation?’ For Monroe, the print medium of the modernist periodical would allow her to ‘un-silence’ experimental poets – to materialise and concretise their work, without paralysing the energies that drive innovation and experimentation.

*Poetry* is renowned for supporting a broad spectrum of individual poets, ranging from Eliot and Marianne Moore to Maxwell Bodenheim and Sara Teasdale, as well as for its success in promoting and sanctioning new poetic forms. Among other innovative editorial tactics, Monroe jumbled modes of delivery in her quest to obtain for *Poetry* the openness she regarded as necessary for poetic innovation. In the very first issue of *Poetry* published in 1912, Monroe’s editorial comment ‘As It Was’ follows poems by Ezra Pound, William Vaughn Moody, and Helen Dudley. In this essay, Monroe spins out the tale of an ancient king whose son’s sung poetry has the power to soothe him. The king apprehensively asks his son, ‘Verily thy words are rich with song . . . but thou shalt die and who shall utter them?’ In the essay’s conclusion, the king comes to understand that the song will live on. As her inaugural editorial gambit, Monroe expresses her confidence in poetry by turning to the genre’s oral tradition passed down from generation to generation, even as she promises to explode that tradition with this new little magazine.

Monroe’s commitment to maintaining the link between print and performance in *Poetry* appears in her enthusiasm for the work of the American poet Vachel Lindsay. Lindsay holds a marginal place in the modernist canon, despite being singled out for praise by poets such as Yeats and Robert Frost. In part, his minor status has been attributed to his populism, but it may also be explained by his
commitment to poetry as a performance in a high modernism that traditionally lionises text and image. On the pages of Poetry magazine, the dynamic relationship in his work between the oral and the lexical becomes evident. The July 1914 issue of Poetry opens with Lindsay’s three ‘Poems to be Chanted’, each of which captures a scene in American life. In ‘The Firemen’s Ball’ he employs poetic devices such as regular rhyme patterns, repetition, and onomatopoeia to convey how ‘the music of the Ball imitates the burning of a great building’. But in this printed poem, inventive punctuation and italicised margin notes cue the reader (imagined simultaneously as a speaker) as to how the poem should be performed, instructing the reader, for instance, that the first stanza is ‘To be read or sung in a heavy buzzing bass, as of fire-engines pumping’. In ‘The Santa Fé Trail – A Humoresque’, Lindsay celebrates the speed of the automobile, as well as its alarming and invigorating ‘life-drunk horns’, as it careens through the American West. The arrangement of these poems on the page, designed to convey Lindsay’s innovative sound patterns, refuses to separate text and performance.

As with Poetry, the American little magazine Others: A Magazine of the New Verse (1915–19) had in Alfred Kreymborg an editor astutely aware of the importance of performance. As editor of the modernist magazine Glebe (1913–14), Kreymborg published Des Imagists (1913), the first Imagist anthology, and with Skipwith Cannell, Wallace Stevens, and William Carlos Williams he founded Others; he later co-edited Broom: An International Magazine of the Arts (1921–24) with Harold Loeb and the yearbook American Caravan (1927–29, 1931, 1936) with Van Wyck Brooks, Lewis Mumford, and Paul Rosenfeld. In his aptly titled memoir Troubadour (1925), Kreymborg describes his career among the American avant-garde as one infused with readings, lectures, and poetic drama. He remembers an aunt with ‘critical integrity’ whose readings of Keats inspired him as a child, and he shares his early enthusiasm for vaudeville, ‘his favorite type of theatrical entertainment’. The variety of vaudeville, its rapid shifts among different performers, acts, and genres, is reflected in the form of the numerous little magazines he would found and edit.
In his autobiography, Kreymborg reminds readers of the crucial role that performance played in the development of poetry in Greenwich Village, Chicago, Provincetown, and other sites in early twentieth-century America where poetic innovation was unfolding. With Lola Ridge, he organised a lecture bureau to provide readings and lectures by *Others* contributors including Williams. And, like Monroe, he was drawn to Lindsay, whose ‘dynamic, demoniac performance’ before the ‘knitting and chatting’ members of a Los Angeles women’s club he celebrated. He notes the involvement of Mina Loy and Williams in amateur theatricals, and describes the work of ‘The Other Players’, a troupe including William and Marguerite Zorach and Edna St Vincent Millay, as they rehearsed Kreymborg’s poetic drama, which he would simultaneously publish with *The Other Press*. There was a clear feedback loop between modernist periodicals and these performances. As he asserted, ‘there were, among the contributors and readers of *Others*, a number of people who would not be intimidated by the prospect of beholding something fantastically poetic and free of traditional stage formulas. Besides these, adherents of other experimental groups might be expected to appear at the box office – *The Seven Arts* crowd, *The New Republic, The Nation, The Masses*’.  

This is not to say everyone was comfortable with the integral relationship between print and performance. There remained a deep ambivalence about the nature of poetry as oral and performed rather than visual and material. For example, the December 1917 issue of *Others* edited by William Saphier was titled ‘A Number for the Mind’s eye: Not to be read aloud’. The issue opens with poems emphasising the visual qualities of poetry, such as Baxter Alden’s ‘In Ink of India and Gold’ and Bodenheim’s ‘East-Side Children Playing’ and ‘Factory-Girl’, whose crisp descriptive language calls to mind photographs of similar urban scenes. Yet even within this issue, which published Stevens’s ‘Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird’, there lurks evidence of the tension between language as printed and read, spoken and heard. Louise Bogan’s ‘The Young Wife’, for instance, chronicles in free verse a newly-wed’s sexual jealousy as she asserts, ‘I shall not watch the eyes of my lover, their
every glance’. Yet she locates the power of ‘all beautiful women’ primarily in ‘their voices’ and ‘their speech’, bemoaning the fact that ‘Though I might choose delicate words / I could not speak so fair as they’. Here, the oral and the visual work together to stoke her insecurities and upset. This issue of Others offers only poetry and no editorial commentary, so readers are left to discern why this issue is ‘Not to be read aloud’. Yet its back cover advertises a future issue of the magazine entitled ‘A Play Number’, underscoring the irrepres-sible link between poetry and drama, language and performance.

Across the Atlantic, the six issues of Wheels: An Anthology of Verse provide a means for further exploring the relationship between poetic performance and modernist periodicals. Founded and edited primarily by Edith Sitwell, this periodical anthology was published annually between 1916 and 1921. Its title drawn from a poem by Nancy Cunard, Wheels championed the well-known modernist themes of speed, revolution, forward progress, and connectedness, and published verse that aggressively challenged Edwardian aesthetics, focusing in particular on the faults of Georgian poetry. It offered readers innovative artwork and a cast of modernist contributors including not only Cunard and the Sitwell siblings (Edith, Osbert, and Sacheverell), but also Wilfred Owen and Aldous Huxley, among others. In fact, the fourth cycle of Wheels first introduced the world to Owen’s war poetry, which Edith and Osbert Sitwell would, along with Siegfried Sassoon, later edit for publication in book form. During its short publication history, Wheels received largely negative reviews and folded when, in a narrative familiar from tales of the modernist little magazine, it suffered financial problems and its editors and contributors moved onto other projects. Nonetheless, as a periodical anthology, published regularly like a monthly or quarterly modernist magazine, Wheels intervened in its culture – introducing new talent, critiquing staid art forms and practices, and challenging norms.

In addition to displaying the fault lines among strict categorisations of modernist periodicals, Wheels offers a rich site to explore the complexities of the relationship between the oral performance of modernist poetry and its manifestation in print. As editor, the
notoriously flamboyant Edith Sitwell was particularly well suited to explore this interaction. As Sitwell’s autobiography reveals, performance was integral to her understanding of poetry more generally; she kept a steady diet of reading aloud and recitation as a child, and, though she was shy, described herself as ‘entirely unselfconscious’ when she performed. A prolific poet and novelist, Sitwell is perhaps best known in modernist annals for Façade (1922/23), the spoken poems set to music that she created with the composer William Walton and recited before audiences in Europe and America. Over the course of her long career, modernist luminaries such as Louis Aragon, Eliot, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and Gertrude Stein were in her audiences, and Stephen Spender once observed that she ‘impressed all who met her or heard her read her poems by her presence’. Those who saw her perform noted her statuesque presence and aristocratic bearing, qualities she heightened by wearing long gowns, capes, and other accoutrements that emphasised her role as performer. She was clearly aware of the important role that visual spectacle played in the circulation of poetry, both in performance and print.

Sitwell’s ongoing commitment to poetic performance appears most blatantly in the ‘Fifth Cycle’ of Wheels, which appeared in 1920. The issue is dedicated to ‘Mrs Arnold Bennett (Mademoiselle Hébrard) Poetry’s Greatest Interpretative Artist’. A French actress to whom Bennett was married, Hébrard (along with Sitwell and the Rimbaud translator Helen Rootham, who would later become the music editor for A. R. Orage’s New Age) founded the Anglo-French Poetry Society in 1920 to promote modern French poetry. A letter articulating the aims of the Society promised that the meetings would offer poetry readings in English and French, as well as informal lectures and the occasional presentation of original work, and stressed the importance of recitation by asserting ‘All reciters will be trained, as the object of the society is to make the recital of poetry a pleasure both to the reciter and to the audience’. Both Hébrard and Sitwell regularly presented at the organisation’s London meetings, which were attended by artists and intellectuals including Harley Granville Barker, André Gide, Vita Sackville-West, and Lytton Strachey, who at one meeting peevishly noted, ‘Mrs Arnold
Bennett recited, with waving arms and chanting voice, Baudelaire and Verlaine until everybody was ready to vomit.  

The variety that infused modernist periodicals, with their typical mixture of different artists, genres, and media, was reflected in the diverse agendas of these social gatherings. In this particular issue of *Wheels*, the integral relationship of the oral and the material also appears in other manifestations. The cover of the issue, painted by the Italian Futurist Gino Severini, depicts a Renaissance figure playing a harp, and Severini’s still-life painting on the subsequent page places at its centre a violin and a manuscript page. In addition, the issue’s opening poem, ‘Cornucopia’ by Osbert Sitwell, is dedicated to Edith and offers readers a final stanza that, like the issue’s dedication and artwork, calls attention to the power and influence of spoken poetry: ‘Then from the Ocean came the Syren song, / Heavy with perfume, yet faint as a sigh, / Kissing our minds, and changing right from wrong; / Chaining our limbs; making our bodies seem/Inert and spellbound, dead as in a dream.’

The poem in this issue of *Wheels* that most overtly explores the function of spoken poetry is Huxley’s ‘Theatre of Varieties’. Best known for dystopian fiction like *Brave New World* (1932), Huxley was labelled by Harold Monro as being ‘among the most promising of the youngest generation of contemporary poets’. Grouping him with other *Wheels* poets, Monro observed, ‘he writes poetry of a very modern type: style and content both “shocking”.’ Like other modernist poets, Huxley’s career is dotted with publications in various modernist periodicals, including the *Oxford Annual* (where members of the Auden Generation would later publish) and *Coterie* (in whose fourth issue Huxley would publish a play). Early on, he was reluctant to embrace *Wheels*, dismissing it as a ‘well-known Society Anthology’ founded by ‘dear solid people who have suddenly discovered intellect’. But soon Huxley was among the anthology’s most prolific, and enthusiastic, contributors.

In her autobiography, Sitwell described Huxley as ‘one of the most accomplished talkers I have ever known’, describing an instance in which he enthusiastically expounded at a London Underground station on the ‘advantages possessed by the octopus in every amorous
adventure’ while waiting passengers ‘listened, spellbound, to the monologue’. An interest in performance may partially explain their affinity. Performance and recitation are at the centre of Huxley’s ‘Theatre of Varieties’, which, while fairly conservative formally, deploys modernist tropes in its critique of spectacle, the crowd, imperialism, and nationalism. Like Marinetti’s 1913 manifesto ‘The Variety Theatre’, Huxley’s poem finds much to celebrate in this live event: his account of the fragmented production is filled with exclamations and energy, rich with the ‘dynamism’ that Marinetti identified in this modern theatrical form. It also reflects the enthusiasm for vaudeville shared by Kreymborg and Lindsay, who described his poem ‘The Firemen’s Ball’ as having a ‘Higher Vaudeville imagination’. Huxley’s long poem chronicles the act of a magician who appears to kill and then resurrect a young Indian boy, the trapeze work of the Six Aerial Sisters Polpetini, the performance of Professor Chubb’s Automaton, and the dances of Dobbs and Debs. Throughout the performance, the audience responds enthusiastically, most notably in the form of a ‘terrible infant’ who seems less the avant-garde enfant terrible seeking to question norms than an actual child who asks daft questions.

At the centre of this spectacle is ‘Divine Xenocrate!’, the erotic ‘angel’ whose beauty – and near nudity – inspire awe in the speaker. Named for the Egyptian princess in Marlowe’s Tamburlaine (1587), Xenocrate, like the Indian boy in the magic act, provides an instance of cultural otherness in this variety show. She rivets her audience with spoken poetry, but in the poem’s penultimate stanza, she behaves more like an instructor in recitation than a femme fatale. At the stanza’s close, Xenocrate sings the lines of Spenser’s ‘An Hymne in Honour of Beautie’ (1596) to the ‘face flowers’ of her audience, while ‘A poet in the pit / Jots down, in tears, the words of her Siren song’. In this variety act, she performs not her own poetry, but that of a famed Renaissance poet. At the close of the stanza, she urges her audience to recite with her:

— ‘Now boys, together! All with me!’
‘For of the soul the body form doth take; — . . .
Together boys, together!
And soul is form and doth the body make.’
Xenocrate, alone, alone divine!
It is possible to regard this exuberance as false, as a sign that Xenocrine is some counterfeit god, another deleterious spectacle that lures the audience away from true faith or from the secular realities of the modern world. However, it is also possible to read this moment in a poem published in a modernist periodical as a celebration of the potential lurking in poetic performance. In this poem, the recitation ultimately fails to transform her listeners: the audience thoughtlessly streams out into Camden Town to the tune of “God Save the King”.

Music’s last practical joke’ as ‘next week’s bills are being posted’, thus promising through printed advertisements more of the relentless theatrical novelty that corrupts the audience. But as Xenocrine recited, the poet ‘jots down, in tears’ the words; as a member of the audience, he is aware of their power, thanks in part to her performance (and perhaps to their provenance). Lodged within Huxley’s poem, I would argue, is a moment akin to that of the fishmen listening to a mandolin in Eliot’s The Waste Land, one offering readers a reprieve from desiccated modern life with the promise of ‘authentic’ art. That utopian moment of live performance, which as in The Waste Land is allowed only to a collective of men, appears briefly in ‘Theatre of Varieties’ through the inspired poet in the audience.

F. R. Leavis famously asserted that ‘the Sitwells belong to the history of publicity rather than of poetry’. Intended to denigrate their talents, this declaration might instead help to us understand more fully their importance to modernist poetry and the modernist periodical. Edith Sitwell’s commitment to the coteries that sustained recitation and performance, and the way in which she used those social networks as a foundation for her modernist periodical Wheels, reflects the ongoing and important social dynamic characterising the relationship between modernist poetry and modernist periodicals. More particularly, as the editor of Wheels, she gave voice to the widespread modernist anxiety about the demise of oral culture and the tradition of spoken poetry in a society increasingly dominated by commercial mass print culture. But, having identified this seemingly inevitable cultural change, she shrewdly demonstrated in her modernist periodical that the creative integration of the oral and lexical offered great promise for the form, content, and potential influence of modernist poetry.
Notes


9. See Laurel Brake, ‘Aestheticism and Decadence: *The Yellow Book* (1894—7), *The Chameleon* (1894), and *The Savoy* (1896)’, in Peter Brooker and


16. Latham and Scholes similarly imagine the dynamics of modernist periodicals in social and oral terms, describing them as ‘rich, dialogic texts’: Latham and Scholes, ‘Rise of Periodical Studies’, 528.


32. *Wheels* is reproduced online on both *The Modernist Journals Project* and the *Modernist Magazines Project*, but the editors of the first volume of *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Magazines* regard it strictly as an anthology and therefore do not include it in their evaluations. The designation ‘periodical anthology’ derives in part from Scholes and Wulfman’s assertion that ‘We may indeed wish to give separate categorical names to some of these, like daily newspapers and annual volumes, but we must recognize that every publication issued periodically is a periodical’: Scholes and Wulfman, *Modernism in the Magazines*, 48. Useful studies of *Wheels* include Jane Dowson, *Women, Modernism and British Poetry, 1910–1939: Resisting Femininity* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), 89–124; Aaron Jaffe, *Modernism and the Culture of Celebrity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); and Kathryn Ledbetter, ‘Battles for Modernism and *Wheels*’, *Journal of Modern Literature*, 19.2 (Fall 1995), 322–8, as well as the many biographies of Edith Sitwell.

33. Qtd in Robert M. Post, in Robert M. Post, ‘“To Read as a Poet”: Major Performances of Edith Sitwell’, *Text and Performance*, 11 (1991), 129.


39. Monro, *Some Contemporary Poets*, 129. The few studies of Huxley’s early poetry note its inconsistency, but universally identify its modernist characteristics, such as an anti-Victorian sentiment, a frank approach to sexuality, and a critique of the crowd; see Holmes and Jerome Meckier, *Aldous Huxley, from Poet to Mystic* (Zurich: LIT Verlag, 2011).


42. Vachel Lindsay, ‘Mr. Lindsay on “Primitive Singing”’, *Poetry*, 4.4 (July 1914), 161.


PART II
By a ready consensus, Charles Baudelaire appears as the inaugural figure of modernist poetry: scenes of urban modernity, where the frisson of experience in the modern city comes through a striking concreteness of feeling; a verbal surface rifted with startling shifts in imagery, diction, and rhythm; a tonality mixing ambiguous or equivocating emotions; and older poetic forms like the sonnet preserved as structures but broken in prosody and so dislocated into new expressiveness. The technical and imaginative palette of The Waste Land in particular and modernist poetics in general is already in place here. To what existing poetic conventions, however, can we assign this otherwise apparently singular originator? ‘The author of “The Flowers of Evil” loved what is inaccurately called the decadent style’, Théophile Gautier half-answerer. Apologising at first for this label of ‘decadent style’, Gautier proceeds nonetheless to strengthen its claim, vividly particularising its features and its evocative range. Baudelaire’s decadent style appears thus as

an ingenious, complex, learned style, full of shades and refinements of meaning, ever extending the bounds of language, borrowing from every technical vocabulary, taking colours from every palette and notes from every keyboard; a style that endeavours to express the most inexpressible thoughts, the vaguest and most fleeting contours of form, that listens, with a view to rendering them, to the subtile confidences of neurosity, to the confessions of aging lust turning into depravity, and to the odd hallucinations of fixed ideas passing into mania.

‘This decadent style’, Gautier now proclaims demonstratively as well as summarily, ‘is the final expression of the Word which is
called upon to express everything, and which is worked for all it is worth’.

So comprehensive is this linguistic and imaginative consciousness of ‘decadence’, in fact, it must be accounted for in an equally totalised way. Thus Gautier presents decadence as an expression of necessity in a historical formation – all in all, as the inevitable representation of its age, which, in the other sense of ‘final expression’, is an expression of finality. This is an age of endings; more vividly and concretely, of decay. Its representatives in literary decadence are so profoundly embedded in this condition, and so highly self-conscious about it, that they not only accept but stylise it, flaunting a manner Gautier characterises as ‘veined with the greenish streaking of decomposition’. This extremity of sensibility is justified, repeatedly and emphatically in Gautier’s account, by a provocation it is impossible to ignore: by that sense of contemporary endings. ‘The poet’s business is to paint the actual time of day and to use a palette provided with the colours necessary to render the hues of the hour’, he asserts in principle, and then proceeds to tell precisely the imaginatively late time of this historical day: ‘For has not sunset its beauty like the dawn? Are not copper reds, golden greens, turquoise tones melting into sapphire, the hues that blaze and melt into the final great conflagration, the strange, monstrous shaped clouds interpenetrated by the flash of light, that look like the ruins of mighty aerial Babel, are not these as poetic in themselves as rosy-fingered Dawn?’

If the style of decadence is occasioned and explained by a sense of endings, we can see why that style has claimed an uncertain place in most conventional histories of a literary modernism routinely represented as the art of the new, the modern, century. Here imaginative adventuring and technical inventiveness bespeak the more powerful feelings of novelty, originality, non-contingent beginnings. For these reasons, among others, there is a shift in nomenclature in such histories, where the categories of ‘aestheticism’ and ‘symbolism’ provide alternative designations. Not without reason. As a ‘final expression’, after all, the decadent poetry of Gautier’s Baudelaire also looks for nothing beyond itself – here is the signal indicator for the literary creed of ‘l’art pour l’art’, that point of defiance to any
moralised notion of poetic edification in the nineteenth century, a role contested and denied by modernist poetry as well. What this identification of ‘aestheticism’ misses, however, is the stronger force in the sensibility of decadence. In its resistance to the dominant models of progress and futurity in nineteenth-century European intellectual and popular culture, decadence presents a position more profoundly counter-conventional and so more potently efficacious as a creator of the new, even as the concept of novelty itself becomes more problematic as a category of value.

‘Symbolism’, too, is understandable as a synonym for ‘decadence’. In fin-de-siècle Paris, as Patrick McGuinness has documented, the poetic coteries originally associated with décadence and symbolisme actually overlapped: the two terms were conferred, in turn and even simultaneously, on the same authors, who were routinely changing sides, claiming and disclaiming these different appellations in an exercise equally of literary sport and contesting ambition. In the end, however, and largely as a function of their greater aptitude in self-promotion, the writers identified as Symbolists claimed that greater strength, and took on the mantle of advanced-guard philosophers of artistic novelty. As a result of this very local literary history, in ‘the Symbolist version of events’ that become the dominant story of the background forces for modernism, ‘Symbolism attains the status of a theory’, as McGuinness correctly puts it, ‘whereas Decadence is perceived as a mood’. All of this is to say: there was an intense sense of possibility and novelty in the Parisian air, but it was not detachable from the feeling of current civilisation being at its end and a concomitant sense of dissolution in matters literary and moral. And if, underwriting a theory of novelty, the sensibility identified with the term ‘symbolism’ has dominated the origin story of modernism, an alternate story comes with an emphasis on the equally important ‘mood’ of decadence.

Indeed, even the poet most readily associated with symbolism in English poetic modernism, W. B. Yeats, reveals the force of the sensibility of decadence in the formation of a ‘new poetry’. Representing the conditions and principles of this ‘new poetry’ in 1898, Yeats in ‘The Autumn of the Body’ replicates both the
hesitations and intensifications of Gautier’s piece: ‘I see, indeed, in the arts of every country those faint lights and faint colours and faint outlines which many call “the decadence”, and which I, because I believe that the arts lie dreaming of things to come, prefer to call the autumn of the body.’ Euphemism or not, the autumnal body of the new poetry represents ‘a crowning crisis of the world’, which Yeats specifies further in his recasting of the growth and improvement narratives of a conventional progress mythology. Here, at the turn of this next century, at the dawning of the supposedly modern age, Yeats presents the customary understanding of ‘the moment when man is about to ascend, with the wealth he has been so long gathering upon his shoulders’, and then intervenes, reversing that direction of conventional progressiveness in the assertion that this is in fact ‘the stairway he has been descending from the first days’. So, in Yeats’s summary formulation: ‘Man has wooed and won the world, and has fallen weary, and not, I think, for a time, but with a weariness that will not end until the last autumn, when the stars shall be blown away like withered leaves.’

The apocalyptic quality in the historical imaginary of decadence turns, then, in two ways. For Yeats, the ‘last autumn’ that he is waiting for coincides with a turn towards the birthing of a New Ireland. The cultural nationalism he is championing brings with it the poetic dogma of the symbolic, where the symbols he is inventing are instinct with the energy of the nation state which they are at once generating and encoding. The forward-looking force in his imaginative attitude carries him out of the time zone of a decadence which remains, however, as the locus of productive possibility for other poets in the English nineties. As subjects in an imperial state, which takes the escalating unrest in Ireland as just one measure of the threats to its hegemony, these poets import the imaginative vantage of a décadence that may be assignable otherwise to France but is connatural, in fact, to the British political climate at the end of the century. An end-of-empire-days feeling grew up over the long turn of the century in England, not only as the aftermath to the failing campaign of the Boer War but in the growing loss of moral authority in the imperial mission, which occurred, paradoxically but
understandably, with immense gains in actual terrain. In an imagina-
tive calculus familiar to the sensibility of decadence from its
Roman and Alexandrian examples, the scale of imperial grandeur
in collapse provides a frame of reference and focus of emotion for a
generalised presentiment of decline. If an imperial fall is not the
necessary or establishing circumstance of literary decadence, it
provides a metric of expressive reference and it appears in the
imaginative vocabulary of poetic decadence as a primary locator.
So, whether or not the poets of a British decadence could naturalise
the language of a French experience, they inherited a historical
circumstance even as they imported a literary convention. They
could give its presumptive understandings a local habitation as
well as an English name.

As a French word, however, *décadence* provided a target for a
revealing invective in the public culture of English letters. Clearly,
the foreign formation serves to displace this sensibility to an alien
land. This same motive informs the construction of the unutterable
‘decadentism’. Against the temperament which these unspeakable
words estrange or denaturalise, usually in the imagery of extra-
territorial infection, the protectorate of the island culture erects its
quarantine. ‘Let us hug ourselves on our iron constitution, and the
clean bill of health we should have, but for the tainted whiffs from
across the Channel that lodge the Gallic germs in our lungs’,
Margaret Armour proposes in 1897 in ‘Aubrey Beardsley and the
Decadents’, where the critique circles constantly back to France, to
which she motions thus in closing: ‘Why not hoist the Decadents
altogether off our shoulders and saddle them on to France?’

So, seven years later, in a review of the posthumous collection of
Ernest Dowson’s poems in the *Times Literary Supplement*, we
hear the small tragedy of Dowson’s career – an early death, a
gift unrealised – being attributed to the *malignant* influence of
French poetic decadence. Its charter document, Baudelaire’s *Les
Fleurs du mal*, is the reference stirring within the sickness attributed
to his co-national Paul Verlaine: ‘Mr Dowson had, if not great, at
least very distinguished gifts and sufficient means to enable him to
devote his time to literature. But he early caught the malady which
we may call Verlainitis, a comparatively harmless complaint in Paris, but a fatal disease in this country’, which, presumably, has no natural immunity to an illness that is a wholly foreign import.\(^6\)

Attempts to preserve an integral literary culture can be seen as an effort that complements the otherwise widespread denial of the failing narratives of British imperial command, which provide the other dimension of awareness in the imaginative economy of a ‘decadence’ all too native-borne.

The intervention which ‘decadence’ represented to an insular literary culture is sampled by Dowson himself, in a fashion equally subtle and suggestive, in his poem ‘Transition’. Taking the turn of the seasons as its nominal topic, invoking the emotions of a down-turn of time at the end of the century as its ready framework of association, the poet observes the regular progressions of metrical time through most of the poem – ‘To love thee well enough; then time to part, / To fare through wintry fields alone and climb / The frozen hills, not knowing where thou art’ – and so echoes a convention of progressive time in a more general sense. In the final line of the last stanza, however, an interruption opens in the most fraught and charged of the poem’s words:

\[
\text{Short summer-time and then, my heart’s desire,} \\
\text{The winter and the darkness: one by one} \\
\text{The roses fall, the pale roses expire} \\
\text{Beneath the slow decadence of the sun.}^{7}\]

The two initial iambic feet of this last line force a momentum stress on ‘de-cad-ence’, where the emphasis on the middle syllable amplifies the hard ‘a’ vowel and so strengthens the root sense of ‘fall’, which accords with the seasonal and atmospheric prospect of the poem. At the same time, the memory of the other pronunciation of \textit{dec-a-dence} creates a stumble-step, a pause contorted further by the caesura expected here. While there were two pronunciations available at this time, Dowson’s metrical scheme defines and amplifies the uncertainty, so that, at the centre of attention in this final line, as of the poem it concludes, is the word that wobbles uncertainly and indeed unspeakably within the regulation cadence of English verse.
Here is a parabolic version of the intervention ‘decadence’ presents in the temporal sensibility of a national literature, which is committed otherwise and more widely to the progressive conventions and advancement narratives of mainstream nineteenth-century intellectual and political cultures.

So, where those strenuous efforts to alienate or denaturalise décadence provide evidence of the threat which this sensibility represented to existing systems, they also locate a contrarian power. Here is potential for invention. This is one point of imaginative attraction for the nascent spirit of Anglo-American poetic modernism, which can find in the poets of English decadence a precedent spirit and a growing point of further experimentation. This generational relationship is complex, and sometimes contradictory, involving the understandable need on the part of the younger poets to suggest at least a difference within the derivation or, at most, as they sometimes claim, an autonomous descent. The range of attitudes and postures in this cross-generational exchange is sampled in Ezra Pound’s 1915 preface to a collection of Lionel Johnson’s poems. Pound does not trouble with this poet’s nominal identity as a ‘decadent’. What concerns him most is this poet’s literary diction, which Pound objects to as excessively ‘bookish’ – it involves an especially heavy dose of Latinity – but he also demurs in this critique: ‘I do not, however, contradict [the standard of the word spoken in poetry] when I say that the natural speech of one decade is not the natural speech of another.’ In an analogy as fanciful as his need to admit affinity is strong, he likens Johnson’s Latinate vocabulary to the speech of Euphues in Renaissance England; thus he assimilates the poet of decadence to the ages if not to the moment and so reclaims something of a perennial standard of importance for Johnson as well as himself. If the modernist attempts to resist any effort to being pushed back into that decade of decadence, however, he maintains the connection by updating the decadent on his own modernist terms. Thus he shifts the modal tense of their connection from a simple to a conditional past and so turns the decadent forward towards the future possibility that he, the modernist, occupies: thus Pound’s Johnson
would, for instance, have welcomed good *vers libre*; he would have known how the Greeks had used it. You could have discussed with him any and every serious problem of technique, and this is certainly a distinction among ‘the poets of England’. He might have differed from your views of good writing but he would have believed in good writing. His hatred of slovenliness would have equalled your own.

Not all, however, seems acceptable. A point of apparently unconditional resistance to Johnson’s (unmentioned) ‘decadence’ comes in Pound’s recycling of one of the most heavily clichéd characterisations of *fin-de-siècle* attitudes: ‘The “nineties” have gone out chiefly because of their muzziness, because of a softness derived, I think, not from books but from impressionist painting. They riot with half decayed fruit.’ This last phrase takes the measure of the signal condition of ‘decay’ in a quantitative adverb which, if a concordance to the poetics of decadence were ever put together, would occur with telling frequency. This adverb quantifies decline in that poetic lexicon not only because ‘half’ of anything is less than the whole but because it occurs so often, as in Pound’s phrase, in relation to a decay that is ever underway: the glass of decadence, almost always half-empty, is always emptying.

This condition of depletion appears inadmissible to the modernist, insofar as the potential for the invention otherwise assigned to a modernist temperament does not find its seeds in the dregs of the glass. This critical reckoning comes as readily and automatically to us as Pound’s own reaction to that caricature of the nineties. However, our reaction would express only half of the matter. The other half shows in the repetition of this signal phrase, just one year later, when Pound is writing from Stone Cottage to John Quinn about a book of essays he has put together. He has titled the collection *This Generation: The Spirit of the Half-Decade*, and now, with rueful humour, he mispronounces the subtitle for his American patron: ‘Am. humorists please copy “half-decayed”.’ The wit darkens against current circumstance, in the middle of the Great War, which seems to have dissolved the force of ‘this generation’ of younger modernists: T. E. Hulme and Wyndham Lewis are gone to the front, T. S. Eliot has gone silent poetically, and his great friend
Henri Gaudier is gone altogether, ‘mort pour la patrie’ in the words of the testimonial in the second (and final) edition of Blast. A ‘decade’ now ‘decayed’, the modernism of the teens replicates the decadence of the nineties, but Pound’s phrasing bespeaks more than a defensive if sombre comedy of mispronunciation – that is, more than a Nietzschean laughter at catastrophe in the circumstance of an otherwise resisted affinity. It comes out of a profounder inwardness with the sensibility of decadence, which he admits indirectly in the Johnson piece as he recalls being ‘drunk’ with the poetic spirit of those nineties as a younger poet. For him, and for the strain in modernist poetics that he represents, there is an imaginative understanding of decline as a circumstance of artistic ferment, not to be rationalised or approved by virtue of its consequence in standard values of health and development but as a condition with its own expressive integrity and merit. This is a condition with its own literary and political history, which may help us to reclaim the depth and resonance of a poetic tradition that the modernists are living forward with their own authority.

‘Decadence’ is understood customarily as a ‘late’ or ‘decayed’ romanticism. The relative status of these twin conditions of lateness and decay may be situated meaningfully in relation to the most eventful circumstance of earlier European political and literary history: to the age of revolutionary romanticism and, more abstractly, to the value of futurity and its fate in subsequent literary generations. Over the long turn of the nineteenth century, a sense of progressive destiny had informed the major efforts at emancipation from the older historical orders, and a renewal of history was promised already and first of all in new words for time itself. This is a force Marx records in the title of his memoir-commentary The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon (1852), which recycles the nomenclature of the new revolutionary calendar of France as a reminder of the inventive, future-oriented possibilities in post-revolutionary history. Now, following the ironic grimace of his titular insignia, Marx presents the content of a loss he records on a pan-European scale in his report on the failure of the several revolutions of 1848. The embittered eloquence of this account
might serve as a tuning fork for the sounds poetry was making in its response. The experience and representation of imaginative time in the poetries of first and second generation romanticism could be followed through as a literary history of that lost possibility. Here, say, the integration of youth and maturity that is promised and sometimes accomplished in the Wordsworthian ‘spot of time’ becomes unavailable for poetry, following the failure of renewal of the time of history with the original energies of revolution. Witness the disintegration of this imaginative ideal already in 1822, in *The Triumph of Life*, where Shelley, featuring the shade of Napoleon in the wake of the triumphal chariot of sheer physical Life, takes that signal figure of betrayed revolution as the most vivid reference for the failure of his counterpart Rousseau to connect as an adult to the restorative energies of youth. This sense of an aftermath to failed or futile rejuvenation is one of the most powerful imaginative circumstances in subsequent literary history, which retains the memory of those earlier events as a counterforce to the increasingly standardised values of progressiveness and futurity in mainstream political and social history. This is the counter-conventional sensibility for which decadence is the most immediate representative, retaining the import of those earlier events not only as a history but as a form of consciousness and, in short course, as a set of poetic attitudes and practices, as a poetics and a prosody; all in all, as a way of telling this historically informed sense of time, with its enriching debility of loss, in the most inventive tempos of verse. These experiments occur most notably in the aesthetics of echo and reflection and in a poetics of repetition, where the reiterative witnesses an interest not in redoubling but in fading: sequencing moves to depletion, then, not to increase. This conceit may be focused in its most representative poetic expression in a single verse subgenre: the villanelle.

The importance of the villanelle to the poetics of decadence is as manifest as the extensiveness of its record in the poetic bibliography, where it reveals the special turn the poets of decadence work on its repeating structures: this is the fade-away, where the reiterative refrains of their villanelles do not build or intensify but work inversely and, as such, exert the major appeal. ‘Come hither, Child! and rest’ goes the first
line of Dowson’s ‘Villanelle of Sunset’, where the otherwise oddly compounded interests of an exclamatory appeal to the pleasures of rest do the work of defining the tensions and counter-rhythms special to this villanelle. Here the force-building reiterations one expects (before and after Dylan Thomas’s exertions in this genre) turn to just the opposite ends, as registered in the tonal atmospherics of the third line of the first stanza, where an exclamation once again points up its opposite quality in fatigue: ‘Behold the weary west!’ As these two lines comprise the refrain structure of the poem, the special effect of a strength fading against the greatening that is expected from a repetitive structure is an appreciation as fine as the tightly fingered work Dowson performs in the final line: ‘Behold, the weary west!’ As in the equally subtle reversal he works into the final line of ‘Transition’, the insertion of a comma offers this small pause as a stopping point which, unexpected as it is in the otherwise strictly reiterative structure of the villanelle, makes the rest of the line fall off track and lose the physical body, the material confirmation, of the effect now expected, which would bring along the cumulative force of an uninterrupted form. The small difference in the repetition leaves the poem falling and fading away at the end.

This imaginative circumstance of aftermath is of formative importance in the poetics of decadence. ‘I have outlived my life, and linger on, / Knowing myself the ghost of one that was’, Arthur Symons intones somewhat lugubriously in ‘Satiety’. In a larger sense, however, it is in fact the dissatisfaction of surfeit in the current circumstance of a ‘late civilisation’ that provides the instigation of greater interest and consequence. There is a sort of temporal dispossession at the core of the experience of decadent time, where the imaginative apprehension of the moment, always already falling away from the wholeness of a possessed present, provides a constant provocation for this verse. A census of these moments in Symons’s oeuvre alone would be extensive, where a poem opens with the image of a potential as compelling as it is incandescent but as elusive as it is instantaneous: ‘The pink and black of silk and lace, / Flushed in the rosy-golden glow / Of lamplight on her lifted face’, in ‘Impression’; ‘Her face’s willful flash and glow / Turned all its light upon my
face / One bright delirious moment’s space’, in ‘On the Heath’, where the last line of this first stanza closes down the moment of potential possession: ‘And then she passed’. ‘A piteousness of passing things’, goes the formulation of one of the poems of his sequence ‘Bianca’, where ‘A presage of departing things’ is an aftermath already ahead of time. Symons is delineating the condition which his contemporary Dowson reiterates as the temporal imaginary of decadence in one of the refrain lines of another villanelle: ‘Yet is day over long’. A day too long to sustain the momentary pleasure of Symons’s overtures, of an event original or the originating energy of revolutionary history in the early romantic first of all: this is the literary and political history that provides the content and depth of a longer memory and a greater range of feeling and implication to this characteristic aspect of the poetics of decadence.

This imaginative circumstance of afterwards unfolds as well in the disposition of the poetic language of decadence. Against all of those clichéd and caricatured images of scandalous personages and reprehensible behaviours in decadence, there is in fact a comprehensive attempt at ghosting – a dematerialisation – of the physical body of the words of poetry. This interest locates a point of experiment and invention that reveals its logic as well as its importance within the larger culture of the study of the history of language. As Linda Dowling has demonstrated in her defining account Language and Decadence in the Victorian Fin de Siècle, a shift of interest in academic understanding had relocated the developmental energy of words from their semantic roots to their phonological contents. The unit of action in the evolution of words thus changes from verbal radicals (the root-and-branches scheme) to sound conglomerates (phonic molecules), where words combine and recombine according to the laws of material sound, which is understood as a physical science. There grows an apprehension, no less powerful for literary authors than it is for linguistic scholars, that the life of spoken language expires as soon as it hits the page. Here printed words are left behind as shells, as it were, as reliquaries of their extinguished acoustic quick. This is the dead matter of language that the sensibility of decadence takes hold of, accepting the written condition of literature.
as its necessary state. Where the cultivation of Latinity by writers of the English fin de siècle reflects the sense of the treasured deadness of that language, the anti-futurity that underlies this attraction to dead languages is a prevailing attitude here, too.

This framework of critical understanding reveals some of the motives and aims in the otherwise odd concoction of Dowson’s ‘Chansons sans Paroles’, where a reiterative structure like that of the villanelle works further, within the five-line stanzas he features, to the purposes of the dematerialisation of speech. If Paul Fussell is correct in noting that the stanza-forms apparently ‘natural’ to English come in even-numbered units, Dowson’s five-liners provide a measure in which his repetitions work in the service of an experiment that can turn the native tongue of English verse against its own vocal grain:

In the deep violet air,
Not a leaf is stirred;
There is no sound heard,
But afar, the rare
Trilled voice of a bird.

In the wood’s dim heart,
And the fragrant pine,
Incense, and a shrine
Of her coming? Apart,
I wait for a sign. . . .

I wait for a sign:
The leaves to be waived,
The tall tree-tops laved
In a flood of sunshine,
This world to be saved!

In the deep violet air,
Not a leaf is stirred;
There is no sound heard,
But afar, the rare
Trilled voice of a bird.  

Where the last stanza repeats the first with the single difference of italicisation, we may note the significance of print in the poem’s own imaginative fiction of language. For, while its title signals a song
without words, what we notice on the printed page is words without song. This is an impression intensified by the extraordinary preponderance of monosyllables in the poem, which, individually and especially together, emerge like a set of verbal objects that are clotted rather than quickened into an impression of fluent speech, let alone musical sound. In line with the dramatic fiction of unheard voice, the poem may be read as an experimental untuning of the page – that is, an undoing of the technical and imaginative fiction of the reader’s proverbial ‘inner ear’. Following Dowling’s formulations on the importance of the silent page in the poetics of decadence, Dowson provides a record of the special technical stress of the repetitive in this language imaginary of lost sounds, of foregone origins. Thus, where the words of the first stanza are reiterated in the last without any quickening in the fiction of expectations met, the sense of a decrease in the repeat is realised in the further ‘afar’ of that ‘rare, trilled voice’, where the imagined sound ‘of a bird’ is further rarefied in the second instance of being unheard again on the silent page. The shift of the familiar into the italics provides an instrumental sign, moreover, of the difference this reiteration may make in the poetics of diminishing originals, to which it contributes the significance of a familiar that is also now made strange. And even if the uncanny is not a constant quality in this poetic sensibility, its category of imaginative interest serves to measure the significance of the difference the reiterative makes in the total effect of a poetry which distances itself from the living original of experience and redoubles that distance in discarding the impression of living voice.

This account of the poetics of decadence suggests points of difference from a received understanding of the programs of poetic modernism, which, in most constructions, features poetry of living speech in a historical moment that is tuned to the present-ness, not afterward-ness, of its own time. The sensibility of decadence provides a precedent for modernism not so much as an unresolvedly opposite quality, however, but, rather, as a better measured complexity. So, if it is customarily acknowledged that Eliot as well as Pound may have toyed with the legacy of decadence in their poetic youths but outgrew this influence as they matured into the modernist
poets they became, it is fairer to say that they grew into the poetics of decadence – as an ongoing response to the truth history would be giving to the conditions on which the temporal imaginary of decadence was founded. That apprehension had been established in its own way in their American experience, where, as male Anglo-Saxon Protestants of an originally (or supposedly) patrician class now threatened by the immigrant waves of the later nineteenth century, they each undertook an early course of dedicated reading of decadent poets. The imaginative understanding of history that decadence features would be corroborated and magnified by the momentous catastrophe of the First World War. And it is on this historical site, so often invoked as the defining event of the modernist generation, that we can see, even in necessarily shortened form in this chapter, the enriching significance of the tradition of literary decadence in some of the hallmark work of poetic modernism.

Consider *Homage to Sextus Propertius*, the creative translation of the Roman poet that Pound was at work on during the last half of the war. With the Roman poet Pound shares a late moment in the history of empire, which, in the grandiosity of its fall, locates the most substantial of the establishing circumstances of literary decadence. Thus Pound puts the present moment of his own historical experience into an epic linguistic perspective, not just excavating the poetic archive of his Roman original but assimilating its significance into his literary diction in a poetic vocabulary weighted with outlandish Latinisms. ‘Celebrities from the Trans-Caucasus will belaud Roman celebrities / And expound the distentions of Empire, / But for something to read in normal circumstances?’ The Latinity of the current day, a Propoundius in the midst of the English war: this is the conceit of a second and present decadence. It is undertaken in the imaginative tense of a modernism whose self-consciousness about its own time is its defining condition; this awareness of current circumstance shows of course in that last phrase in the personage of talky modernity, which Pound dubs into the predominantly Latinate language of his English version. The anachronistic comedy points up the darker matter, the tragic backdrop to the high jinks of the poem’s verbal surface, its performative foreground, so that, all in all,
in a sort of tonal chiaroscuro, the rising rhythm of Pound’s verbalist
humour includes the dying fall of a former (and present) empire as
the decadent apprehension of a signature modernist work.

Eliot’s major wartime and immediately postwar verse comes in
the stanza form of the quatrain, which had been as rare in his earlier
verse as it is appropriate to this moment. Here the apprehension of a
decadent circumstance that he shares with Pound calls up a verse
measure whose literary philology reaches back to the ur-decadence
of Gautier himself, whose quatrain art Eliot had acknowledged as his
particular model. The French poet’s mechanical cadence provides a
rhythmic figure for that category of value we may identify in the
aesthetics of decadence as the inorganic, where we see puppets in lieu
of living bodies – effigies or dead replicas instead of vital human life.
These insignia appear frequently in the earlier poetry of Eliot,
where, too, they illustrate an imaginative understanding of a histori-
cal present that has outlived the life cycle of renewable organic time.
These are the features of a late or last age, an aftermath, where the
machine has lost any iconic human value and stands as the sign of
post-human time, which is told in the current historical circumstance
in the negative apocalypse of modern technology at war. This dark
historical imaginary stands as a hinterland behind Eliot’s poetry of
this moment, which features the metronomic regularity of these
tetrameter quatrains, the four-by-four of poetic tradition, where he
accentuates the regimentation with a heavily regulated, sometimes
jackhammering, rhyme – as, for instance, in ‘Sweeney Among the
Nightingales’:

Apeneck Sweeney spreads his knees
Letting his arms hang down to laugh,
The zebra stripes along his jaw
Swelling to maculate giraffe.

The representation is sufficiently rich to benefit from a historically
informed understanding of this simian Irishman Sweeney, who,
beyond the ethnic stereotype, illustrates a more widely working
obsession in the late nineteenth century with the process of reverse
evolution, or degeneration: the much-feared belying of the promise
of Progress is projected into this image of a human reversed to the ape. In tempo, too, where the bestiary of human features coincides with the pace of a tetrameter quatrain that is stiffened considerably by the unexpected hard rhyme in the final line. There is an animal–mechanical character to this measure, which taps into an imaginative apprehension of the relentless mechanism of downward-turning time. It is the rhythmic signature of the failure of the ideal time of human improvement through Progress, which, after all, history has now outlived in an aftermath circumstance that is typified as well, in the final line, in that adamantine piece of dead language Latinism in ‘maculate’.

The decadence we have recovered in the modernist poetry of wartime, which is customarily understood as the defining occasion of the arts of modernism, thus returns from the recessive to the dominant power in our critical understanding. These major poets of Anglo-American modernism are working out of the sensibility of the decadence which they have been developing, over the long turn of the century, as a main line in their literary legacy.

Notes

2. Ibid.
6. ‘The Poems of Ernest Dowson’, review of The Poems of Ernest Dowson, with a memoir by Arthur Symons, Times Literary Supplement (2 June 1905), 177.
9. Ibid., viii.

11. Blast, 2 (July 1915), 34.


13. Poems of Ernest Dowson, 44.


15. ‘Villanelle of the Poet’s Road’, Poems of Ernest Dowson, 110.


18. Poems of Ernest Dowson, 95.


The period covered in this chapter, from 1901 to 1917, was one of tumultuous change, both in world affairs and in the arts. Anglo-American poetry was no exception. The traditional New Critical account of poetry in these years, still sometimes retold, suggested that poetic transformation came only with vers libre and the Imagists on the eve of the First World War – in other words, with what became known as modernist verse – but it is now generally recognised that change both began earlier and was more widespread. On the American side of the Atlantic, although Imagism would make a remarkable impact, the rather broader term, the ‘New Poetry’, was often used during these years; indeed, the 1917 anthology entitled The New Poetry, edited by Harriet Monroe and Alice Corbin Henderson, contained poems that came from all of the different categories of poetry with which this chapter will deal. W. B. Yeats was undoubtedly right when, speaking in Chicago at Poetry: A Magazine of Verse’s banquet in 1914, he saw the poetry of these years continuing and sharpening the aims of his own Rhymers’ Club in the early 1890s. ‘We wanted’, he said ‘to get rid not only of rhetoric but of poetic diction. We tried to strip away everything that was artificial, to get a style like speech, as simple as the simplest prose, like a cry of the heart.’ That could sum up much of the poetry I deal with here. The search for a more direct, pared-down poetry, in touch with the rhythms of speech, was widespread in the early years of the century. Not all of this poetry would now be identified as modernist – though much of it then seemed shockingly modern – but Anglo-American modernist verse grew out of this wider search for a new voice and new forms in response to a changing world.
Edwardian Poetry

‘Edwardian poetry’ is not a phrase often heard. ‘The Edwardian novel’ is another matter, that fact-filled monster denounced by Virginia Woolf, where everything is known about Mrs Brown except what it feels to be her.3 The reign of Edward VII appears, in Woolf’s depiction of its lumbering materialism, the very antithesis of the poetic; Edwardian poetry would seem an oxymoron. Yet modernist accounts of the Edwardian period are to be treated with caution – Pound’s later versions of the literary London of those years are particularly suspect. It’s true that in the first decade of the twentieth century, as in so much of the nineteenth, the novel and drama rather than poetry were seen as the literary forms in which the important questions of the day were to be debated. This was one of the reasons, as Donald Davie has pointed out, that Pound would come to be so adamant that poetry must be as well written as prose; only then would it speak to its times and wrest back poetic authority. It’s also true that the aspects of late nineteenth-century poetry that Yeats’s Rhymers had rebelled against, ‘sentimentality, the rhetoric, the “moral uplift”’, had by no means disappeared.4 The nine years of Edward VII’s reign were very much a time of transition between the poetry of the 1890s – with the Rhymers’ Club and the aesthetes on the one hand, and manly imperial verse on the other – and the later advent of the ‘Georgian revolt’ and the modernist ‘Imagist’ rebels, both emerging in late 1912, two years after the accession of George V. To use Raymond Williams’s terms, there was a good deal of ‘residual’ Victorianism, but there were also many signs of the ‘emergent’ new poetry, even if there was no one ‘dominant’ strand that one might label Edwardian.5

In market terms, the best-selling poetry continued to be – as it had been since the backlash against aestheticism and decadence that followed the Wilde trials in 1895 – stirring patriotic verse like that of Henry Newbolt and Rudyard Kipling. Much of their work exemplified the verse that Yeats condemned as rhetorical – public poetry, full of ‘moral uplift’. Certainly Newbolt’s verse, like that of a poet such as Alfred Austin (the little remembered Poet Laureate 1896–1913), was largely conservative in form as well as in politics. Yet some of Kipling’s verse – and, in fact, some of Newbolt’s, like his ‘Drake’s
Drum’, which Pound described as his ‘one good’ poem⁶ – was written in what Yeats called a ‘style like speech’. Moreover, as Craig Raine points out, it was in the speech of ‘the underdog’: ‘An’ it’s Tommy this, an’ Tommy that, an’ anything you please; / An’ Tommy ain’t a bloomin’ fool – you bet that Tommy sees.’⁷ Jan Montefiore has argued that the ‘demotic coarse vitality of the Barrack Room Ballads’ shows Kipling as a poet ‘on the cusp of modernism’, and she sums up what she calls his ‘heteroglossial’ verse under Eliot’s first title for The Waste Land, ‘He Do the Police in Different Voices’.⁸ Kipling, who was at the height of his fame in the Edwardian years, winning the Nobel Prize in 1907, was a contradictory figure, on the one hand endorsing unquestioning patriotism and white supremacy (‘Land of our Birth we pledge to thee’, ‘The White Man’s Burden’), but on the other bringing the unruly and subversive energies of working class and exotic others into his verse, destabilising the imperial order from within. If, as Edward Said argues, modernism is in important ways ‘a response to the external pressure on culture from the imperium’, one can see those early signs here.⁹

It would not be until 1913 that Robert Frost would note ‘How slowly but surely Yeats has eclipsed Kipling’, but for many younger poets Yeats, another figure conscious of the pressure of the imperium, was already the dominant poetic literary figure; it was to learn from him ‘how it was done’ that Ezra Pound came to London in 1908.¹⁰ Until 1909, when Pound would eventually meet him, Yeats spent much of the decade involved with theatre projects, particularly the Abbey Theatre in Dublin, returning to poetry and London after J. M. Synge’s death in March of that year. Yet his theories of musical speech, which he developed through his work in the theatre, particularly with the actress and writer Florence Farr, influenced a range of poets: among others, Laurence Binyon, now generally remembered for his work on Far Eastern art, though his poem, ‘For the Fallen’, with its spare cadences (‘They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old’), is quoted every Remembrance Day;¹¹ the young Lady Margaret Sackville, first President of the Poetry Recital Society (now the Poetry Society) when it was founded in 1909, whose melodic lyrics were admired by Pound and his fellow
Imagist F. S. Flint; and, perhaps most significantly, the Imagists themselves, one of whose principles would be ‘to compose in sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome’. Flint, underlining the point, would entitle his first collection of poetry *Cadences*.

It was only during the course of the decade that Yeats himself would move in his poetry from aestheticism to something more strikingly modern, the shift beginning with *In the Seven Woods* (1904) and becoming clear with *The Green Helmet and Other Poems* (1910), which had, as R. F. Foster puts it, ‘a sharp new edge’ that ‘had been honed for some time’. James Longenbach argues that Ezra Pound was right when he suggested that the influence here was J. M. Synge, although, as Alex Davis has argued, the change in Synge’s own verse appears only in a few of his posthumously published poems. Yet Synge was a highly influential figure for a number of early modernists, though perhaps more through the poetic richness and vitality of the Irish – or, rather, Hiberno-English – dialogue of his plays than through his verse as such. This was certainly Harriet Monroe’s view; arguing that the ‘new poetry’ began with the ‘two great Irish masters’, Yeats and Synge, she comments, ‘Synge wrote his plays in that wide borderland between prose and verse, in a form which, whatever one calls it, is essentially poetry.’

In addition, the way in which Yeats, Synge, and others in the Celtic revival drew on earlier Irish folk traditions to forge a new language offered a significant template for much of the verse that followed. Irish poets had found a voice in opposition to the British Victorian mainstream, returning to earlier Gaelic traditions, reworking them and re-inventing the English language in ways that made it theirs. This strategy was important later for other liberation movements, in, for example, India and the Harlem Renaissance, as well as in postcolonial nationalist writings. And in the early years of the century, other English-language poets attempted something not dissimilar. Some tried to find a new, fresher voice though ballad or folk forms, like John Masefield, whose first book of poems in 1902 was *Salt-Water Ballads*. Some found it through writing their own
kind of children’s verse, like Walter de la Mare, whose first book of poems, *Songs of Childhood*, also appeared in 1902. Others, like Kipling, evoked the voices of the ‘underdog’, the peasant or working class – Masefield again, Wilfrid Gibson, and, at times, Thomas Hardy. The Imagists, for their part, turned to what seemed starker, more distant and more elemental forms: Ancient Greek, Hebrew, Anglo-Saxon or Far Eastern poetry. While this pre- or proto-modernist Edwardian poetry did not necessarily have the anti-imperial subtext of the Irish, the turn in the pre-war years to poetic forms that offered in some way or other an alternative to those of the dominant class or culture, was, one might say, an implicit – later sometimes explicit – rejection or interrogation of nineteenth-century hierarchies of class, nation, or race. In the forms they choose there was a strong element of primitivism, but there was also paradoxically a sense of moving to something much more ‘modern’ than Victorian grandiloquence or grandstanding, and the emphasis on speech rhythms and avoidance of traditional poetic diction was an important aspect of this search for modernity.

Ford Madox Ford (then Ford Madox Hueffer), godfather to so much modernist talent, encouraged a range of ‘emergent’ new poetry during the fifteen months that he was editor of the *English Review*. The *English Review*, a distinguished if not money-making journal under his editorship, published, as well as a section called ‘Modern Poetry’, political articles, works in French and German, translations from the Russians, and stories by such writers as Joseph Conrad, John Galsworthy and the young Wyndham Lewis, one of Ford’s discoveries. Ford later claimed that he had begun the journal, whose first issue appeared in December 1908, in order to publish a particular poem by Thomas Hardy, which other magazines of the day had, he said, ‘found too – let us say – outspoken for them to print’. This was ‘A Sunday-Morning Tragedy’, a ballad-like poem, in which a country woman tells the harrowing story of her daughter’s death from a potion that she gives her to induce an abortion. It is not a ‘modernist’ poem, but its spare, striking language, its directness of presentation, its attack on conventional morals, all move in that direction. As Pound would later say of poetry he admired, ‘It
presents. It does not comment.' In the issues of the *English Review* that followed, established poets such as Yeats and Thomas Sturge Moore appeared; some of those who would be future contributors to the *Georgian Poetry* anthologies, such as de la Mare, Wilfrid Gibson, and Rupert Brooke, not modernist but using direct language and speech rhythms; and future modernists like Pound, Flint, and D. H. Lawrence, another of Ford’s discoveries. All these last three occasionally experimented in these early poems with free verse, Lawrence in a delightful poem about a baby running barefoot in a garden: ‘With her two bare feet on my hands / Cool as syringa buds / Cool and firm and silken as pink young peony flowers.’

Very different from that was the first poem of Pound’s to appear in the *English Review* – ‘Sestina: Altaforte’ – based on a war-song by the troubadour Bertrans de Born, a poem with a highly demanding form, which begins ‘Damn it all! all this our South stinks peace. / You whoreson dog, Papiols, come! Let’s to music!’ It’s certainly direct enough speech, but in contrast to Lawrence’s language, its archaisms – as reviewers would point out – seemed strangely out of date. But Pound was approaching modernism by his own circuitous route, in which making the old new would form a central role. He and Flint were already part of the proto-Imagist group who met in 1909 at the Tour Eiffel restaurant, another face of the new poetry in Edwardian London, but one to which I’ll return later.

**Georgian Poetry**

The term ‘Georgians’ is a slippery one, often used fairly loosely to group together those British poets working just before, during, and just after the First World War, whose work has been deemed ‘non-modernist’. More strictly speaking, it is used to designate the poets who contributed to Edward Marsh’s anthologies of *Georgian Poetry*, the adjective, in the first instance, referring simply to the fact that they were writing in the new reign of George V. But even then there is a complication; as Peter Howarth points out, many of the surviving early contributors to the *Georgian Poetry* anthologies, which appeared from 1912 to 1922, deeply disliked what he describes
as ‘the post-war coterie of poets led by J. C. Squire’, the arch antimodernist. And what does one do with a poet like Lawrence, who published both with the Georgians and the Imagists, whilst not fitting easily into either camp? But, again, as Peter Howarth has noted, speaking of the original Georgians, ‘both Georgians and Imagists alike were devoted to the ideal of a direct and immediate poetry . . . without cliché, self-consciousness or convention, a realism premised on removing the filters of custom’. \(^{21}\) Lawrence shared that aim with them both.

The leader of these original Georgians was Rupert Brooke, a stunningly handsome young man, whose posthumous reputation has suffered from his co-option as the quintessential English soldier-poet after his early wartime death. Now he is best known for patriotic poems like ‘The Soldier’: ‘If I should die, think only this of me: / That there’s some corner of a foreign field / That is forever England.’ \(^{22}\) Yet for most of his brief poetic career he cut a rather different and more subversive figure. Like his Bloomsbury friends, his leanings were to the left, and he regarded ‘Victorianism’ as the enemy as much as any modernist could. T. S. Eliot, whose campaign against the Georgians was fairly unrelenting, would disparage them in 1917 for their ‘pleasantness’ and love of the pastoral. \(^{23}\) Many of the Georgians did turn to the natural world – Wordsworth was an important model – but Brooke and the original Georgians had set out to disturb and alarm the establishment by their modern ‘realism’.

The forerunner of the anthologies might be said to be the 1911 poem by John Masefield, *The Everlasting Mercy*, the story of a pugilistic, foul-mouthed poacher, Saul Kane, told in his own demotic, colourful words. Harold Monro, who ran the Poetry Bookshop, which published the Georgian anthologies as well as the first Imagist one, saw it as the opening salvo of a new poetic era: ‘People who thought English poetry had died with Tennyson suddenly recognised their error . . . the rapid free doggerel of “The Everlasting Mercy”, its modernity, its ballad colloquialism, and its narrative interest awakened the curiosity of the public in 1911, and a revival of the dormant interest in poetry was at once assured.’ \(^{24}\) The year 1911 was one of acute social unrest, which the poem could be said to mirror but also contain – lower-class violence and moral anarchy, yes, but
the country setting, a fight between two comic ne’er-do-wells, Saul’s final repentance, are of a much less threatening order than the bitter, widespread industrial strikes that were igniting fear of revolution. All the same, it caught its readers’ imagination as a poem in touch with the modern world.

Brooke’s first and only collection also appeared in 1911, causing shock and horror among traditionalists owing to the unpoetic grittiness of some of its content. Brooke, ex-public school (Rugby, where his father was a master), and, like so many Bloomsbury men, a Cambridge Apostle, claimed that when the book came out he was cut in the street by his ‘Godfather and seven other Rugby masters’. Even Edward Marsh, also public school and Cambridge, editor of the Georgian anthologies, thought his poem on sea sickness on a Channel crossing went too far. The poem, ‘A Channel Passage’, which begins ‘The damned ship lurched and slithered’, and which several reviewers said should never have been printed, was in fact, like much of Brooke’s verse, an unhappy, disturbed, and disturbing love poem. One such poem, about sexual (possibly homosexual) desire, and rather chillingly called ‘Success’, ends bleakly: ‘One last shame’s spared me, one black word’s unspoken; / And I’m alone; and you have not awoken.’ Brooke rebelled against Victorian shibboleths, but was still tormented by them. Virginia Woolf had dubbed Brooke and his young friends the Neo-Pagans, but it was a very constrained kind of paganism. Brooke had considerable lyrical gifts, often achieving a swift-moving musical colloquialism – even Eliot acknowledged his ‘amazing felicity and command of language’ – but it is his more conventional poems that are remembered.

It was Brooke who suggested the idea of an anthology to Edward Marsh, then Winston Churchill’s secretary, not a writer himself, but an industrious editor and lover of literature who encouraged and sometimes subsidised writers’ ventures. Marsh presumably would have been ready to subsidise the anthologies as well, but in the event they were far too successful to need it – in fact, their contributors were in general immensely grateful for the royalties they gained, which Marsh scrupulously shared out, keeping nothing for himself. Lawrence, though he appreciated March’s generosity, described him as ‘a bit of a policeman in poetry’, but Marsh could be surprisingly
open. He was dubious about Pound, but invited him to contribute to the first anthology, although in the event Pound did not. Part of Brooke’s aim, according to Robert Ross, was, like Pound’s, to reassert the relevance of poetry at a time when the drama and the novel were regarded as the significant literary forms, but this certainly did not mean a return to the grand style. On the contrary, as C. K. Stead puts it, what was characteristic of the Georgians was ‘a rejection of large themes and of the language of rhetoric that accompanied them in the nineteenth century; and an attempt to come to terms with immediate experience, sensuous or imaginative, in a language close to common speech’.

Even if there is an implicit politics in poems such as Gibson’s, with their sympathy for society’s losers, it is not explicitly stated; the Georgians rebelled with moderation. As Robert Graves and Laura Riding said, ‘Georgians wanted to be English but not imperialistic, pantheistic rather than atheistic, simple as a child’s reading book.’ (‘The Soldier’ is in fact very much a pantheistic rather than a Christian poem, so not declaring quite as much of a truce with the Establishment as it might first seem.) Eliot said, with some justification, that the danger of the Georgians’ love of simplicity was that, like their model, Wordsworth, their poetry could slip into banality; but much of it found ready and appreciative readers.

That Georgian distancing from the large affairs of state could be said to change with Siegfried Sassoon’s anti-war poems, though they still work, and work powerfully, through the representation of immediate experience. It’s to Marsh’s credit that he published them. In fact, the Georgians could be said to have given English verse the most powerful of the war poetry of the First World War. Isaac Rosenberg appeared in the anthologies, as did Graves, and although Wilfred Owen did not, his friendship with Sassoon, who helped him so much in his discovery of his poetic voice, meant that he was proud to be associated with them. Had he lived, no doubt his work would have been included. Edward Thomas, too, had he lived longer, would have appeared. Thomas, a gifted prose writer and literary critic, was friendly with many of the Georgians, though not uncritical of their poems. He had done much to help and establish the
'tramp poet', W. H. Davies (Welsh like himself), and saw a good deal of the other Georgian poets, such as Brooke, Lascelles Abercrombie, and Gibson. Thomas started writing poetry in 1914 after making friends with Frost, then living in England, whose first (and immediately much praised) book of poetry, *A Boy’s Will*, had appeared the year before. Thomas volunteered for the army in 1915, and was killed in 1917. Only six of his poems were published in his lifetime, but his reputation has steadily grown, and he has been much admired by later fellow poets, including Ted Hughes and Seamus Heaney. His poems, like much Georgian poetry, are often about the natural world, though in his case seen under the shadow of war, as in his poem ‘In Memoriam (Easter, 1915)’:

The flowers left thick at nightfall in the wood  
This Eastertide call into mind the men,  
Now far from home, who, with their sweethearts, should  
Have gathered them and will do never again.33

The movement of Thomas’s poems, though at first sight they seem simple, is unpredictable and unsettling, the stresses irregular and disturbing, echoing the melancholy and unmanageable events of the time. As with Hardy and Owen, though in different ways, the form of the poetry always underlines the clash between the inexorable forces of history and human hope and desire. Owen’s poems achieve this though their discomforting consonantal rhymes, Hardy through his complex, oddly wrought forms and strange, inventive, troubling language – for example, in his poem about the Titanic, ‘The Convergence of the Twain’, which exemplifies his sense of the inevitable clash between the blind forces of destiny and human aspiration:

Over the mirrors meant  
To glass the opulent  
The sea-worm crawls – grotesque, slimed, dumb, indifferent.34

Hardy, having come to poetry late in his career, was a kind of elder statesman in the poetic field, but Robert Caserio has suggested that he should be seen as proto-modernist in his consciousness of form, and, though very different from the Imagists, he was much admired
by them, particularly by Ezra Pound and his later usurper (as Pound saw it), Amy Lowell.

Imagist Poetry

Imagism is most closely associated with Pound, who named, defined, and promoted the movement, which was later identified by Eliot as the point de répère of modernist poetry. As Michael Levenson says, ‘Pound willed [Imagism] into being, wrote it into doctrine, and publicized it into prominence.’ But that was not until 1912–14. The story of Imagism begins in 1909, with a group of poets that Pound would later name the ‘School of Images’. They met in the Tour Eiffel restaurant in Percy Street, then thought of as part of London’s dubious Soho, a more radical, avant-garde group than the later Georgians, a breakaway from the highly respectable, Mayfair-based Poets’ Club, where Henry Newbolt was one of the two presidents. What brought the group together, according to Flint, ‘was a dissatisfaction with English poetry as it was then . . . being written’, and many of the core ideas behind Imagism emerged from their discussions. Both the leading figures – T. E. Hulme and Flint – were keenly interested in Continental philosophy, particularly Nietzsche and Henri Bergson, as well as French Symbolist poetry and vers libre. Hulme, ‘the ringleader’, insisted on ‘absolutely accurate presentation and no verbiage’. In other words, like the Georgians, he wanted direct language, and poetry that ‘strip[ped] away everything that was artificial’: but he wanted to strip yet more, advocating free verse without rhyme and without conventional metre.

The Tour Eiffel poets were a disparate group, of a kind that is only likely to come together in a metropolis. Hulme came from a Midlands trade family, Flint from the poorer London working class. Among the others were two Irish nationalists, Joseph Campbell and Desmond FitzGerald; Florence Farr, Yeats’s associate in developing his ideas of musical speech, and very much a New Woman; and the young American poet newly arrived in London, Pound. So their very demographics were strikingly different from the mainly English, largely upper-middle-class background of the Georgians, though the final two members of the group, Edward Shorter and Francis W. Tancred, friends of Hulme, were English and reasonably
well-to-do. But these proto-Imagists also differed from the Georgians in the kind of poets they turned to for their poetry; Wordsworth was emphatically not for them, though Coleridge’s ideas, particularly on organic form, were important to Flint, and perhaps implicitly so for Hulme.\footnote{38} But for models they went beyond English, and at times beyond European modes. Campbell had already worked with Gaelic poetry, from which he had produced his own evocative, spare quasi-translations, and the group experimented, according to Flint, with vers libre, Japanese tanka and haiku, and Ancient Hebraic forms. In addition, Flint says, there was ‘a lot of talk and practice among us . . . of what we called the Image’.\footnote{39} For Flint, this was ‘a form of expression, like the Japanese; in which the image is a resonant heart of an exquisite moment’, a brief, intense epiphany.\footnote{40} Hulme explained its workings in terms drawn from Bergson, suggesting the poetic ‘image’ came paradoxically from two or more images juxtaposed, which, when brought together, like a musical chord, ‘unite to suggest an image which is different to both’, through which a poem could create something close to a Bergsonian moment of intuition.\footnote{41} Take, for example, his brief two line poem: ‘Old houses were scaffolding once / And workmen whistling’, where the meaning and poignancy come from the fused impact of the contrasting images.\footnote{42} The haiku is the perfect example of this technique (Hulme’s poem is itself a form of haiku), and Flint says they wrote dozens of them. For Flint, Campbell, and Farr, whose book on The Music of Speech appeared that year, the musicality of the poetic line remained as important for free verse, if not more, as for conventional metric stanzas. Hulme was less concerned, but that Yeatsian emphasis on musical speech would win out.\footnote{43}

Important though all this would be to Pound in the future, not least the haiku form, at the time, according to Flint, he ‘was very full of his troubadours’, and did not enter much into these discussions.\footnote{44} In fact, on the first evening he joined the Tour Eiffel group, he read them the bloodthirsty ‘Sestina: Altaforte’ that Ford later published in the English Review, declaiming it at the top of his voice to the consternation of other diners and of the waiter, who hastily screened the poets off. The group broke up after a few months, Hulme abandoned verse, and it was only in 1911 to 1912 that Pound began
to engage with these ideas about poetry. Ford finally convinced him of the need for ‘simple current speech’;\textsuperscript{45} he became interested briefly but transformatively in Hulme’s Bergsonism, whose first fruits were his notion of the ‘Luminous Detail’;\textsuperscript{46} and Flint persuaded him of the importance of \textit{vers libre}. Flint also published an influential, much discussed article in the August 1912 \textit{Poetry Review} on contemporary French poetry, which alerted Pound to the French avant-garde’s competing ‘schools’, with their manifestos and little magazines. The same month, Pound came up with the name of Imagism, or rather, out of deference to the French, \textit{Imagisme}.\textsuperscript{47}

Pound would never give up his troubadours completely, but his poetry had already begun to change. In late 1911 he had published his translation of the Anglo-Saxon poem \textit{The Seafarer}, an extraordinary tour de force, inventing a language that conveyed the sounds and patterns of the Anglo-Saxon, a different, more rugged and vital archaism, using, as Daniel Albright puts it, ‘Old English to strip poetry of decorative elements, to simplify into strangeness’\textsuperscript{48}. In his stoic endurance and lonely quest, the seafarer is, Pound would later say, a persona or mask for himself; he was again going to the past to find himself in the present. And even before he invented the \textit{Imagiste} name, Pound had already written several of the poems he would later identify as Imagist. One such is ‘The Return’, which drew on a \textit{vers libre} poem by Henri de Régnier evoking the poetic power of the ancient gods, and which Yeats said read as if Pound ‘were translating at sight from an unknown Greek masterpiece’.\textsuperscript{49} Pound himself compared it to the sculptor Jacob Epstein’s \textit{Sun-God}, which he had earlier said might have been ‘exkavited from Babylon & not questioned as to authenticity’.\textsuperscript{50} When he originally wrote it, he had thought of it as being written in Sapphics, a term he used very inexacty, to the horror of classicists like Edward Marsh, to mean quantitative verse, but Sappho’s ancient, melic, fragmentary poetry would become a touchstone for Pound and his fellow Imagists. The search in the archaic, and soon the non-Western, for something more elemental and potent than present society offered would now be a central part of Pound’s poetics and that of his fellow Imagists. If the Georgians rejected imperial posturing, the Imagists, in their
choice of models, again went further, like modernist painters and sculptors, searching for artistic renewal in the cultures that the British Empire – and European colonisers more generally – deemed inferior; paradoxically, of course, they often only knew about these cultures through imperialist plunder or trade. For the Imagists – like, in fact, many of the Georgians – the nineteenth-century grand narrative that saw Western modernity as the height of human progress no longer rang true.

The first the public knew about Pound’s new movement was with the publication of his collection, *Ripostes*, in October 1912, to which he appended five poems as ‘The Complete Poetical Works of T. E. Hulme’, with a prefatory note in which he referred to the ‘School of Images’, ending, without explanation, ‘As for the future, *Les Imagistes*, the descendants of the forgotten school of 1909, have that in their keeping.’ Meanwhile, Pound was identifying some fellow Imagists. The first was the American Hilda Doolittle, whom he renamed ‘H.D. Imagiste’ when he sent her poem ‘Hermes of the Ways’ – redundant words ‘slashed’ out, according to H.D. – to Harriet Monroe’s Chicago-based *Poetry* magazine, for which he had become foreign editor, and through which he would publicise his new movement. This poem was a translation, and transformation, of an epigram by Anyte of Tegea, from the fourth century BC, in H.D.’s version dramatising the return of the weary traveller to shore and to Hermes’s shrine: ‘Hermes, Hermes, / the great sea foamed, / gnashed its teeth about me; / but you have waited, / where sea-grass tangles with/shore-grass.’ Writing to Monroe, Pound praised its ‘laconic speech . . . no slither; direct . . . straight as the Greek’. The original is from the *Greek Anthology*, a collection of short epigrams, a source of fascination for the Imagists, for whom their brief, elliptical form seemed to share something with the recently discovered Sappho fragments.

Pound also recruited the English Richard Aldington, again for his poems on Greek themes – he claimed he had discovered free verse from translating the chorus of a play by Euripides. Creative translation, reworking earlier works, was a crucial part of Imagism. It’s perhaps a form that could be seen as analogous to what the
French art critic Nicolas Bourriaud calls ‘postproduction art’, which he suggests emerged with Marcel Duchamp and his ready-mades, and remains very much part of the art scene today, art that works with and remakes previous works.  

The Waste Land – a poem much influenced by Imagism, as critics have noted – is perhaps the most famous example of modernist literary postproduction art, and Eliot’s 1919 essay ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ could be said to be its literary explication.  

Pound also identified Flint as one of his Imagist recruits, pruning his imagistic but extended poem ‘A Swan Song’ into Imagist concision. Flint was slightly resentful, feeling he knew much of this already, but he agreed to help Pound promote the movement. An interview with an ‘imagiste’ (Pound, of course) appeared under Flint’s name in Poetry in March 1913, followed by an article by Pound himself entitled ‘A Few Don’ts by an Imagiste’. What these both emphasised was poetic technique, direct treatment (‘go in fear of abstractions’), no verbiage, and musicality rather than rigid metre; in fact, given they didn’t insist on *vers libre*, there was little with which the original Georgians would have disagreed, though in practice Pound was much more ruthless than they in using ‘absolutely no word that did not contribute to the presentation’. 

Pound’s ‘Don’ts’ constitute excellent advice for any aspiring poet, and are still used on some creative writing courses today. But in addition, Flint had mentioned (though not explained) a certain ‘Doctrine of the Image’ (‘it did not concern the public’), and Pound, before embarking on his ‘Don’ts’, gave more information. The ‘Image’, he said, was ‘that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in a moment of time. . . . It is the presentation of such a “complex” instantaneously which gives that sense of sudden liberation . . . which we experience in the presence of the greatest works of art’.  

Pound is using – or rather, creatively *mis*using – the word ‘complex’ in a psychoanalytical sense, having found it in a discussion of Freud’s ideas, fusing it with the Bergsonian moment of intuition, to convey the immediacy and revelatory force of this poetic epiphany. For Pound, unlike Hulme and Flint, the image had a visionary dimension, a continuation with the ‘unofficial mysticism’, ‘half memories of
Hellenic mysteries’, that he had earlier identified in his troubadours. Much later Pound would write that ‘imagism was formulated almost in order to give emphasis to certain qualities that [H.D.] possessed to the maximum degree; a mytho-poetic sense that was deep and true and of Nature’. At the time that ‘A Few Don’ts’ appeared in early 1913, Pound had not followed up the Tour Eiffel interest in Japanese poetry, though he was already on the lookout for new models beyond the European. The previous year he had, like Yeats, been deeply impressed by the Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore, whose work he was still promoting, comparing it both to the troubadours and to the ‘most advanced artists in vers libre’. But that April he would publish his first ‘hokku-like’ poem, ‘In a Station of the Metro’:

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

Seamus Heaney, writing of this poem, which he describes as ‘one of the briefest and most influential in [Pound’s] total oeuvre’, suggests this Imagist haiku changed the way we read such poetry:

Thanks to these fourteen words, we are now well attuned to the Japanese effect, the evocation of that precise instant of perception, and are ready to grant such evocation of the instant a self-sufficiency of its own. We don’t require any labouring of the point. We are happy if the image sets off its own echoes and associations, if it speaks indirectly, as Issa speaks in his haiku: ‘A good world – / dew drops fall/ by ones by twos.’

What Hulme and Pound take from the haiku, Heaney suggests (he also quotes Hulme’s poem about the old houses), is not only its brief form, and its ‘closeness to common experience’, but also its central theme, ‘the pathos of things’, ‘the sense of evanescence, of the transitoriness of things, of the stillness behind things into which they eventually pass’. A few months later, in the autumn of 1913, Pound discovered Chinese poetry, making little Imagist poems from the translations he found, cutting them to the essence, shaping them into haiku-like fragments. For example, he turns a ten-line poem by the poet Lady Ban (first century BC) into three brief lines:
As Heaney suggests, the haiku form enables Pound to evoke directly, in a few words, the ‘lacrimae rerum, . . . the grievous aspects of human experience’, here, the perennial human pain of rejection and loss. He is turning to the past, and another distant culture, to convey what his readers can recognise in their present. From now on Pound would turn to the Far East, and increasingly to China, to bring a new renaissance, though the Greeks and many others would remain important too. One wonders if he knew Lady Ban had been called the ‘Sappho of China’; whether he did or not, he would soon be advocating the exploration of ‘world-poetry’.

In August 1913, Pound found a British little magazine through which to promote Imagism, becoming literary editor of the New Freewoman, by the next year to be The Egoist, which would play an important role in the development of modernist writing. In March 1914, Pound also brought out an anthology, Des Imagistes, including several of his Chinese poems; his own, H.D.’s and Aldington’s Greek poems; and poems by Flint, James Joyce, and Allen Upward, among others. He included a poem, ‘In the Garden’, by the rich Bostonian Amy Lowell, who had discovered Imagism through reading H.D. in Poetry, and whom he had recently met. He hoped she might set him up with a magazine of his own, but things would turn out very differently. For now, however, he was also busily involved with setting up a new movement.

**Vorticist Poetry**

In early 1914, Pound had started to see more of Wyndham Lewis, then making a name for himself as an artist. His work had been included in the Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition, and he had worked for a while with Roger Fry at the Omega Workshops, until there was — as so often with Lewis — an acrimonious split. Lewis denounced the Omega’s effeminacy (‘The Idol is still Prettiness . . . despite the Post-What-Not fashionableness of its draperies’) and set
out to found his more masculinist Rebel Art Centre. Lewis’s drawings and paintings moved towards abstraction – and sometimes were entirely abstract – and his style was strikingly and powerfully angular, with slashing diagonals and breaks, very different from the curves of the Bloomsbury artists. The artistic schools, however, from which Lewis wanted most to differentiate himself were, on the one hand, the French cubists, and, on the other, F. T. Marinetti’s Futurists. It was in June of that year, when Marinetti was on one of his frequent and well-publicised visits to London, that Pound came up with a distinctive name for Lewis’s rebel art: Vorticism. Other artists involved would include Edward Wadsworth, William Roberts, Jessica Dismorr, and the sculptor Henri Gaudier-Brzeska. This was to be a movement that spanned the arts, and Imagisme would now be the poetic arm of the Vorticist movement. So with Vorticism Pound was not abandoning Imagism, but he began to understand it in new ways. He was also making himself a much more public rebel by establishing these links with the art world; visual arts, then as now, could outrage the daily press in a way poetry could for the most part only dream of. In Vorticism’s first explosive multimedia manifesto – Lewis’s magazine Blast, whose aggressive bold black type in fact owed much to the Futurists – Pound wrote: ‘The vortex is the point of maximum energy. . . . All experience rushes into this vortex. All the energised past, all the past that is living and worthy to live. . . . VORTICISM is art before it has spread itself into a state of flaccidity.’ He ends his manifesto by quoting, as an example of Vorticist poetry, H.D.’s ‘Oread’, a six-line poem that begins: ‘Whirl up sea – / Whirl your painted pines’. Pound had repeated in this manifesto, as part of the ‘ancestry’ of the Vorticist movement, his earlier definition of the Image as ‘that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time’, but a few weeks later, he had rethought this Vortict Imagism further. In an article entitled ‘Vorticism’ (though mainly about Imagism) he wrote: ‘THE IMAGE IS NOT an idea. It is a radiant node or cluster; it is what I can, and must perforce, call a VORTEX, from which, and through which, and into which, ideas are constantly rushing.’ The image has become a dynamic, intensive concept, and he develops it by saying that Imagist poetry, like the haiku, exemplifies ‘super-position’, ‘one
idea set on top of another’. He cites his ‘hokku-like’ ‘In a Station of the Metro’ as an example, and also, once more, H.D.’s ‘Oread’, along with Aldington’s ‘In Via Sestina’. (‘Super-position’ is, one might say, Pound’s more visionary version of Hulme’s earlier Bergsonian juxtaposed images.) In poems like these, Pound explains, ‘one is trying to record the precise instant when a thing outward and objective transforms itself, or darts into a thing inward and subjective.’ The image now fuses intellect and emotion, past and present, inner and outer, energy and stillness.

For Pound, all Vorticist poetry is *Imagiste*, though perhaps *Imagiste* with a difference, of an even great intensity and energy; so it is a moot question how far for Pound ‘Vorticist poetry’ is a separate category at all. The not wholly successful satires that he supplied for *Blast* – though they are in tune with Lewis’s radical and noisy challenge to respectable British values, and with his own increasingly intemperate response to what he saw as the follies and iniquities of the world – were not for Pound serious *Imagiste* poems, so in that sense not Vorticist either, but, as he says elsewhere, poems of diagnosis. His poem ‘Dogmatic Statement on the Game and Play of Chess: Theme for a Series of Pictures’, an ingenious attempt to translate a Vorticist painting into verse, is sometimes cited as Vorticist poetry, but it scarcely fulfils Pound’s other stipulations. Perhaps his most Vorticist poem would be *The Cantos*, certainly a poem in which, for Pound, ‘all the energised past, all the past that is living and worthy to live’ is drawn in, ‘a VORTEX, from which, and through which, and into which, ideas are constantly rushing’. Ronald Bush has argued that *The Cantos* draws on the Vorticist design practice in its paratactic repetition of themes, with multiple narratives, multiple voices, multiple histories, simultaneously repeating and metamorphosing, another form Pound had found of ‘super-position’. Pound’s Vorticism, like his Imagism, was visionary, and his mythopoesis underlies *The Cantos*.

Of course, there could be other definitions of Vorticism and Vorticist poetry besides Pound’s. Lewis and Pound understood Vorticism very differently. For Lewis, who increasingly found Pound *passéiste*, the ‘new vortex plunges to the heart of the Present’, and its designs celebrated a harshly urban, industrial townscape: Lewis would later
insist that ‘the point to stress’ was that Vorticism ‘accepted the machine world’.71 No petals on wet boughs for him. If there was an implicit primitivism in the Georgians, and more in Imagism, with Lewis it was explicit and fierce. If, as he said, the ‘Art-Instinct is permanently primitive’, the Vorticists for him were ‘Primitive Mercenaries in the Modern World’; they fought to survive in a brutal modernity.72

The other poems besides Pound’s included in Blast 2 (only Pound had poems in the first Blast) were all urban – the then unknown T. S. Eliot’s ‘Preludes’ and ‘Rhapsody on a Windy Night’, Ford’s ‘Old Houses in Flanders’, which was a poem about the war, and several by Jessica Dismorr.73 Some of Dismorr’s ‘London Notes’ are powerfully evocative of Vorticist designs: ‘Towers of scaffolding draw their criss-cross pattern of bars upon the sky, a monstrous tartan. / Delicate fingers of cranes describe beneficent motions in space.’74 Eliot’s poems, which he had written some years earlier, were, Timothy Materer argues, the ‘only literary productions in Blast that matched in force and originality the designs of Lewis, Gaudier-Brzeska, and the painter Edward Wadsworth’, but he suggests they are fin-de-siècle rather than Vorticist.75 That’s overstating it, but certainly Eliot’s Laforguian Paris, ‘grimy’, ‘dingy’ as it is, is full of human (and other) life, in that way very different from the Vorticist mechanised world. It may be the morning that ‘comes to consciousness’ rather than the people, but the iterated rhyme on ‘street’ and ‘feet’ in the ‘Preludes’ insists on the human presence.76

Lewis himself was not writing poetry at the time, though when younger he had written a large number of sonnets, which he never published, and in 1933 Eliot would publish a collection of Lewis’s poems called One-Way Song. Yet perhaps the most striking candidate for Vorticist poetry is Lewis’s extraordinary play, The Enemy of the Stars (1914), whose language could be said, like that of Synge’s, to occupy the ‘wide borderland between prose and verse’. The section called ‘The Night’ begins: ‘His eyes woke first, shaken by rough moonbeams. A white, crude volume of brutal light blazed over him. Immense bleak electric advertisement of God, it crushed with wild emptiness of stress. / The ice field of the sky swept and crashed silently. . . . The stars shone madly in the archaic blank
wilderness of the universe, machines of prey.’ At the time, Aldington commented on its ‘sudden clear images – flashes of lightning suddenly displaying forms above the dark abysmal conflict’, and suggested its ‘telegraphic language’ was doing something very similar to Imagist verse, a comment in which there is some truth, but the desolate violence of *The Enemy of the Stars* is darker and harsher – in fact, more Vorticist.

‘Amygiste’ Verse

If it has taken quite a time for the Edwardians and Georgians to recover from the insults piled on to them by the New Critics’ high modernist orthodoxy, Amy Lowell’s intervention in the history of Imagism has only very recently begun to be seen afresh. Feminist critics, in particular, have during the last ten years raised questions about the fairness of Pound’s insistence that she diluted his high standards, turning his finely-honed *Imagisme* into the alleged loose writing and insipidity of ‘Amygism’. They have also argued for increased appreciation of Lowell’s own poetry, not only her powerful lesbian love lyrics, but also her experimental polyphonic prose.

In late 1914, as the First World War began, Pound, to his outrage, lost sole control of the Imagism movement. Lowell had by then had quite a number of her Imagist poems published in *The Egoist*, including several powerful poems in August of that year, such as the moving and inventive ‘Miscast’, and one of her most striking love poems, ‘The Taxi’ (‘When I go away from you / The world beats dead / like a slackened drum’). But, to her chagrin, she found that Pound was less interested in her as poet than as a potential patron, and when she visited London that summer he suggested she might buy the *Mercure de France* and appoint him salaried editor. Lowell said that was beyond her means, which Pound refused to believe, and never forgave her. Lowell, however, decided she could help the Imagist cause in another way. She was convinced that Imagist verse could attract more than the small number of readers that it had so far found; she was also undoubtedly put out that only one of her poems had been included in *Des Imagistes*. Her own second book
of poetry, *Sword Blades and Poppy Seed*, which contained many of her recent Imagist poems, appeared that September, and was widely reviewed – much admired by some, shocking others, and undoubtedly making a stir. She had become a literary celebrity. With her name now well-known, and her shrewd business sense, she could find a publisher for a series of Imagist anthologies, appearing annually like *Georgian Poetry*, and constructed on democratic lines, the poets presented in alphabetic order, each with equal space and each choosing his or her own poems; Lowell would pay any costs. She had become friendly with Aldington, H.D., and Flint while in London, and they responded warmly to the idea. Pound, however, refused to join this venture, which he described to Harriet Monroe as a ‘proposal to turn “Imagism” into a democratic beer-garden’; *Des Imagistes*, he said, was only made possible by ‘the most rigorous suppression of what I considered faults’. But Pound’s erstwhile protégés were weary of being suppressed. Aldington and H.D. were increasingly out of sympathy with his enthusiasm for Vorticism, in spite of the fact that he had identified them both as Vorticist poets. By the Christmas of 1914, with the war preoccupying all minds, Vorticism appeared to many an uncomfortably militaristic movement, something Lewis himself felt acutely when he reached the front.

Lowell found two more contributors: the American John Gould Fletcher, a moody, uneven, but imaginatively experimental poet, on the edge of the Imagist circle, though he hadn’t contributed to *Des Imagistes*; and D. H. Lawrence, whom she met that summer and much admired – when Lawrence tried to demur on the grounds that he wasn’t an Imagist, she quoted to him his lines, ‘The morning breaks like a pomegranate / In a shining crack of red.’ Lawrence gave in, as people generally did to Lowell. Lowell was by now becoming a highly successful, indeed charismatic, public speaker and performance poet, and she threw herself into publicising the Imagists, visiting the then highly conservative Poetry Society of America in New York, and causing uproar when she read her poems and those of her fellow Imagists. But she succeeded in drawing attention to the anthology, *Some Imagist Poets* (1915), which, if it didn’t sell in the numbers of *Georgian Poetry*, did remarkably well. In
many ways a more even collection than *Des Imagistes*, it included H.D.’s ‘Oread’, so praised by Pound, as well as several poems that would appear in 1916 in her collection *Sea Garden*, Lawrence’s ‘Ballad of Another Ophelia’, and one of Lowell’s most-admired love lyrics, ‘Venus Transiens’. Pound would mutter gloomily the next year that Imagism had gone off ‘into froth . . . lack of cohesion . . . rhetoric’, but his critique was hardly borne out by the anthology. Unlike *Des Imagistes*, the anthology had a preface, written by Aldington with some contributions from Lowell, which, while repeating the same points about techniques, stressed Imagism as an individualistic, libertarian approach to poetry. Levenson quotes this preface as an example of early modernism as opposed to the high modernism that Eliot and Pound were evolving, but it is perhaps better seen as an alternative modernism. It was also more secular than Pound’s Imagism – no doctrines in sight.

Amy Lowell relished the outrage she provoked at her readings, but her aim was to win over readers to the new poetry. She had none of the Vorticists’ scorn for the public, for whom the artist was at constant war with the forces of mediocrity. She was convinced that, with education, there would be a much wider audience for Imagism, once she had weaned the reading public away from Victorian verse. Jane Marcus suggests that ‘Amy Lowell’s American imagism for the people . . . was a direct threat to the Eliot/Pound European mode of the cult of genius. Lowell not only read poetry aloud in public, she proselytized for a whole new culture of poetry readers and writers of poetry.’ And she succeeded; hundreds came to her readings. Eliot’s unkind response to her success was to later label her ‘the demon saleswoman’ of poetry, but she was selling more than books. Imagism, she felt, had liberated her from Bostonian stuffiness, and could liberate others.

Lowell’s campaign steadily gained ground, and Imagism, or the ‘New Poetry’ was becoming much more accepted; indeed other poets, such as Mina Loy, who published in Alfred Kreymborg’s *Others*, outdid them in creating scandal. Vers-librists were now renamed Vers-libertines, and the shedding of rhyme was compared to the recent vogue for the shedding of corsets, an analogy which could be argued to have had considerable truth. Aldington and Fletcher suggested bringing some other newly emerging poets into
the anthologies – Wallace Stevens, Marianne Moore, and Eliot – but, perhaps mistakenly, Lowell did not agree. Yet the 1916 anthology not only sold well, but also received a much more favourable reception. Lowell was now developing a new story of American poetry. Poets like Longfellow, Emerson, and Bryant were really English provincials. The first truly American poets were the pagan Whitman, Poe, and Dickinson, and the new poets were their heirs. Lowell was not alone in arguing for the recognition of an indigenous American tradition. William Carlos Williams would do the same, and Monroe’s *Poetry* had always had as its central aim the promotion of American poetry; Monroe had been particularly keen to support poets such as Carl Sandberg, Vachel Lindsay, and Edgar Lee Masters, with specifically American voices and subject-matter. Alice Corbin Henderson, the first deputy editor, who had had to move to New Mexico when she developed consumption, had begun to take a keen interest in Native American culture, and when *Poetry* in 1917 brought out an issue devoted to Native American poetry, translations of their traditional verse were identified as Imagist avant la lettre. Henderson, reviewing an anthology inspired by the 1917 issue, compared them to both ‘our most modern American poets’ and to the Chinese. Imagism, Mary Austin would claim, was clearly an indigenous American form. There was much, of course, that *Poetry* misunderstood about Native American traditional verse, and this move to gloss over the difference between a dispossessed indigenous ‘American’ and an ‘American’ whose forbears had dispossessed them was politically highly suspect. But the wish to compare the Native Americans, the Chinese, and the modern Imagists does emphasise how much those who embraced Imagism had a sense of ‘world poetry’, all of significance, from all of which they could learn.

The last Imagist anthology came out in 1917, as the United States entered the war, and the poets went their separate ways. Pound, with Eliot’s aid, mounted a campaign against what he saw as the dilution of vers libre, and prescribed instead Théophile Gautier’s “Emaux et Camées” (or the Bay State Hymn Book). Rhyme and regular strophes’, though, apart from *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*, he did not follow his own prescription for long. In November 1917, Eliot,
now assistant editor of *The Egoist*, wrote a witty, ironic but not unkind review of *The New Poetry*, the anthology with which I began, casting doubt on its programme of ‘insurrection’ and introducing an early version of his theory of the inevitable importance of tradition, while suggesting that rhetoric is best avoided ‘by the exercise, in greater or less degree, of intelligence’. Yet he, Pound, and others would carry on the new poetry’s struggle against what Eliot called ‘the pathology of rhetoric’, as well as its quest to make new Anglo-American poetry.

Notes


18. Significantly, Ford did not publish the patriotic imperialist poets.
29. The later anthologies, however, solely published British poets, and only two women ever appeared: Vita Sackville-West and Fredegond Shove.
37. Hulme’s views of the relation between prose and poetry were very different from the other reformers; see Helen Carr, *The Verse Revolutionaries: Ezra Pound, H.D. and the Imagists* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2009), 161.

38. See Howarth, *British Poetry*, 73–4, for a fascinating analysis of the elements of romantic aesthetic theory in Hulme’s thought.


44. Flint, ‘History of Imagism’, 71.

45. ‘Simple current speech’ was how Pound put it in an unpublished letter of 1915 in the University of Texas at Austin: qtd in Carr, *Verse Revolutionaries*, 766.


47. Lawrence Rainey has suggested it was March, and was in reaction to Marinetti’s Futurism, but though it’s a colourful story, it doesn’t fit the historical facts: see Lawrence Rainey, *Institutions of Modernism: Literary Elites and Public Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 29, and my account in *Verse Revolutionaries*, 432.


50. Pound, letter to Isabel Weston Pound, [c. 20 Apr. 1912], *Ezra Pound to his Parents*, 277.


The resulting poem was renamed ‘The Swan’, and published in *Poetry* in July 1913.

Ezra Pound, ‘A Few Don’ts by an Imagiste’, *Poetry*, 1.6 (Mar. 1913), 201;


Wyndham Lewis, ‘Our Vortex’, *Blast*, 1 (June 1914), 147.


Eliot’s ‘Prufrock’ had appeared in *Poetry* just the month before.


Wyndham Lewis, *Collected Poems and Plays*, ed. Alan Munton (Manchester: Carcanet, 1979), 99–100. The play was first published in *Blast*, 1 (June 1914); a revised edition appeared in 1932.


To adapt Helen Vendler’s concept, Ezra Pound, H.D., and T. S. Eliot all ‘came of age’ as poets at approximately the same moment, just before the First World War. All three were Americans born in the mid- to late-1880s; all decided, in an expatriate move typical of the early modernists, to relocate during the early years of the twentieth century from an American cultural climate they found artistically and personally stifling to an environment abroad that they read as more conducive to growth – chiefly in London, at times in Paris and other European contexts. Pound, whose poetry reached publication a few years earlier than H.D.’s and Eliot’s, styled himself as promoter of and mentor to both. Pound made the earliest break from the US, establishing himself in London in 1908 after a brief sojourn in Venice, transitioning rapidly from a brash American newcomer to a respected, if maverick, innovator in London literary and artistic circles. As attested by Harriet Monroe, editor of *Poetry* magazine (a major publication venue for the rising generation of anglophone poets), Pound was increasingly known not only as a pathfinding practitioner of what came to be called the ‘New Poetry’, but also as an astute judge of new talent.

Pound would present H.D. and Eliot to Monroe as two of his first major ‘finds’. After an engagement in Pennsylvania that dissolved in the early 1900s, Pound and H.D. maintained ties; when H.D. travelled to Europe in 1911 and chose to remain abroad, Pound introduced her to his London contacts. As of 1912, together with Richard Aldington, Pound and H.D. formed the nucleus of the Imagist movement, developed to mark a group of shared poetic commitments and an intention to renew anglophone poetry, as
well as to launch new work such as H.D.’s. Pound recommended H.D.’s work to Monroe in 1912 as impressively ‘modern’ – in the ‘laconic speech of the Imagistes’. As of 1914, Pound also alerted Monroe to another new American poet whose work he regarded as among the best of the ‘promising young’ – Eliot, who, as Pound stressed in an enthusiastic letter to Monroe, had ‘modernized himself on his own’.3 Although Monroe was not initially impressed by Eliot’s ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’, Pound forcefully persuaded her to accept it for Poetry, securing for Eliot his first major publication in 1915. A long and fruitful comradeship would ensue between Eliot and Pound, whom Eliot would credit in 1922, after Pound’s significant contributions to revising Eliot’s The Waste Land, as ‘il miglior fabbro’: this was Dante’s phrase for the medieval poet Arnaut Daniel (whom Pound admired), meaning ‘the better craftsman’.4

During the First World War, the work of each poet enjoyed a major flowering: after Eliot’s major early poems such as ‘The Love Song’, ‘Portrait of a Lady’, ‘Rhapsody on a Windy Night’, and ‘Preludes’ had been published in little magazines, his first volume, Prufrock and Other Observations, appeared in 1917. Likewise, after publishing verse in periodicals, H.D. also published her first collection, Sea Garden, in 1916, featuring work in her Imagist mode. And in 1915, Pound published Cathay, chiefly poetry based on liberal translations from Chinese verse. It was Pound’s seventh published volume of poetry; reviews by Ford Madox Ford and A. R. Orage suggested that it was his best work to date.5 During 1915, Pound also began drafts of what would become his magnum opus, The Cantos.

As Vendler observes, a central problem shaping Eliot’s early poetry was his quarrel with the received discourses of the cultural environment of his upbringing – the intricate and repressive codes of the Boston Brahmin – as insufficient for ‘genuineness of voice’: his early work probes restlessly towards an idiom more adequate for ‘authentic’ articulation of feeling.6 As Eliot’s theorisations of the ‘objective correlative’ (in ‘Hamlet’, 1919) and ‘the Impersonal theory of poetry’ (in ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’, 1919) suggest,7 the early Eliot was deeply concerned with poetic languages for, and
based in, emotion, although he famously came to favour not poetry that overtly expressed an individual artist’s personal emotion or personality (in a lyric, Wordsworthian sense), but rather verse that sensitively conveyed what, in ‘Tradition’, Eliot terms ‘art emotion’. Specific to art, such complex emotional effects were developed through the ‘combination’, ‘concentration’, and ‘transmutation’ of personal emotions and experiences – achieved through what Eliot imagined as the ‘pressure’ and ‘fusion’ involved in the creative process.  

Vendler’s account traces Eliot’s progress from his early poetic experiments housed in the notebook since published as Inventions of the March Hare to the more mature idiom of ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’. Eliot arrives at this language through experiment with discourses of his cultural context, together with influences from Dante and nineteenth-century French poets such as Charles Baudelaire and Jules Laforgue. (Eliot later suggested that, for him, there was no poet in the recent Anglo-American context ‘who could have been of use to a beginner in 1908’.) The main features of the idiom developed in ‘The Love Song’ appear also in early poems such as ‘Portrait of a Lady’, ‘Preludes’, and ‘Rhapsody on a Windy Night’: all first published in 1915, these four poems form a kind of cycle. All feature marginalised figures in urban settings – ‘Prufrock’ and ‘Portrait’ present genteel suffocating interiors of such cityspaces; ‘Preludes’ and ‘Rhapsody’, their windblown and squalid exteriors. All portray habitual actions and customs with ironic critical detachment and often wistful regret that, because of customary discourse, little genuine human feeling or connection is possible among those in this climate (‘I could see nothing behind that child’s eye’); and there is little satisfying action where all seems baffled by ennui and muffled by enervation. Eliot’s featured speakers – such as the named persona of ‘The Love Song’ or the shadowy unnamed speaker wandering the night-time city in ‘Rhapsody’ – hover on thresholds: of scenes, utterances, and contemplated actions. Often this liminal condition comes across as regrettable (‘It is impossible to say just what I mean!’ Prufrock exclaims in exasperation); but also sometimes as affording distinctive sensitivity (as the speaker of ‘Preludes’ remarks, ‘I am moved by
fancies that are curled / Around these images, and cling’). In the early Eliot, such liminality often defamiliarises ordinary phenomena towards greater insight.

Sometimes the liminal position is even presented as affording a seductive refuge from potentially threatening involvement: ‘We have lingered in the chambers of the sea / By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown / Till human voices wake us, and we drown.’ In these famous last lines of ‘The Love Song’, the mention of ‘lingering’, also invoked earlier in the poem, suggests a rereading of Prufrockian ‘lingering’ (initially presented as unwelcome hesitation) as fortunate haven from human contact: such contact, as with the ‘women [who] come and go’, if at times tantalisingly desirable, can also be suffocating. Better to ‘linger’ in the sea’s ‘chambers’ (the diction here suggests womblike repose). If ‘The Love Song’ s Dantesque epigraph frames Prufrock as consigned to an internal inferno of unrealised desires, the end of the poem suggests instead a somewhat liberatory purgatory.

Reinforcing this impression is the complex of sonic effects pervading these early poems of urban anomie and longing. The powerful sonic resonances and chimings (phrasal repetitions within poems, such as ‘I have known’ and ‘There will be time’ and ‘time’ in ‘The Love Song’ (e.g. ll. 23, 26, 28); repetitions of signature words such as ‘curled’ and ‘twisted’ across poems) lull readers, I would suggest, into a kind of consent to softly ‘lingering’ states. As a result, we are often invited to read Eliotic lingering not only as failure of nerve or land-of-the-lotus-eaters abdication, but sometimes as a kind of resistance – a refusal to play a game whose guiding principles have been found wanting. These poems’ featured critical perspectives anticipate those which later enable Eliot to limn a modern ‘waste land’.

Two other tour-de-force pieces from Prufrock and Other Observations attempt idioms markedly different from that of the ‘Prufrockian’ cluster: the prose-poem ‘Hysteria’ and ‘Mr. Apollinax’, the latter inspired by a Harvard garden party attended by both Eliot and Bertrand Russell. In ‘Hysteria’, the woman’s unsettling laughter evokes entropic forces by which Eliot’s early
speakers often feel overcome. The speaker’s sense of being ‘involved’ in the woman’s laughter, together with the hurtling momentum of his utterance, also suggests that the speaker – and perhaps other poetic speakers of this volume – are likewise afflicted by forms of emotion about to spin out of control.15

‘Mr. Apollinax’ achieves a surrealist idiom not present elsewhere in Eliot’s first volume – used to represent the destabilising effects of Mr Apollinax, the Russell-inspired maverick guest. Here the laughter suggests emancipatory irreverence that plumbs depths to wisdom (‘His laughter was submarine and profound’). Eliot reaches for a vocabulary for what might effectively ‘unbalance’ oppressively tame garden-party talk with an incongruously aggressive and erotically charged presence (‘centaur’s hoofs’). An amazing assertion (rivaling Prufrock’s ‘patient etherized upon a table’ in its shock-effect) falls on its own line: ‘He laughed like an irresponsible foetus’ – suggesting a weird intrusion of a radically non-adult creature liberatingly indifferent to forms of grown-up correctness. When the speaker notes having ‘looked for the head of Mr. Apollinax rolling under a chair’, this initially recalls gestures of derailed synecdoche present in many of Eliot’s early poems, such as the catalogue of body parts in ‘Prufrock’ (‘Arms that are braceleted and white and bare’) suggesting a blinkered, fetishistic perspective that only grasps parts but never a whole, as well as Prufrock’s John-the-Baptist-like head ‘upon a platter’.16 But in the context of ‘Mr. Apollinax’, such a ‘head’ reads as invigoratingly surrealist disruption. This is Eliot of the ‘dull tom-tom’, yearning to upset the tea-table with something more primitive and vital.17

At one point, in a tonal shift, the poem displays Eliot’s signature preoccupation with scenes of drowning:

His laughter was submarine and profound
Like the old man of the sea’s
Hidden under coral islands
Where worried bodies of drowned men drift down in the green silence

Such ‘submarine’ imagery reappears in Eliot’s second volume in ‘Dans le Restaurant’, which in turn supplied the language of
'Phlebas the Phoenician' in *The Waste Land*. The 'green silence' also fleetingly suggests the comforting Prufrockian 'chambers of the sea'. But in 'Mr. Apollinax' the imagery suggests that, with a sufficiently bold perspective, not 'worried' by waves or tea-time macaroons, one can remain safely submarine, rather than drown – one can be a bold swimmer.

Eliot seems here to reach for a language with which to 'laugh it off' ('Wipe your hand across your mouth, and laugh') – to rebel with aggressive irresponsibility against the hypercorrectness of an all-too-genteel society. This impulse seems to contribute to many of the broad caricatures of his second major volume, published in 1920, in its British edition entitled *Ara Vos Prec*. This title derives from the speech of twelfth-century Provençal poet Arnaut Daniel as represented in Dante’s *Purgatorio*: in English, the sentiment suggested is ‘I pray you ... Be mindful in due time of my pain’. Eliot often referred to *Purgatorio* XXVI.142–8, as he would at the end of *The Waste Land*. If, as this suggests, the volume’s poems are fashioned from pain, they respond to such pain with a language of deliberately repulsive caricature. Three major Sweeney poems are here (‘Sweeney Erect’, ‘Sweeney Among the Nightingales’, ‘Mr. Eliot’s Sunday Morning Service’), featuring fleshy, ‘Apeneck’ Sweeney, Eliot’s figure for *l’homme moyen sensuel*. Here also is Eliot’s ‘Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleistein with a Cigar’, one of several poems in which Eliot disturbingly participates in anti-Semitic discourse by using 'the Jew’ to suggest cultural decline. Also here are Eliot’s poems in French from 1917 – brashly comic, merciless to the miserable experience of the honeymooners in bedbug-infested hotels (‘Lune de Miel’) and the slobbering waiter narrating a sexual act from childhood (‘Dans le Restaurant’). ‘Whispers of Immortality’ displays ghoulish abstractions against equally chilling sensuality: everywhere we feel foulness and death’s heads.

These satirical poems follow ‘Gerontion’, the volume’s compelling opening poem: its oracular language, anticipating that of *The Waste Land*, makes the comic brutishness of the poems that follow read as the outcome of a desperate state like that of the ‘little old man’ of the title, passionless and decaying amid cultural decay – perhaps
Eliot’s post-war figure for the condition of those who, amid the carnage of war, remained feebly at home. Moreover, given the epigraph of ‘Sweeney Erect’ (from the brokenhearted Aspatia of Beaumont and Fletcher’s *The Maid’s Tragedy*), these poems’ effort to laugh off pain is overcome by what feels like the pain of disappointment: they suggest bitterness arising from a dream of beauty dashed by sordid reality. Repeatedly, we feel a gesture of comedown – into the feeble desire for the pallid Pipit (‘A Cooking Egg’, whose title suggests rottenness) or into Sweeney’s brutal insensitivity to his epileptic lover, which suggests murder in the offing (he tests ‘the razor on his leg’). These images anticipate *The Waste Land*’s ‘typist home at teatime’ and ‘young man carbuncular’, figures for desire gone debased.

If Eliot’s early ruminative poems such as ‘The Love Song’ often place speaker-observers at a boundary, in H.D.’s early poetry, the liminal zone, as generative site and topos, is even more consistently central. The whole of *Sea Garden* takes place in a windswept coastal ecosystem, characterised by turbulent, briny weather, often inhabited only by seaside flowers buffeted by natural forces (such as the ‘sea rose’, ‘sea lily’, and ‘sea poppies’ invoked in poems’ titles), and sometimes by supplicant figures calling out to forms of divinity (as in ‘Orchard’, ‘Sea Gods’, ‘Shrine’, and ‘Hermes of the Ways’). Although the volume is composed of individual poems, the continuity of tone and landscape among poems suggests an ensemble springing from the same cluster of problems, participating in shared work.

Thus, if Eliot’s boundaries are associated with urban, often ultra-civilised, contexts, H.D. sets her poems in deliberately wild zones, markedly apart from civilised spaces and ordinary humanity, often rendered vaguely Hellenic through names or diction in ways that underline remoteness from the familiar present. Her flora and creatures lie open to the weather, vulnerable to stormy conditions; here, radical unshelteredness is celebrated as both occasion for admirable survival of adversity and avenue to greater strength and knowledge. If the sometime violence of Eliot’s early poetry is that of bitter satire, H.D.’s stormy violence suggests a romantic sublime. In H.D.’s
environments, natural forces ‘split’, ‘rend’, and ‘shatter’ those subjected to them, capable of transforming elements into higher states: her flowers are endowed with greater worth through the assault of rough wind and water, her figures apostrophising sea gods reach a pitch of taut yearning and humility marked in this context as valuable – in the vision of H.D.’s early verse, going out on an edge perspectively yields higher forms of awareness.

If Eliot’s early poetry derives from discontent with the discourses of New England gentility, H.D.’s early work often reads as issuing from a quarrel with the ‘sheltered garden’ of femininity associated with her cultural climate. The poem of this name in Sea Garden articulates a gesture of repudiating the orderly, domesticated garden (with its ‘border on border of scented pinks’\textsuperscript{23}) that suggests a rationale for constructing the alternative ‘sea garden’ (with its ‘marred’ sea rose and sea lily ‘shattered’ by the wind\textsuperscript{24}). H.D. draws on the time-honoured language of flowers as tropes for femininity, prevalent in the Victorian era during whose last years H.D. spent her childhood – and, in many poems, insistently displaces the conventional flower of the cultural imagination with an alternative bloom whose characteristics differ markedly from – and in this perspective supersede – those of ordinary flowers. The sea-flowers reveal a ‘new beauty’ in a ‘terrible / wind-tortured place’\textsuperscript{25} – a beauty predicated upon such ‘terrible’ conditions (the word evokes a Burkean sublime). This beauty resides both in difference from received ideas thereof and, as descriptions of these marred flowers suggest, the ability to weather adversity, despite a ‘frail’ ‘grasp’:\textsuperscript{26} the poems celebrate unexpected strength. Encouraged by the speakers’ repeated gestures of apostrophe, we imagine these strange blooms as individuals, likely women, scarred and deepened by experience, managing to survive in inhospitable circumstances. Awareness of H.D.’s attunement to feminist discourse of her time (as evidenced by an early story, for example\textsuperscript{27}) reinforces this interpretive path. As the speaker of ‘Sheltered Garden’ observes in a Rosetta-Stone moment illuminating of the logic of the collection, ‘beauty without strength, / chokes out life’;\textsuperscript{28} the ‘new beauty’ these poems affirm involves strength and fosters vitality. Rather than finding relief in ‘lingering’
in the ‘chambers of the sea’, these poems’ speakers desire contact with the sea in its stormiest aspects as a way towards relief and liberation.

The aesthetic of radical austerity in H.D.’s early work thus performs a rejection of the softness and gentleness often admired in femininity of her time. Recently, commentators such as Cyrena Pondrom have rightly accorded H.D. greater credit than she has traditionally received for the formative influence of her early aesthetic on Imagism. But if H.D. helped to inspire Imagism’s bent for spare diction and natural imagery, H.D.’s petals and leaves are markedly not the soft and soft-focus aesthetic effects of much Imagist verse: her petals have an ‘edge’, one leaf ‘cuts’ another; her rose is, in a defamiliarising gesture, ‘cut in rock’. This aesthetic of sparseness, stark definition, and sinewy strength is generated not only by H.D.’s imagery of ‘flint’, glinting brightness, and rock-like substances with sharp edges, but also through sound-play: if Eliot’s sound-play implicitly recommends lingering, H.D.’s characteristic verbs and adjectives (‘sharp’, ‘split’, ‘cut’) and short vowels linked through assonance and hard consonants (‘thin’, ‘flint’, ‘cut’, ‘harsh’, ‘sparse’, ‘marred’) create a bracing lash of sound. Inspiring H.D. to such effects was the poetry of the Greek Anthology, particularly Meleager’s Garland, forming the anthology’s core – and, above all, the verse of Sappho, available to latter-day readers only in haunting fragments. Her fascination with poetry of Greek antiquity also indicates a cluster of other preoccupations shaping the early poetry. As H.D. noted in her posthumously published essay ‘The Wise Sappho’ (written 1918–20), Sappho represented to her ‘an island, a country, a continent, a planet, a world of emotion, differing entirely from any present day imaginable world of emotion’. That H.D. also spends this essay taking issue with Meleager’s tag for Sappho, ‘little, but all roses’, suggests that H.D.’s sustained interest in Sappho involved and supported her ongoing dispute with femininity’s constraints. And an arresting image in ‘Wise Sappho’ suggests her early poetry’s rootedness in what Sappho represented to her: ‘we are inclined to visualize these broken sentences and unfinished rhythms [of Sappho’s verse] as rocks – perfect rock
shelves and layers of rock between which flowers by some chance may
grow but which endure when the staunch blossoms have perished.'
Later poems, like those first written in the 1910s such as ‘Fragment
Forty-one’ (also called ‘Amaranth’) or poems of H.D.’s second
volume, *Hymen* (1921), such as ‘Fragment Forty’, even use Sapphic
fragments directly as epigraphs and points of departure.

Given the dynamic, agonised, sometimes violent whirling of these
early poems, they are clearly not the still, lapidary, sculpted verses
that lore about Imagism has sometimes suggested. Filled with ten-
sion, desire, and taut athletic bodies recalling Greek statuary (‘The
Contest’, for example), they are charged with an erotic informed
partly by Sappho, partially by Artemisian austerity and Aphroditic
sensuality in tension, and, as Cassandra Laity’s work suggests, even
by Swinburnian turbulence and decadence. This preferred erotic of
the early poetry, I would argue, is deliberately predicated on a
liminal state before a fall into comely maturity – generated by opting
out of the expected narrative of growth towards ripeness. Like
Eliot’s early poetry, H.D.’s early verse thus implies resistance to
the expected narratives of coming of age – here, specifically those
that affect girls; accordingly, the liminal stage associated with
Sappho’s ‘thiasos’, a school for young maidens, captures H.D.’s
imagination.

As a result, when H.D.’s second volume, *Hymen*, opens with a
poem meditating on the ritual of marriage, we enter an environ-
ment in which the sandaled poetic feet of the early verse no longer
proceed so surely. *Sea Garden*’s repertoire is to some extent still in
evidence, and *Hymen* offers several thought-provoking re-readings
of female figures from Greek myth, exhibiting feminist explorations
on how to survive and overcome hell-states, especially those
brought on by entrapment in feminine conditions (‘Circe’,
‘Phaedra’). But *Sea Garden*’s starkly breathless intensity and elated
gestures of imagined futurity (‘we will answer with a shout’36) have
receded. In my reading, H.D.’s poetry of this next period is no
longer the chief forum for her major conceptual ventures, espe-
cially those exploring the recent trauma of war: what takes over as
such is her experimental autobiographical prose fiction, much of it
unpublished during her lifetime. But as this prose fiction does not, her poetry still provides a forum for meditations on forms of ecstasy and extraordinary states of mind, often achieved through worship and radical humility – like those registered in H.D.’s posthumously published essay, ‘Notes on Thought and Vision’ (1919).

Pound’s early poetry, like H.D.’s and Eliot’s, reflects a desire to venture beyond the pale of comfortable civilisation, and, like H.D.’s, often valorises the open road or open sea (‘Cino’, ‘The Seafarer’). To find a lexis for ‘unsheltered’ figures and attitudes, however, Pound reached less frequently than H.D. to the sources from Greek antiquity that inspired H.D.’s wild landscapes; he generally preferred the literary traditions of Romance languages. Pound’s early poetry is that of a scholar-poet steeped in the work of medieval Italy and France, occasionally Spain, at one notable point England (‘The Seafarer’). His early idiom is often shaped by work from medieval troubadour poets writing in ‘Provençal’ (now called ‘Old Occitan’), whose language, philosophy, understandings of eros, and mysticism inspire Pound: he favours poets such as Arnaut Daniel and Bertran de Born, whose verse often engages courtly love discourse. While Pound’s early fascination with the troubadours might seem recondite today, when Pound was at university, study of their poetry was flourishing, reflecting the turn-of-the-century consensus that, as Stuart McDougual notes, ‘Provence was the first culture in Western Europe to produce a literature in the vernacular, and thus an examination of Provençal poetry was a return to origins.’

Accordingly, Pound maintained that ‘Any study of European poetry is unsound if it does not commence with a study of that art in Provence.’ Pound’s engagement with the troubadours appears in his early translations of their work, poetic personae influenced by their lives or poetry, and experiments with poetic forms at which the troubadours displayed notable skill (such as the sestina, often credited to Arnaut Daniel). His early poetry often also features and champions the work of medieval Italian poets inspired by the troubadours, such as Dante and Guido Cavalcanti. In keeping with these allegiances, Pound’s search for resources usually bypasses most post-Renaissance verse, and pointedly rejects most poetic modes of
the nineteenth century (which Pound deplores as a ‘messy, blurry sort of period’): he admits to his pantheon only exceptions such as Yeats, whom the young Pound elevated above any other living poet, the Pre-Raphaelites (who likewise favoured sources preceding the Renaissance), and Robert Browning, for Pound a kindred spirit. Like Browning’s, Pound’s early work often features personae in dramatic monologues (‘Cino’, ‘Piere Vidal Old’, ‘Sestina: Altaforte’).

Tom Grieve suggests that Pound’s profound, if selective, commitment to history, together with his interest in the dramatic monologue, issues from an ongoing quest for what Pound terms, mysteriously, the ‘real’ – a term he uses to refer to extra-subjective realms of experience, to which he grants ontological privilege. Like Grieve, I read Pound’s early poetry as shaped by a dissatisfaction with the perspectival limitations of the subjectivist expressive lyric and a faith in a turn to history as a way beyond these limitations. Accordingly, Pound was committed to a poetics of historically informed experimentalism. ‘A Retrospect’ (1918), an essay encompassing two earlier essays (1912 and 1913), registers his dedication to honing his craft through engagement with a range of judiciously chosen historical ‘masters’ – and his strenuous recommendation that novice poets do likewise. Pound’s claims resonate closely with those of Eliot’s ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’: like Eliot, Pound advocates an ‘impersonal’ approach to poetic formation, based more in métier than self-expression, and insists that new poets develop a version of what Eliot calls ‘the historical sense’, though Pound’s sense of ‘tradition’ is markedly more eccentric and somewhat less Eurocentric than Eliot’s (even early in his career, Pound turns to Asian poetry for important resources). ‘A Retrospect’ also accents Pound’s attendant commitment to poetic experiment (for Pound analogous to scientific experiment), which both sharpens the developing poet’s skills and advances knowledge in the field. The chequered nature of Pound’s early work stems from this spirit of experiment: Pound’s novice poems, steeped in medieval literary traditions, brimming with archaisms; early efforts at translation; verse inspired by Yeats and Browning; Imagist and Vorticist ventures; work spurred by
Chinese poetry; a scattering of bumptious and somewhat strained social satire; and longer post-war poems shaped by Pound’s struggle with the twinned problems of imperialism-driven war and aestheticism.  

As Pound suggests in ‘The Serious Artist’ (1913), his early poetic is one of ‘amalgamation’ of material from various sources in which he finds what he calls, in ‘A Retrospect’, ‘leaven’ to enliven culture. Along these lines, in the 1911–12 essays ‘I Gather the Limbs of Osiris’, Pound lays claim to a ‘New Method in Scholarship’ – for him, also a method for the best artistic practice – which selects from among a wealth of material excavated from the past the ‘luminous detail’ that provides sudden ‘intelligence of a period’; or, in art, displays a technique or tradition perfected. The metaphor of the essay’s title likens Pound’s work of assembling a vital poetic corpus to that of Isis restoring Osiris to life.  

One ‘luminous detail’ that exerted a direction-changing impact on Pound’s work was the scholarship of Ernest Fenollosa, a sinologist whose notebooks Pound was given in 1912 by Fenollosa’s widow Mary. Knowing no Chinese, Pound had nonetheless been influenced by the era’s widespread fascination with Chinese poetry in translation, writing early poems such as ‘Liu Ch’e’ and ‘Fan-Piece, For Her Imperial Lord’ based on English translations by H. A. Giles: these convinced Mary Fenollosa of Pound’s suitability for carrying on her husband’s work. Pound received Fenollosa’s detailed notes on a significant body of Chinese poetry, much of it by eighth-century poet Li Po (today often called Li Bai).  

Pound’s engagement with this material yielded Cathay (1915), which included thirteen poems inspired by Chinese poems, framed as ‘translations’. Here Pound tried a new kind of translation – drawing upon what he understood as the characteristic aesthetic features, patterns, and implied cultural surround of a poem from an alien tongue and culture to produce an ‘unEnglished’ English, bent in the direction of a source text. Influenced by Fenollosa, Pound also came to hold that Chinese ideograms afforded a language closer to natural processes than English or the Latin-derived tongues with which he was familiar, and thus a distinctively valuable language for
poetry. Accordingly, in 1919, Pound edited and published Fenollosa’s essay articulating this view, ‘The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry’, an *ars poetica* which was later to be significantly influential on twentieth-century poetry and poetics; the Chinese ‘ideogram’ would remain influential on Pound’s later thought.48

As Hugh Kenner observes, *Cathay* highlights experiences typical of wartime: its ‘exiled bowmen, deserted women, levelled dynasties, departures for far places, lonely frontier guardsmen and glories remembered from afar, cherished memories, were selected from the diverse wealth in the [Fenollosa] notebooks by a sensibility responsive to torn Belgium and disrupted London’.49 Through this project, Pound also disciplined his language into a new kind of English, radically simplified away from the ornate and archaic English of many of his early experiments: the remoteness of the Chinese, unlike that of Old Occitan, prompted Pound to pare down to what come across as essentials: his diction is simple, delicate, often monosyllabic, shorn of arabesques in ways that create effects of quietness; carefully chosen repetitions generate a sense of deliberate insistence but never emphatic delivery; nothing hammers heavily. Emotions are evoked either through reticent understatement (‘We have no rest, three battles a month’), stark compressed statement (‘Hard fight gets no reward’), images suggesting emotion through a logic akin to that of Eliot’s ‘objective correlative’ (‘The paired butterflies are already yellow with August / . . . / They hurt me. I grow older’), or moments of lyrical intensity that burst through restrained surroundings (‘And my spirit so high it was all over the heavens’).50

In a footnote to ‘The Jewel Stairs’ *Grievance*’ (conspicuously longer than the brief poem itself), Pound suggests that the poem is especially ‘prized’ because the woman in the scenario, whom we infer is waiting for a lover who never arrives, ‘utters no direct reproach’.51 Here is a cultural meme, a code of reticence that captured Pound: laudable for him is the ability to sustain hardship with a restraint that suggests self-command and results in emotional delicacy. Like many modernists, Pound was concerned with how modern poetry
might be refashioned so as to register emotion more faithfully and powerfully than hackneyed nineteenth-century poetic language – and many sought to achieve ‘genuine’ effects (as Pound does here) through radical tact. And, as the footnote suggests, Pound ‘prizes’ such restraint in conduct as well as aesthetics.

*Cathay* also importantly allowed Pound to weigh in, if obliquely, on important current events. Sometimes read as an antiquarian poet aloof from concerns of the public sphere, through *Cathay* Pound takes his stand among poets commenting on the war. Stung by a general sense of what he called the ‘wastage’ of war (intensified by personal losses of comrades such as Henri Gaudier-Brzeska), Pound struggled to discover how his kind of poet might speak to his times. As the rueful self-reflexive commentary of the autobiographical *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* (1920) suggests, Pound recognised in his early experiments tendencies that left him ‘drift[ing]’ as an irrelevant ‘hedonist’, as ‘a myriad’ died in the carnage of the Great War.

Through the early *Cantos* and more emphatically in work of the 1930s, Pound sought to correct for such tendencies. But during the 1910s, his poetry was still haunted by the spectre of the ineffectual aesthete indifferent to humanity’s travails.

In *Homage to Sextus Propertius* (1917), Pound displays an ambivalent attraction to the aesthete figure that he later sheds. Here Pound engages the *Elegies* of Sextus Propertius – first-century BC Roman poet, contemporary of Ovid and Virgil – suggesting affinity with what he read as Propertius’ courageous commitment to poetry focused on the pleasures of love during the late Roman republic when many poets turned to epic verse celebrating the glories of empire. Pound’s allegiance to the position he ascribes to Propertius echoes the liminal foot-dragging of Eliot and H.D.: through Propertius, he suggests that he will not accept that the road to maturity (artistic and otherwise) lies through epic and imperialist sentiment.

By 1920, however, when Pound develops *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*, such an aesthete figure will suggest too much ‘inconscience’ to be portrayed in anything but a satirical and self-reproachful vein. As Pound noted in 1921, ‘artistic aloofness from
world affairs is no good now’. H.D., at this juncture, likewise changes course, turning to prose fiction as an arena for enlivening experiment leading to her major late long poems. Eliot, meanwhile, at this point also turns in a new direction with *The Waste Land*, importantly guided by Pound’s editorial hand.

Notes


17. ‘Portrait of a Lady’, *ibid.*, 19.

18. ‘Preludes’, *ibid.*, 23.
19. The American edition (Knopf, 1920) was entitled Poems. By this point Eliot had also published a limited edition volume entitled Poems (1919) through the Hogarth Press.


22. Ibid., 68.


27. H.D.’s early story ‘The Suffragette’ is housed at Yale’s Beinecke Library.


34. H.D., Notes on Thought and Vision and The Wise Sappho (San Francisco: City Lights, 1982), 58.


39. For example, Pound’s ‘Sestina: Alfafor’.


42. The uneven achievement of this work is evident from the selections in *Collected Early Poems of Ezra Pound*, ed. Michael John King (New York: New Directions, 1976).


52. *Ibid.*, 201, 188.

53. Initially framing the sequence as a creative ‘translation’ and incurring the ire of classicists, Pound subsequently denied that the poem was a ‘translation’, insisting that he had simply sought to ‘bring a dead man to life’: Pound, letter to A. R. Orage, [? April 1919], *Selected Letters of Ezra Pound*, 148–9.

Yeats, Modernism, and the Irish Revival

Gregory Castle

Yeats and the Dialectics of Modernism

Oscar Wilde, in ‘Critic as Artist’, has Gilbert admit that he ‘lived in terror of not being misunderstood’. The point, for Gilbert, is that misunderstanding is the sign of an artistic temperament, one that can be neither contained nor trained through education, for ‘nothing that is worth knowing can be taught’. What is worth knowing is what must be, at least at first, misunderstood. W. B. Yeats also lived in terror of not being misunderstood, in just this pedagogical sense, for his poetry, his drama, his criticism, his autobiographies, all were elements of a constantly evolving, self-revising personality. This is to be expected of a poet whose aesthetic sensibility required the mask and the symbol, required dissimulation as well as revelation, required, in short, a dialectical logic of misprision. Yeats knew from the first that eternity must accommodate the time-bound violence that it appears to transcend, that we must “Hate on and love through unrepining hours”. For to ‘hate on’ is to live on in the world, amid the ‘fury and the mire of human veins’ that does not transcend itself, even as we aspire to become ensouled as love: “Before us lies eternity; our souls / Are love, and a continual farewell”.

The passage, from naive faith in the possibility of transcendence to the wisdom of scepticism, is a familiar narrative in Yeats studies; however, it presupposes that Yeats’s faith in transcendence was absolute, at least at first, and that he became a modernist only after he abandoned that faith. In this narrative, the poet’s Revival period (early 1880s to sometime around 1910) is cordonned off as a preliminary stage
of his development, one that prepares for modernism but is still too deeply invested in romantic nationalism to allow the poet to modernise himself. I want to suggest that Yeats’s modernism is rooted in and continuous with Revival, in part because Revival taught the poet that faith in transcendence, in an otherworld of eternal Beauty, could only be grounded in the historical world he occupied. After all, the hidden ‘faery vats’ and the ‘olden dances’ take place amid the ‘rocky highland / Of Sleuth Wood in the lake’ or where ‘the wave of moonlight glosses / The dim grey sands with light’. Yeats learned that eternity was always already embattled by time. In fact, I submit that the poet’s misrecognition of faith enabled his later recognition that embattlement itself, a kind of aesthetic adversity, was the true object of his faith: not the resolved dialectic, but the friction and struggle that dialectics never quite overcomes, a ‘continual farewell’, a looping backward in order to pitch forward again into ‘dim coming times’. To the extent that it resists closure and leaves behind a ‘remainder’ (a residue of hate after love’s triumph, for example), Yeats’s is a negative dialectics in Theodor Adorno’s sense, one that makes way for the separate being of the negative moment and the separate temporality of its resistance.

Negative dialectics accommodates the struggle between contraries; it does not seek to resolve them. For Calvin Bedient, this irresolution constitutes ‘a dialectic of staying and going, of surrender and self-assertion’. Yeats’s modernism is a ‘joy in motion’: ‘His dialectic, one term of which is movement, is itself movement.’ In reading Yeats, Bedient turns to Gilles Deleuze and Alain Badiou, arguably anti-dialectical thinkers, to make a case for Yeats’s dialectical sensibility. I want to build on his argument, to sound out his logic, for if movement, chaos, noise are all valences of the Real, as Bedient suggests, then in a negative dialectics understood as ‘itself movement’, movement (presumably the negative term of the process) is propelled dialectically towards itself; the goal of a timeless and absolute self-identity is thus displaced by the temporality of propulsion. It is this temporality – the materiality of dialectical movement – that I want to explore here as a chief characteristic of Yeats’s modernism. But in order to do so, I will have to pose the question in a way that will
account for Yeats’s Revivalism, an aspect of the poet’s career that stymies most critics who attempt to account for his modernism.

Revival and Recognition

Like so many other critics, Bedient rather dismissively puts Revival into quarantine. He sees it primarily as a movement, one that by 1914 had ‘begun to exhaust its first enthusiasms’ and had ceased to interest the Irish poet who was turning more and more towards Europe. To be sure, like J. M. Synge and Augusta, Lady Gregory, his partners in the Abbey Theatre, Yeats was sometimes accused (largely by nationalists, including his close friend Maud Gonne) of co-opting Irish cultural identity in order to create a modern literature for a metropolitan audience. This way of putting the case for Revival fails to account for certain key continuities in Yeats’s work, particularly the poet’s attitudes towards time, temporality, memory, and history, and grants authority implicitly to a view of Revival as a form of coloni-alist cultural appropriation.

Irish Revival was the product of a metrocolony with a sophisticated media environment, including many newspapers devoted to special interests across the political spectrum; a fairly open market for broadsheets, pamphlets, and other ‘ephemera’; theatres and theatre groups, literary and political societies with their own publishing outlets, schools, and universities. Access to advanced media technology, and the tight-knit, interdisciplinary media habitus that it energised, provided Revival groups with a host of possibilities for promoting their ideas and disseminating their message. My claim about Yeats’s modernism depends on first acknowledging that Revival is (and was historically) an attitude towards culture and its temporalities that more often than not challenged the very regressive political positions it is sometimes held to have taken, and that it was by no means a single or monolithic movement concerned with the retrieval or preservation of the pre-colonial past. A wide assortment of intellectuals, artists, poets, scholars, journalists, editors, and academics adopted a Revival attitude towards Ireland’s recent and ‘pre-historic’ past during a time of decolonisation when such a stance inevitably took on a nationalist
dimension. What united them, even when they diverged ideologically, was the desire to re-introduce the non-modern into the modern by way of its inclusion in new historical accounts. In this way Revival writers tactically redeployed rhetorical tropes and figures – for example, the peasant, the ‘bonny colleen’, the ballad singer, Cuchulainn, the women of the *sidhe* – in ways that did not revive the past so much as mediate it anew, offering new ways of thinking about Ireland, Irish identity, and Irish time. David Lloyd speaks of ‘an alternative conception of historical time’ in Ireland in which ‘the temporality of modernization’ is ‘rifted with formations that live on as the altered shape of practices which, rendered unviable by the inroads of colonial capitalist rationalization, find new and resistant ways to persist’. Revival, I’m suggesting, is just such a ‘resistant way to persist’.

Yeats’s poetry models a persistent engagement with the Irish past that both corrects misrepresentations and, in the process, generates new errors that are themselves (re)generative. A theme the poet announces again and again is the violence that tears ‘all things’ asunder and the tragic gaiety and ‘shaping joy’ that motivate ‘those that build them again’. Revival estranges time, not because nostalgia has falsified an authentic relation to the past, but because Revival is, at bottom, a production of time – not a critique of the past, but an alternative to it that can be known only ‘in the dim coming times’:

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I cast my heart into my rhymes,
That you, in the dim coming times,
May know how my heart went with them
After the red-rose-bordered hem.
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Yeats’s poetry challenges the past to be what he says it will be when it is taken up in coming times, where he will have already cast his rhymes, filled with his heart, so that his future readers (‘you’) will know them, recognise them, sanctified by their *having been* proximate to the ‘red-rose-bordered-hem’.

The temporal dynamic of the early Revival poems – a recursive responsibility within time: *It will have been done*, in coming times, if we *only do it right now* – tends to conform to a modernist poetics of history.
that sees the past in terms of cyclical or recursive temporal patterns. In many ways, Revival anticipated T. S. Eliot’s ‘mythical method’ and his belief that the historical sense ‘involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence’. Yeats’s technique of recursive or nested verb tenses – ‘tensed temporalities’ – also looks forward to Ezra Pound’s method of structuring temporality in The Cantos: ‘Ply over ply / The shallow eddying fluid, / beneath the knees of the gods’ (Canto IV). The Irish poet differs from his American, English, and European counterparts in that his historical sense was conditioned by the experience of imperialism, anti-colonialism, and revolutionary nationalism. It was also conditioned by an occult understanding of time – for example, the phases of the moon and historical gyres of A Vision (1925, 1937) – which posits multiple points of intersection of the present and the past, as well as multiple possible ‘futural’ states. But, like other modernists, he tended to reframe historical themes in terms of aesthetic solutions, like dialectical images that bring process and discovery, misprision and the corrective gaze into a kind of vibrant and sculptural presence – in short, they bring temporality to form. In the dialectical image, writes Walter Benjamin, ‘what has been comes together in a flash with the now [“now time”, Jetztzeit] to form a constellation. In other words: image is dialectics at a standstill.’ The poet casts a corrective gaze on the past, on Irish culture and on the ideals in which he believed, and on the works that challenged that belief in the very struggle to represent it. It is a gaze that disorients and redistributes symbolic power, ‘the sweetness that all longed for night and day’, and that devours all of time in the standstill of dialectics: the ‘abounding glittering jet’.

Reading Yeats’s poetry in the context of Revival presents us with an intriguing instance of the hermeneutical circle, which for Heidegger involved a movement back and forth from part to whole, from work to historical tradition. ‘We are compelled to follow the circle’, Heidegger writes. ‘Not only is the main step from work to art a circle like a step from art to work, but every separate step that we attempt circles in this circle.’ Paul Ricoeur writes of a related phenomenon, the ‘hermeneutical arc’, moving ‘between a naive and a critical interpretation, between a surface and a
depth interpretation’. The hermeneutical arc is a unique site for explanation and interpretation, which both find their place along what is, in essence, a temporal arc. It makes possible the integration of ‘the opposed attitudes of explanation and understanding within an overall conception of reading as the recovery of meaning’. The logic of misrecognition that characterises Yeats’s Revivalism presupposes this two-step process of understanding, that moves from naive to more canny interpretations, but it temporalises it in recursive and repetitive ways. For in building up intertwining loops of recursive time, his poetry is always in communication with other, earlier works. Multiple standpoints present each work in transit or in transmission within an oeuvre and across a career, creating multiple opportunities for analysis and interpretation, along progressive and regressive arcs, and for higher levels of understanding.

To a large degree, hermeneutics is about recognition; we try to recognise the truth, the authenticity of a voice that comes to us from afar, communicated in an other text that we must train ourselves to recognise. Yeats’s Revivalism trained him well in this practice and the inevitable – but also inevitably pedagogical and formative – misrecognitions that contribute so much of what is substantial to his work (and, I might add, to the practice of recognition as such). His oeuvre is steeped in a self-conscious engagement with his own history and poetic production (his redistribution of the symbolic), so that each volume rectifies and overcomes the preceding one. This hermeneutical vocation, one that recognises the value of misrecognition, brings symbolism into modernism.

Symbolism and Temporality

In the dedication to The Symbolist Movement in Literature (1899), Arthur Symons called Yeats ‘the chief representative of [the Symbolist] movement in our country’, a poet who creates ‘beautiful things’, as part of a general ‘revolt against exteriority, against rhetoric, against a materialistic tradition’. Yeats realised, by the late 1890s, that he could only pose the question of the existence of eternal Beauty (which for him was tantamount to Being) in the midst of the materiality of the now, the true-
real, which Julia Kristeva identifies as ‘an area of risk and salvation for the speaking being’.

In the late 1890s, Yeats would have concurred with Symons’s laconic summation that symbolism leads ‘through beautiful things to the eternal beauty’. He understood that eternal Beauty was accessible only through the dynamic and historical process of making beautiful things: ‘we must labour to be beautiful’, the poet writes in ‘Adam’s Curse’. The labour of which he speaks is spent in the reproduction of symbolic power, whether in a line of poetry or the face of a ‘beautiful mild woman’.

In ‘The Symbolism of Poetry’ (1900), in part a response to Symons’s book, Yeats makes a case for his own poetry along lines that resonate with Symons’s critical overview of the movement. Speaking of how a symbol like Time can ‘evoke an emotion which cannot be evoked by any other arrangement of colours and sounds and forms’, Yeats argues that metaphors are not strong enough to make sense of these arrangements, these transitory evocations. They require ‘symbolical writing’, he declares, ‘because metaphors are not profound enough to be moving, when they are not symbols, and when they are symbols, they are the most perfect of all, because the more subtle, outside of pure sound, and through them one can best find out what symbols are.’ Yeats notes that the Symbolist poet Gérard de Nerval, ‘like all who are preoccupied with intellectual symbols in our time, [was] a foreshadower of the new sacred book, of which all arts, as somebody has said, are beginning to dream’. Influenced by Blake and Shelley, whose visionary poetics sought to abolish the tyranny of chrono-logos, Yeats calls for a poetry of ‘wavering, meditative, organic rhythms, which are the embodiment of the imagination, that neither desires nor hates, because it has done with time, and only wishes to gaze upon some reality, some beauty’. Yeats’s symbolism desires a break with time and the interminable dialectics of love and hate that inscribes a temporality in which beauty fades and love transforms into hate-filled regret about the past. But it also pledges itself to time insofar as Yeats is himself a ‘foreshadower’, one who pitches the ‘sacred book’ of art towards a future that will alone recognise it and be able to read it and, it follows, overcome all past misrecognitions.
If symbolism brought Yeats the conception of eternity outside of time, Revival helped him express the paradox to which symbolism inevitably led him – that is, the paradox of conceiving eternity while living in time. The otherworld of the sidhe and the legendary world of the Iron Age warrior Cuchulainn both offered Yeats models of this paradox, for the queer temporalities and geographies of legend and faery are coeval with normative historical time and the official maps of empire. In the otherworld,

Fergus rules the brazen cars,
And rules the shadows of the wood,
And the white breast of the dim sea
And all dishevelled wandering stars.

The folkloric and occult unities (inevitably ‘dim’ and ‘dishevelled’) that Yeats invoked in his early love and faery poems did not provide a dialectical solution to ‘love’s bitter mystery’, but rather offered up, through images and symbols, ‘befitting emblems of adversity’.  

In Yeats’s poetry, idealism is always breaking with itself, asserting a dialectical will to unity at the same time that it asserts a will to break with all dialectics, for the idea of a break has the greater hope of aesthetic achievement than any idealised totality. As Rob Doggett notes, Yeats developed a ‘relentlessly dialectical poetics’, a negative dialectics that ‘continually evokes unity only to return to disunity’.  

Anne Fogarty makes a similar point about Yeats’s ‘fresh aesthetic’, a dialectical solution to the problem of antinomies that let him capture ‘the disjunctions and dissonance of the modern world while not renouncing a unity of structure’.  

We see this double movement of breaking and refounding, building continuities out of discontinuities, at every stage of the poet’s career. In ‘The Rose of the World’, from his second volume of poems The Countess Kathleen and Various Legends and Lyrics (1892), the poet begins by asking ‘Who dreamed that beauty passes like a dream?’ A ‘lovely face’ lives on beneath ‘passing stars’ and the ‘foam of the sky’, bringing into the quotidian world the symbol of eternal Beauty. The dialectic of the earthly and the eternal culminates, unresolved, in an image of
motion: ‘He made the world to be a grassy road / Before her wandering feet.’ The ‘red lips’ on this lovely face, ‘with all their mournful pride’, serve the function of a symbol (the rose of the world) that is in turn the symbol of Helen, who embodied for the poet the qualities of heroism, beauty, creativity, and intellect possessed by women like Maud Gonne, ‘Being high and solitary and most stern’. This double displacement is rendered as a dream within a dream that dimly refigures a time before time, when the ‘grassy road’ of the world was laid ready for the ‘wandering feet’ of Beauty. The untimely world of dreams, as Symons notes, presents us with ‘a more fortunate atmosphere than that in which we live’. In this case, it is more fortunate because dreams revive the beauty that passes, by identifying it with life itself, and with time’s passage.

Throughout The Wind Among the Reeds (1899) the poet reveals his increased willingness to make accommodations with time that would enable him to accept the earthly and material as worthy of symbolic value. But his ironic and gradual demotion of the Rose as a symbol of eternal verities like Beauty signals a new direction. He urges his beloved to

Crumple the rose in your hair;
And cover your lips with odorous twilight and say,
‘O Hearts of wind-blown flame!
O Winds, older than changing of night and day’

Timeless winds from ‘marble cities’ in ‘dove-grey faery lands’ propel time into every created thing, ‘murmuring and longing’. As in so many of the love poems, lover and beloved are free-floating allegorical figures whose primary purpose is to register the temporal dynamics of the memorial moment in a dialectical image: the ‘Hearts of wind-blown flame’. The lover brings to his beloved, who is already displaced into a faery temporality, a ‘heart more old than the horn / That is brimmed from the pale fire of time’. The dialectical instability of contraries is captured in the image of the lover, who comes from time but is not
of time, whose human heart antedates the ‘brimmed’ horn emerging from the ‘pale fire of time’.

‘The Secret Rose’, a grand Revival gesture in something like the mature style, dramatises this instability that signifies the continued existence of the primeval. Though it enfolds Magi and kings, dreamer and believer, the rose is associated with secrecy (sub rosa) and a time-annihilating dialectic:

I, too, await
The hour of thy great wind of love and hate.
When shall the stars be blown about the sky,
Like the sparks blown out of a smithy, and die?

Yeats anticipates here the apocalyptic message of ‘In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Con Markiewicz’, in which symbols of innocence and beauty – ‘Two girls in silk kimonos, both / Beautiful, one a gazelle’, who ‘have no enemy but time’ – are placed at the mercy of the poet’s annihilating power:

Arise and bid me strike a match
And strike another till time catch;
Should the conflagration climb,
Run till all the sages know.
We the great gazebo built,
They convicted us of guilt;
Bid me strike a match and blow.

The elegy consoles through refusing to console; the poet barters the inviolate gazebo and the idealised image of ‘Two girls in silk kimonos’ for a cessation of that which ‘The Statues’ terms the ‘filthy modern tide’.45 This signature trope of Yeats’s modernism – the allure of an annihilation that is in itself the promise of a futural state that cancels all annihilations – is a direct development from symbolism. ‘There is such a thing’, Symons drolly notes, ‘as perfecting form that form may be annihilated’.46

The idea of perfecting form for annihilation that Symons describes was, for Yeats, both the apex of Symbolist practice and a turning point in his own development, for he found in personality the ‘befitting emblem’ of the primal and interminable adversities, the
‘great wind of love and hate’ that had buffeted him from the start. By 1907, he was thinking less of a unified and eternal Beauty than of the perfect expression of personality, which brings time into prominence as an image, a mask alive with eternity. Like Eliot’s ‘depersonalised’ poet and James Joyce’s ‘God of the creation’, who ‘remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork’, the Yeatsian personality is a mythic mask, a ‘befitting emblem’ of the ontological diversity and uncertainty that the mask enables. In ‘Poetry and Tradition’ (1907), Yeats speaks of style and the ‘freedom of self-delight’, the ‘shaping joy’ not of symbols but of the ‘perfection of personality’. Personality ‘has kept the sorrow pure, as it had kept it were the emotion love or hate, for the nobleness of the arts is in the mingling of contraries, the extremity of sorrow, the extremity of joy, perfection of personality, the perfection of its surrender, overflowing turbulent energy, and marmorean stillness’. The tension between an overflowing energy and the stillness of a statue crystallises the poetic personality at a halting point, a poised dialectic, a gyre pyrning but still, like a top at the edge of a table. No longer the emblem of eternal Beauty, the ‘red rose’ of this shaping joy opens ‘at the trysting-place of mortal and immortal, time and eternity’.

Consider ‘Brown Penny’, which closes The Green Helmet (1910), a slight but fine example of how Yeats redistributes symbolic power: ‘And the penny sang up in my face, / “There is nobody wise enough / To find out all that is in it”’. Love is bound up with contingency and chance, it must go the way of the penny thrown; it must surrender itself to a labyrinthine fate, ‘looped in the loops of her hair, / Till the loops of time had run’. The simple brown penny takes on the symbolic power that might otherwise have attached to Love, and distributes that power along entirely different libidinal and temporal cathexes, ‘trysting-places’, and the endless looping of a dream within a dream.

This idea of a falling away from romantic idealism and its universalising temporality is the presupposition rather than the effect of Yeats’s ‘conversion’ to (or, as Fogarty puts it, self-induction into) modernism. To be sure, Yeats learned a great deal from Pound at Stone Cottage (in the summers of 1911–13), mostly about Japanese
Noh drama, and absorbed a generally bracing, manly classicism that was the ethos of the ‘men of 1914’, the Anglo-American modernism that began as a form of avant-garde rebellion against Victorian and Edwardian conventions. Pound led him in this direction, but he could not lead him further than the stripped down cadences of Responsibilities (1914, 1916), which seem spitefully to reject a grand romantic vision that lay in ruins in every line. The Revival trope of the peasant, which once had a privileged position in Yeats’s symbolic lexicon, was, by 1916, thoroughly de-idealised, stripped of earlier misprisions, and depicted in a style of satiric realism. And while the poet may be indignant at ‘the obscure spite / Of our old paudeen in his shop’, he is well aware that he is misrecognising him yet again, using Paudeen, as he had the man in ‘grey Connemara clothes’, as the vehicle for the poet’s dispirited revolt against any restraint on his personality.

Responsibilities recalibrates not only the poet’s investment in idealism (‘Romantic Ireland’), but also the immanence it opposes (‘a greasy till’). If Bedient is right, this is a false opposition, and the poet, in locating transcendence in only one place – a place beyond all places – misrecognises as immanent what is really ‘the transcendent everywhere’. What he misses or underestimates is Yeats’s tactical appropriation of transcendence as a trope in the creation of an immanent standpoint for his corrective gaze, the ‘cold eye’ that he casts on his life and his own productions in time.

Personality and Poetics

If we see a turn towards elegy and commemoration in the poetry after Responsibilities, we can attribute it to the same Revival impulse that led Yeats to adapt the disjunctive and recursive temporal dynamics of the otherworld to the expression of regret and desire in the love poems. In the later poetry, we see the same temporal dynamics adapted to a new cause: establishing the greatness of an aristocratic imagination on a ground high enough to
survive the ‘filthy modern tide’ that will inevitably engulf the aristocratic world he half-created in Coole Park and had left in flames: ‘all that great glory spent’. The temporality of ancestral spaces, where ‘Life overflows without ambitious pains’, was close to timeless, a retreat at least from time’s ravages, where the poet could forget about ‘Tara uprooted, and new commonness / Upon the throne and crying about the streets’.\(^5\) This impulse in Yeats created monuments to modernism of the sort that Michael North has described, in which the poet ‘uses the ambiguous nature of sculpture itself and the contradictory traditions behind the word “repose” to place the “statue of solitude” at the center of collective life’.\(^6\) The monumentality of ‘Meditations’ and other major sequences in the late 1920s and ’30s is determined as much by their formal integrity as by the vital personality they realise.

By achieving personality, the poet substitutes mask for essence; and with a mask, the poet forms new aesthetic relations, of the sort pioneered by Wilde and Nietzsche: ‘The aesthetically sensitive man’, writes Nietzsche, ‘stands in the same relation to the reality of dreams as the philosopher does to the reality of existence; he is a close and willing observer, for these images afford him an interpretation of life, and by reflecting on these processes he trains himself for life.’\(^7\) The archetypal Yeatsian hero, the playwright Synge, is just this sort of ‘aesthetically sensitive man’, whose aspiration towards Bildung is shaped not by the dream of harmonious self-unity but by embracing the elemental struggle of aspiration itself, ‘all that has edge . . . all that heightens the emotions by contest’.\(^8\) Yeats could say of him what he said of Robert Gregory, that he consumes ‘the entire combustible world in one small room / As though dried straw’.\(^9\)

‘I am certain’, Yeats writes in ‘John M. Synge and the Ireland of His Time’ (1910), published a year after Synge’s death, ‘that my friend’s noble art, so full of passion and heroic beauty, is the victory of a man who in poverty and sickness created from the delight of expression’. Synge ‘train[ed] himself for life’, and his example led Yeats to a momentous discovery: ‘that purification from insincerity, vanity, malignity, arrogance, which is the discovery of style’. Yeats saw in
Synge’s connection to the Aran Islands ‘a correspondence between a lasting mood of the soul and this life that shares the harshness of rocks and wind’. 60 This same heroic achievement of ‘correspondence’ (not, it should be noted, the absolute achievement of Hegelian ‘coincidence’) marks the Irish airman who decouples himself from the world-historical dialectic – ‘Nor law, nor duty bade me fight / Nor public men, nor cheering crowds’ – and thereby opens himself up to an excess of time: ‘The years to come seemed waste of breath’. Yeats uses the language of exhausted, uncertain time (it only seems a waste) to blow time away, in a dramatic instance of ‘dialectics at a standstill’, in which the surge of negativity (all those ‘nors’) constellates into an image of personality untethered to time: ‘a lonely impulse of delight’. 61

In ‘A Prayer for my Daughter’, this same pursuit of self-delight is bequeathed to the next generation, the poet’s daughter, who should, he advises, resist the brute realities of historical time and tether herself to the mythic ground of transformation: ‘a flourishing hidden tree’ that has rooted itself ‘in one dear perpetual place’. She should be ready to take on the combustible fury of the world, the multitude, the not-One of unthinking nature, with its ‘murderous innocence’, in a dialectic that cannot be closed, though it can be exploited and enjoyed aesthetically. Little wonder that the poet bargains with the ‘sea-wind scream[ing] upon the tower’ at the outset of his prayer, holding what is stalwart and still against the upsurge of primal energies:

There is no obstacle
But Gregory’s wood and one bare hill
Whereby the haystack- and roof-levelling wind,
Bred on the Atlantic, can be stayed. 62

This is a perennial dynamic in Yeats’s poetry, one that allows for ‘looped time’ to gain its own coherence as a defence against ‘murderous innocence’ – the blind time of storm that savages without prejudice, time as primeval, geological, catastrophic. Gregory’s wood, symbol of the privileged cultural space of Coole Park, can only, within rigorous forms, stay (both hold off and remain) an ungovernable excess. This excess, this negative element (Kristeva’s ‘true-real’) evades dialectical closure (or even
simple description) and threatens all aristocratic forms and ceremonies.

Critics like Bedient are right, I think, to show that Yeats just as often invited this ‘murderous innocence’ into his poems, where the unconquerable surge takes the form either of an unfathomable abyss (‘Buddha’s emptiness’) or of the primal temporality of matter (‘formless spawning fury’ of the ‘filthy modern tide’). His ‘high’ modernism co-opts a primal resistance to form and sets it loose within the compass of forms, as in ‘The Statues’ or in the sculpted anarchy of ‘Lapis Lazuli’, where the timeless tragic gaiety of the ‘Chinamen’ shares an aesthetic space with pure process:

Every discolouration of the stone,
Every accidental crack or dent,
Seems a water-course or an avalanche,
Or lofty slope where it still snows.

The fragile monument of blue stone is both an object for Yeats (his own ‘careful visual reconstruction’), an object about the timelessness of art (a ‘suspension of time’), and an object of time (in ‘the wrack of history’). The poem becomes the material moment when eternity flares up, like a struck match, into a message for ‘coming times’. Yeats delivers the same message in the brutally laconic ‘Oil and Blood’, in which ‘tombs of gold and lapis lazuli’ sit atop ‘trampled clay’ where ‘vampires full of blood’ are buried. Like the Chinamen, the vampires defy historical time, but in doing so they defy the forces of change that might temper their cold, unconquerable gaiety.

Accommodating Modernism

The ‘great wind of love and hate’ that orients the Rose settles, in the late work, into a new accommodation: ‘abstract joy, / The half-read wisdom of daemonic images’ that ‘Suffice the ageing man as once the growing boy’. Yeats’s modernism cannot be fully appreciated without considering this aspiration towards accommodation with what is unconquerable, with what escapes grand schemes of totality and oneness. “Love has pitched his mansion in / The places of excrement”, Crazy
Jane declares, and it is love, and the abstract hate seeking to destroy it, that Yeats’s verse attempts again and again to explain: the accommodation to a mutable ontological estate, a mode of being ‘Between extremities’, a ‘brand, or flaming breath’, or a ‘marble table-top’ that prompts a ‘sudden blaze’ of vision. For the poet, love is an accommodation to the world that does not retreat from what it must accommodate; hate is this retreat, a disavowal of love that is the purest fury of envy, a disavowal that sadistically misrecognises itself, seeing instead (in a paranoid manner) a repudiation on the part of the other. The poet wears the mask of an anti-self that makes him an other to himself; personality is to some degree this power of self-othering, this identity predicated on the obligation to rend: “For nothing can be sole or whole / That has not been rent”. 66

The accommodation of the other is an ontological inclusiveness that permits the transcendent to coexist with what it transcends (which is not to say what Deleuze says: ‘the transcendent everywhere’). I would qualify (or perhaps clarify) Bedient’s reading of immanence in Yeats by saying that what we find in these poems is the immanence of the dialectical image as realised in and through personality. The logic of misrecognition, the cold eye the poet casts on his life and work, constitutes the achievement, or nearly so, of a Nietzschean personality that can withstand its own biography:

I am content to live it all again
And yet again, if it be life to pitch
Into the frog-spawn of a blind man’s ditch,
A blind man battering blind men. . .
I am content to follow to its source
Every event in action or in thought;
Measure the lot; forgive myself the lot! 67

In this dream of eternal recurrence, there is certainly a delight in the primal object (‘frog-spawn’), but there is also delight in the measuring and forgiving. Dionysian spawning is followed by Apollonian measurement, a dynamic that favours both poles of a dialectic, a contentment in the pure play and poetic productivity of a personality that can be lived again and ‘follow[ed] to its source’. What Yeats
affirms when summoning the frog-spawn from the ditch, is the purely performative act of the summons itself, which calls forth what it represents, a ‘loop of time’ created in the monumental symbolisation (or halting) of the dialectical image of spawning. The negative dialectical energies in Yeats’s late works feed on a resistance to this spawning, and then they feed on the spawn itself.

This is the force of the Byzantium poems, which summon the sacred site in order to show how imagination has rent it: the ‘gold mosaic[s]’ in the ‘holy city of Byzantium’, in ‘Sailing to Byzantium’, suggest the possibility of aesthetic unity and transcendence, but they fall prey to the ‘fury and the mire of human veins’, the ‘bitter furies of complexity’. The ‘mere complexities’ of human being can only seem bitter and paltry from the august perspective of pure forms, the ‘moonlit dome’ that ‘disdains / All that man is’. The poet who says, in ‘Sailing to Byzantium’, ‘I shall never take / My bodily form from any natural thing’, contemplates, in ‘Byzantium’, a vampiric non-being: ‘death-in-life and life-in-death’. The latter poem doesn’t simply respond to ‘Sailing to Byzantium’, it brutally unveils its ideals and overcomes its misrecognitions. Yeats’s modernism is rooted in this self-reflexive and recursive logic of misprision in which earlier works become implicated in later ones in a way that forcefully urges us to reread the early work in light of this corrective gaze. It urges us to see Sato’s sword, a ‘changeless work of art’ wrapped in a ‘bit of an embroidered dress’, in ‘Meditations in Time of Civil War’ III, in an entirely different way when, in ‘A Dialogue of Self and Soul’, it comes wrapped in a ‘flowering, silken, old embroidery, torn / From some court-lady’s dress’. This slight historical elaboration lifts a veil on how the eternal symbol functions in time. Symbolic power is redistributed, even if slightly, from the ‘changeless sword’ of ‘Meditations’ to the ‘court-lady’s dress’ of the ‘Dialogue’.68

The great poems of Yeats’s maturity model the dynamics of a totality that can never take form, but whose form is discernable in the cumulative force of the oeuvre. For within it, the poet’s personality emerges as something ‘intended, complete’, which has coexisted with a daily self, a ‘bundle of accident and incoherence that sits down to breakfast’.69 His poetry exploits the fullness of a personality defined
by its brokenness: ‘the division of a mind within itself . . . the sacrifice of a man to himself’, in the words of ‘John M. Synge and the Ireland of His Time’. The sacrifice of the self to an intended and complete personality and style exemplifies the aesthetic Bildung of modernism, one that has surrendered the fetish of ‘inner culture’ without doing away with the aspiration towards the utopian idea of a unified subjectivity, a ‘unity of being’. In line with modernists such as Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Gertrude Stein and Marcel Proust, Yeats envisioned a subject of infinite extension in the material and spiritual worlds, a personality that could embody the ‘correspondence between a lasting mood of the soul and this life’. 70

Notes

2. ‘Do you know’, Wilde tells a reporter for the Philadelphia Press, ‘the night before I landed I was wondering how it would be – thinking of the cloud of misrepresentation that must have preceded me, and wondering whether the people would wait to know me for what I am’: The Philadelphia Press (18 Jan. 1881), 2; Clark Library, Wildeana, box 10.7B.
4. A general consensus would put Yeats’s modernist period after 1913 and thus post-Revival; see the essays in Edwina Keown and Carol Taaffe, eds, Irish Modernism: Origins, Contexts, Publics (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2007). Anne Fogarty, who has a sympathetic and clear-eyed view of Revival and its ambivalence as a social institution, sees Yeats’s involvement in Revival as a different undertaking from his ‘self-induction’ into modernism. Her argument implies that Revival is prior to modernism and that modernism is an outcome of Revival. She echoes many critics in seeing the ‘pendant volumes’ The Tower (1928) and The Winding Stair and Other Poems (1933) ‘as Yeats’s key contribution to the annals of modernist poetry’: Anne Fogarty, ‘Yeats, Ireland and Modernism’, in Alex Davis and Lee M. Jenkins, The Cambridge Companion to Modernist Poetry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 135. Michael Wood devotes a book to a single poem from The Tower, ‘Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen’: see Michael Wood, Yeats and Violence (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).
5. ‘The Stolen Child’, Yeats, Poems, 16.
6. ‘To Ireland in the Coming Times’, ibid., 47.
7. ‘In [Hegelian dialectics] there was coincidence of identity and positivity; the inclusion of all nonidentical and objective things in a subjectivity expanded and exalted into an absolute spirit was to effect the reconciliation’: Theodor W. Adorno, Negative Dialectics, tr. E. B. Ashton (New York: Seabury Press, 1973), 141–2. Negative dialectics, by freeing the nonidentical to pursue its own destiny outside dialectical closure, frustrates the Hegelian ‘coincidence’.
9. See ibid., 87. The joy of motion, Bedient notes, is ‘not to lose the pulsion in formalities’: ibid., 77.
10. Ibid., 26.
13. For David Lloyd, the non-modern is a collective identity, the archaic, folkloric, faith-based, poor, rural, religious dissenters, and some nationalists who repudiated mainstream nationalism: see David Lloyd, Ireland After History (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999), ch. 2. I see it in addition as the temporality of the primordial, the privileged time
of the ethno-national origin. On this point, I follow Terry Eagleton on the proximity of the non-modern or (to use his term) archaic and the modern in Irish modernism: see Terry Eagleton, *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger: Studies in Irish Culture* (London: Verso, 1995), ch. 7. As Rob Doggett sees it, the problem for Yeats is not the challenge of the archaic or the tropology of the primordial, but rather the commodification of aesthetic work, for in the ‘contexts of Irish modernity . . . the artist is compelled to produce practical art’: Rob Doggett, *Deep-Rooted Things: Empire and Nation in the Poetry and Drama of W. B. Yeats* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), 141.


16. I don’t mean here the process of ‘self-criticism’ that Thomas Parkinson explored years ago and that so many have continued to do in the wake of the Cornell Yeats project: see Thomas Parkinson, *W. B. Yeats, Self-Critic: A Study of His Early Verse* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1951). That said, the analysis of Yeats’s revisions of his poetry tends to confirm at the level of the ‘genetic archive’ what I am claiming at the level of the oeuvre.


24. ‘Meditations in Time of Civil War’ I, Yeats, Poems, 204. In the later poem ‘Vacillation’, Yeats links the temporality of night and day to the violence of antinomies: ‘From man’s blood-sodden heart are sprung / Those branches of the night and day / Where the gaudy moon is hung’: ibid., 256; and cf. ‘The Tower’, ll. 146–56, ibid., 202.


31. Yeats, Poems, 78.

32. David Perkins notes that Yeats, especially in early essays like ‘Symbolism and Poetry’, was influenced by European symbolist writers and artists: see David Perkins, A History of Modern Poetry: From the 1890s to Pound, Eliot and Yeats (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), 369–70. Michael McAteer traces Yeats’s connections to European Expressionist drama: see Michael McAteer, ‘Expressionism, Ireland and the First World
34. Yeats relates that in his youth, he ‘dreamed of enlarging Irish hate’ and that he felt as if he were entering into a ‘great battle’, ready ‘to forge in Ireland a new sword on our old traditional anvil’: ‘All movements are held together more by what they hate than they love’: ‘Poetry and Tradition’, in Yeats, Early Essays, 182.
35. Cuchulainn’s ideal of fame, which Padraic Pearse adopted as the motto of the Scoil Ereanna, was similarly pitched towards a futural perspective that alone could recognise properly what had to have happened: ‘I care not though I were to live but one day and one night, if only my fame and my deed live after me’: qtd in A Significant Irish Educationalist: The Educational Writings of P. H. Pearse, ed. Séamas Ó Buachalla (Dublin: Mercier Press, 1980), 381.
39. Yeats, Poems, 32, 89.
40. Matthew Campbell reads this differently, seeing in these lines a ‘lover prostrate at the feet of the beloved’, a moment of ‘impasse, historically as well as amorously stalled’. I prefer to see a vibrant temporal suspension of motion, but I agree with Campbell that in such poems we see Yeats ‘testing . . . the limits of symbolism and its means of apprehending spiritual or intellectual truth’: Matthew Campbell, ‘The English Romantic Symbolists’, in David Holdeman and Ben Levitas, eds, W. B. Yeats in Context (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 314.
41. Symons, Symbolist Movement, 50.
42. ‘The Lover asks Forgiveness because of his Many Moods’, Yeats, Poems, 62.
44. ‘A Poet to his Beloved’, Yeats, Poems, 60.
45. Ibid., 66, 237, 238, 345.
46. Symons, Symbolist Movement, 9.
48. Obviously not personality in Jean Baudrillard’s sense of ‘the vital illu-
sion’: qtd in Bedient, Yeats Brothers, 210.
49. Yeats, Early Essays, 186.


53. ‘September 1913’, *ibid.*, 107.


63. See Bedient’s brilliant reading of Yeats’s ‘On a Picture of a Black Centaur by Edmund Dulac’: Bedient, *Yeats Brothers*, 32–47.


67. ‘A Dialogue of Self and Soul’, *ibid.*, 240.


Both the ideology and the category of modernism are presently subject to renewed scrutiny and many of the more rigid classifications and exclusions of the past are under reconsideration. Modernisms are the new order of the day. Yet, even within these considered blurrings of lines, there remains an orthodoxy of modernism, and for the purposes of this chapter we shall highlight two of its central features. Firstly, canonical British modernism still forms around a small cluster of high modernist writers—(later) W. B. Yeats, T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf—whose works first provided the characteristic examples for its definition, and the features of whose works, in both form and content, act as an index of what it is to be modernist. Secondly, the First World War is still seen as creating a social, cultural, and artistic rupture which marks the emergence, post-war, of a full-blown modernism. This orthodoxy effortlessly absorbs the existence of elements of modernism pre-war. Thomas Laqueur summarises the relationship thus: ‘If the Great War did not actually give birth to Modernism it powerfully mobilised elements of a prewar cultural crisis and gave it new, self-conscious definition predicated on rupture.’

We want to emphasise that the rupture which is frequently invoked as either a metaphor within modernism, or a historical marker of a point of change, was an actual cataclysmic event for the poets engaged with the war, and for some of them this had a radical effect on their poetry which brought it into the line of modernism. Key to our argument is the experiential dimension of war poetry; rupture is not just a metaphor for these poets, it is an experience, and one which informs the changes within their poetry. We shall argue that
two distinct strands of (British) modernist poetry emerged in the early twentieth century. Each drew on different poetic antecedents, but were related to rather than divided from each other, in much the same way that the various pre-war proto-modernist movements were interrelated. These two strands we characterise as high and low modernism, but in accepting the standard modernist descriptor ‘high’ and counterbalancing it with the apparently opposing ‘low’, we hope to unsettle the terms themselves.³

High modernism in poetry is what everyone is familiar with as modernism: that strand in poetry which came to maturity during the period of the First World War, beginning with the later Yeats, proselytised and brought to fruition by Ezra Pound, exemplified in its early stages in the Imagism of H. D., Richard Aldington, and others, and reaching its apotheosis post-war in Eliot’s iconic masterpiece *The Waste Land*.⁴ It is characterised by a pared down, direct language, drawing on the rhythms of ordinary speech rather than a laid-down metre, and a concomitant abandonment of restrictive verse and rhyme forms and a move towards free verse, providing a voice sufficiently freed from traditional forms to properly express the modern predicament. Along with this went a desire to inhabit the instant, the newness of an experience, since this was to catch fully the modern moment, as well as to reflect the frailty of any fixed reality. From a fragmented modern world arose the fragmented subject or self, to which this poetry would give a voice, but any reality perceived would therein be partial, incomplete, as would the self who uttered it. The unified and unitary poetic voice, it followed, would be inauthentic to this fragmented world and consciousness; the poet would disappear behind a ranged and disarranged collage of perceptions.

This is necessarily a retrospective characterisation; if we go back to the historical moment of 1914 and examine the state of poetry as it was then, we are struck not so much by the distinctions but by the crossover between poets and their various ideas. Certainly, this was a period of manifestos and declarations, and of powerful ‘little’ magazines positioning themselves in certain ways. But there were constant shifts and interactions within and between these. The
Imagists contested the nature and representation of Imagism in their own publications. At the same time the English Review and the Poetry Review pre-war, as well as Harriet Monroe’s American Poetry: A Magazine of Verse, published Imagist poets alongside poets the Imagists were reacting against. This transatlantic cultural commerce was aided by Pound, who had his finger in almost all poetic pies. The Georgian anthologies lay at the other end of the spectrum from these modernist periodicals, but here too there was crossover and complexity of character. Harold Monro was the publisher of both Pound’s Des Imagistes and the Georgian anthologies. Poets who passed through the doors of Monro’s Poetry Bookshop included Lascelles Abercrombie, Rupert Brooke, Robert Frost, Wilfrid Gibson, Amy Lowell, Charlotte Mew, Wilfred Owen, Pound, Siegfried Sassoon, and Yeats. Meanwhile Isaac Rosenberg, for example, corresponded from the Front with both Laurence Binyon and Monroe. Poetry, then, was not highly demarcated as the war entered its first year: this was still a small and in certain ways a remarkably open creative world.

A particularly interesting example of this fluidity is that of D. H. Lawrence. He was taken up early by the English Review, first under Ford Madox Hueffer’s editorship (the November 1909 issue marked the first publication of Lawrence as a poet), then under the editorship of Austin Harrison from 1910 onwards. Marsh saw his ‘Snapdragon’ in the June 1912 issue and included it in Georgian Poetry 1913–15 – a volume which posthumously published some of Brooke’s poems including ‘The Soldier’. Gibson and Monro were also included, as was the Irish poet Francis Ledwidge. Meanwhile Pound had taken up Lawrence’s cause, sending eight of his poems to Monroe, seven of which she accepted for the January 1914 edition of Poetry. Then, in 1915, we find him popping up in Some Imagist Poets and thus placing himself amongst those making a breakaway from Pound. Post-war he figures in Georgian Poetry 1918–19 (‘Seven Seals’), alongside surviving war poets Robert Graves, Robert Nichols, and Sassoon, and in Georgian Poetry 1920–22, with the subsequently much-anthologised ‘Snake’. At the same time he publishes a body of poems under the title War Films, in Poetry, July 1919,
which, while they purport to be new work, are in fact revamped versions of 1910 translations. Lawrence’s pre-war and wartime poems thus could be made to fit Pound’s or Monroe’s agendas, while still finding favour with Marsh as representative of Georgian poetry; the variety of outlets also reflects his own need for publication at a time when he was unpopular because of his deeply held conviction against the war. Yet his real poetic work during the First World War, which issued in the collection *Look! We Have Come Through!*, was in pursuit of his own highly individual (and certainly sometimes modernist) poetic, exploring a personal male/female conflict which was in his eyes as dramatic, and as worthy of poetry, as the greater conflict. Lawrence’s First World War poetry doesn’t fit easily into any category but his own.

Notwithstanding the fluidity of the poetic world pre-war, there is no doubt that high modernism in this formative stage, and as it developed throughout the First World War and beyond, inhered in particular poets: Yeats, Pound, H.D., Eliot. While this strand is predominantly American in origin, the émigré or outsider nature of these writers signalled their commitment to a European rather than an American tradition. Eliot, in his introduction to Pound’s *Selected Poems* (1928), wrote that his own brand of *vers libre* was ‘directly drawn from the study of Laforgue’. For him, Jules Laforgue and Charles Baudelaire were the nineteenth-century poets of choice, rather than his own countryman Walt Whitman. He added: ‘I did not read Whitman until much later in life, and had to conquer an aversion to his form, as well as to much of his matter, in order to do so.’ Pound, however, both loved and hated Whitman, and he struggled to deal with his difficult poetic inheritance. What Pound shared with Whitman was the impulse to freedom, from constraint of verse, from stricture of subject matter, from extraneous pressures to conform. What he sought that was utterly opposed to the spirit of Whitman was an impersonality of voice, and the suppression of the poetic ‘I’. This impersonality became a definitive marker of high modernism in poetry, laid down by Eliot in ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ (1919) as the essential for a modern poetic: ‘The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction
of personality.’ Eliot likened the mind of the poet to ‘the shred of platinum’ which does not itself change when placed in a test tube containing oxygen and sulphur dioxide, but acts as the catalyst to the two gases to produce a third entity, sulphuric acid. The platinum – and the mind of the poet in the process of creation – ‘has remained inert, neutral and unchanged’.

We can see the poetic move towards this impersonality (predating the theory) in Eliot’s early works – ‘Preludes’, ‘Rhapsody on a Windy Night’, ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’, ‘Portrait of a Lady’. This body of poems was being written and revised from 1910 onwards and ‘Prufrock’, eventually published in 1915, can be taken as an index of Eliot’s development; the onset of war seems to have made little difference to its progress. So familiar are we with ‘Prufrock’ that it is difficult to stand back and see how utterly new it was at the time: the intercutting of voices against the narrative voice; the temerity of asking the reader to be interested in someone called J. Alfred Prufrock; the temerity of Prufrock to utter a love song (though of course ironised by Eliot’s method); the extraordinariness of the imagery (‘the evening ... spread out against the sky / Like a patient etherised upon a table’). Then there is the final improbable movement from the bathos of ‘Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?’ to the lyrical ‘combing the white hair of the waves blown back’ to the incipient tragedy of ‘Till human voices wake us and we drown’.

Eliot seems oblivious of the risk of bringing in ‘combing’ straight after ‘Shall I part my hair behind’, but that is the great strength of his method here – bathos buffs the serious, and the intercutting of registers means that none is privileged over others. Meanwhile, the poet is nowhere to be found, and it is for the reader to determine the reading of the poem.

In The Waste Land, Eliot makes use of different voices, and notably of the common voice, that of demotic speech; but he takes away its individual power rather than revealing it. The intercutting robs the common language of its own identity, since it is always ironised by being placed against another voice or vocabulary. We can see the reductio of this in the pub scene, at the end of ‘A Game of Chess’. Eliot is said to have called this passage ‘pure Ellen Kellond’,
reference to his housemaid from whom he says he got the story.\textsuperscript{14} No one would deny that Eliot brilliantly captures the cadences of certain sorts of reportage, with its repeated ‘I said’, ‘she said’, ‘he said’ linking a litany of the ordinary. And the final movement from the individual ‘Goonight Lou. Goonight May. Goonight. / Ta ta. Goonight. Goonight.’ into the allusive ‘Good night, ladies, good night, sweet ladies’ is potentially as moving as moving as its source.\textsuperscript{15} But the difficulty lies with the placing of the passage in the framework of the poem, and in the choice of language within it. Within this section, it counterbalances the Antony and Cleopatra section at the start; it is of a similar length and it recounts in reportage (as in Enobarbus’s original) a relationship between a man and a woman. Juxtapositions of this sort are the poem’s currency, and they can work powerfully as in the two river passages in ‘The Fire Sermon’, where very different registers and experiences and histories are balanced without detriment to either. But Eliot’s usual method is more fragmented than that in ‘A Game of Chess’; images, voices, vocabularies slip and slide against each other in briefer sections, and the contrast is less weighted. Here the passages seem to be placed in apposition, but the vocabularies in opposition whereby the speech of the pub woman, and the recounted phrases of Lil and Albert, are bound into bathos by comparison with the verbal affluence of Enobarbus. Albert and Lil become figures of fun because they are figures too limited in their ordinariness to be imagined by the reader to carry the same feelings as an Antony and Cleopatra. The impersonality of method in the poem, which depends on treating the different registers and experiences on a par, slips fatally here. We can see Eliot’s smirk, just as we can feel his distaste for the typist with her tins, her divan, and her drying combinations.

It is no accident that Eliot’s verse, through its French forebears, was \textit{libre}, whereas Whitman’s was free. Whitman’s freedom of form springs from the democratic impulse so brilliantly expressed in his Preface to \textit{Leaves of Grass}: ‘A great poem is for ages and ages in common and for all degrees and complexions and all departments and sects and for a woman as much as a man and a man as much as a woman.’\textsuperscript{16} Whitman espoused the common voice, but in a poetry
which made that voice not special – because if so it would cease to be common – but recognised as a voice that could at the same time be poetic. Thom Gunn has noted that he finds the most moving part of *Leaves of Grass* the passage where Whitman ‘speaks for the inarticulate and the unheard, for the “deform’d, trivial, flat, foolish, despised, / Fog in the air, beetles rolling balls of dung” – that is, for those who lack even self-definition and for the lowest of the low’.¹⁷ This was emphatically not the voice of Eliot and Pound in the first decades of the 1900s, for all their insistence on a direct vocabulary. Their commitment to *vers libre* was a technical rather than an ethical one, a deliberate freeing of themselves from the restrictions of earlier outmoded forms, rather than the finding of a common language and speech rhythm to express a common humanity. We shall argue that the strand of low modernism formed by certain First World War poets is characterised by this Whitmanesque embrace of common language and speech, which, under the pressure of the experience of the particular conditions of warfare, issued in a style characterised by multivocality and heteroglossia. This undermined any overarching authorial voice and was able, just as much as high modernism, to express existential and perceptual uncertainty. And, like high modernist poetry, it was a poetry of the moment, but in this case of the particular historical moment, and pressured by that particularity into linguistic and formal experiment. We attach the term ‘low’ to this modernism both to counter the value-laden elements of the descriptor ‘high’, and also with the intention of restoring value to those common elements – ordinary language, the speech of the common man and woman, the physically brutal and psychologically bruising elements of the everyday experience of real life and death in the First World War – which are central to this poetry. Low in the sense that the experience of the trenches was the lowest common denominator and brought all those who suffered it to the same level of experience; low in the sense that those participants were brought low; low in the sense of the commonest form of speech, countering any deceptive rhetoric; and low in the sense of open to all readers, where high might mean exclusive and thus excluding.
If Whitman brought that common language and humanity directly to the First World War poets, they also found in him a poet who had known war at first hand and would give an account of it in a modern voice. This must have spoken powerfully to poets first encountering the brutalities of war which Whitman speaks of in ‘Drum Taps’. *Leaves of Grass* had always had currency in England, but the ‘Drum Taps’ sequence was notably republished as a book by Chatto and Windus in 1915 with an introduction reprinted from the *Times Literary Supplement* (1 April 1915) connecting the work with the current war.

Rosenberg carried Whitman with him in France, writing that ‘“Drum Taps” stands unique as War Poetry in my mind’; indeed, he offers ‘Beat! Beat! Drums’ (which he misquotes as ‘Beat, drums, beat’) as a corrective to Rupert Brooke’s ‘begloried sonnets’. Ivor Gurney too saw Whitman as his artistic compatriot, and in typical Gurney manner felt that the book carried Whitman as an actual companion as well as a poetic influence, recounting in ‘To Long Island First’

> how on a Gloucester book-stall one morning
> I saw, brown ‘Leaves of Grass’...
> — a book that brings the clear
> Spirit of him that wrote

Monro, Sassoon, and Edward Thomas were also admirers. Quite aside from the relevance of the war-related ‘Drum Taps’, Whitman had set in place a line of poetry which was avowedly inclusive, democratic, demotic, free in form and in language: the ‘barbaric yawp’. This too was a poetic which answered to modernity, which addressed the nature of the self within the modern world, and which was loose and large enough to accommodate the multiple alongside the individual voice.

There is another possible antecedent to these war poets’ low modernism, this time an English one. Hardy’s *The Dynasts* was, like Whitman’s ‘Drum Taps’, a poem responding to war. Isobel Armstrong gives an account of the way *The Dynasts* prefigures modernism:

> *The Dynasts* is a strangely contradictory genre, an epic-drama, a heroic poem about the great and a drama, the democratic form of radical
writing. It moves through many styles and languages – reportage, epic
description, metaphysical chorus, rhetorical blank-verse, military-
textbook explication, formal prose, demotic speech, dumb show, march-
ing song, satirical jingle, lyric, folk song and music-hall verse. . . . But
perhaps the most brilliant technical innovation of the poem, the feature
which makes it a fundamentally experimental text, is the constant
change of visual perspective. . . . The reordering of perception frag-
ments and reconstructs, asking for that active, participatory interpreta-
tive process which is the hallmark of democratic poetry from the
beginning of this period onwards.

Armstrong draws here on her concept of the ‘double poem’, which
arises from her readings of Victorian poetry, but which she applies
also to The Dynasts.\textsuperscript{23} What she identifies as constitutive of the
‘doubleness’ of The Dynasts – its multivocality, its linguistic plural-
ism, its abnegation of authorial imprimatur, its involvement of the
reader in the making of its meanings – would all come to be markers
of modernism. All figure in both Eliot’s iconoclastic The Waste Land
and in the poems of the First World War poets. What distinguishes
the war poets’ multivocality from that of Eliot is that for them
it remains rooted in the common language used in circumstances
where the ‘doubleness’ of things was underlined every day. A man’s
blood flows in his veins one instant, he is alive and active, the next
‘the darking flood percolates and he dies in your arms’; where once
there was a pastoral scene, the blue sky itself ‘is flapping down in
frantic shreds’; and when the soldier returns home on leave, the
longed-for peacefulness is interrupted so strongly by memory that
it becomes ‘slow death in the loved street and bookish room’.\textsuperscript{24}

In seeking to characterise the war poets’ strand of low modernism,
we shall draw, respectively, on the poetry of Gurney, David Jones,
and Mary Borden; but our argument can be extended to the more
obviously canonical body of work, especially that of Sassoon,
Rosenberg, and Wilfred Owen.

For Gurney, Hardy and Whitman were equal models, each seen
by him as part of his poetic inheritance and indeed current influence.
Like Rosenberg turning to Whitman as a counter-example to Brooke,
Gurney turned to The Dynasts to set against Brooke’s sonnets: ‘Rupert
Brooke soaked it in quickly and gave it out with as great ease. For all that we have very much to be grateful for; but what of 1920? What of the counterpart to The Dynasts which may still lie within another Hardy’s brain a hundred years today?25

Particularly striking here is the way that he is looking forward to the poetic inheritance he and others, in a line from Whitman and Hardy, might provide for other poets a hundred years hence. In that respect, Brooke is an empty vessel, unable to provide sustenance for the poets to come. Gurney himself, however, took hold of that line of influence from Whitman on the one hand and Hardy on the other, having imbibed equally from both the American and the English lines.

The poetry Gurney produced during the war displays some of the traits of Georgian verse but, as Stefan Hawlin argues, ‘Whitman became a progressively more important influence, helping him to reach beyond the forms and modes of Georgianism.’26 The attractions of Whitman for Gurney were various, and came into full play post-war, in Gurney’s richest period. Firstly, Whitman’s war poetry was experiential: Jeff Sycertez shows how his encounters with wounded and dead soldiers transformed the poetry he wrote about the American Civil War.27 Gurney, in his encomium ‘Walt Whitman’, recognises this when he proclaims that Whitman’s ‘page is coloured with earth’s and his heart’s blood’. Secondly, Whitman provided a model for the popularly acclaimed war poet which Gurney wished to be – in the same poem, Gurney claims that Whitman was:

Praised by Gloucesters in trench or marching mood
For his courage, colour or master-in-action mood.

This acclaim comes from representing the common soldier in a way that is experiential, unsentimental, and therefore democratic. Gurney achieves this through the inclusion of soldiers’ demotic voices in a manner that is comradely rather than condescending, entwining them with his own poetic voice to create a low modernist multi-vocality which, while resisting a univocal vision, also resists both authorial ‘impersonality’ and the high modernist othering of the demotic voice. So, in ‘Half Dead’, the poet, suffering with dysentery pains, is cured by the cold night air and the sight of the constellations:
Yet still clear flames of stars over the crest bare,
Mysterious glowing on the cloths of heaven.
Sirius or Mars or Argo’s stars, and high the Sisters – the Pleiads – those seven.

Best turn in, fatigue party out at seven . . .

The voice is initially poetic – and the borrowing from Yeats’s romantic lyric ‘He Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven’ makes it self-consciously so – then gives way to the authentically demotic. The two ways of speaking are connected by the repeated word, ‘seven’, which movingly emphasises that the poet himself is a common soldier, that one consciousness can experience both these thoughts – one aesthetic, the other practical – and can call on two registers. There are no inverted commas to separate the registers or imprison the demotic, but rather a placing of the poet (isolated as he is in this night-time epiphany) ‘among dim sleepers’, his comrades.  

In ‘The Silent One’, Gurney sets the demotic voice against the accent of the ruling classes. The soldier whose corpse hangs on the barbed wire in no-man’s-land had, when alive, ‘chattered through / Infinite lovely chatter of Bucks accent’. The poet is then urged towards the same fate by an officer speaking in ‘the politest voice – a finicking accent’: ‘Do you think you might crawl through, there: there’s a hole?’ The representation of the officer’s way of speaking is exact: he deploys the politesse of the drawing room to disguise an order as a question. The assertion that there is a hole in the barbed wire through which the poet ‘might’ crawl is, similarly, made interrogative. The poet cunningly responds using the same register, taking the officer’s questions at face value:

In the afraid

Darkness, shot at; I smiled, as politely replied –
‘I’m afraid not, Sir.’

The polite English phrase, in which one pretends uncertainty so as not to appear rudely assertive, masks his actual assessment: ‘There was no hole no way to be seen.’ The slipperiness of this diction is emphasised by the repetition of ‘afraid’: the first use is literal, he is afraid, the second a politic imitation of the officer’s register. The poet
mimics in order to ‘pass’ as a member of the officer’s class and so strengthen his refusal to sacrifice himself. Significantly, only the officer’s register is voiced in the poem – there is no representation of the ‘chatter of Bucks accent’. The battlefield is a place where the demotic speaker is sacrificed, while the ‘polite’ speaker urges yet another common soldier, the narrating poet, to sacrifice himself.

Where the soldier’s demotic was silenced by power in ‘The Silent One’, it fills the entirety of ‘Regrets After Death’. Tellingly, however, this poem is a dramatic monologue spoken by a soldier who is dead (perhaps it is the man hanging on the wire in ‘The Silent One’). This poem recalls Thomas Hardy’s ‘The Man He Killed’, in which a Boer War soldier ruminates over his act of killing, trying, in a halting dialogue with himself, to understand how he could kill someone just like himself. Gurney portrays a similar process of reasoning, but here, taking a step inwards, the soldier tries to work out how to feel about what has happened to him and what he has done:

True on the Plain I might have seen Salisbury Close,
But how that would have repaid there is no one knows,
True at Epping I might have thanked kindness more,
But we were for France then – scarce a week to be here.
At Chelmsford, true I might have kept my first lodging
Despite of cooking, ’cause she did my washing.

His regrets, relating to the various places he was stationed before being sent to France, are a strange mixture: the first concerns what has been done to him – his life cut short, he will now never see Salisbury’s beautiful Cathedral Close – the second is a regret at his own behaviour, while the third is comically practical. Like Hardy, Gurney uses line-breaks and metre to trace the pauses, the turns of thought, the process of arriving at a conclusion. The dead man finally dismisses his regrets, reminding himself of blunt realities:

Regrets and hopes and accusations are all vain.
Chelmsford was bad, Hell-upon-Army the Plain,
Epping had compensations, Northampton kindness, invitations.
They buried me in Artois, with no time to complain.
The final line, a discrete sentence, expresses that wry, stoic, unsentimental demotic voice – the antithesis of the mealy-mouthed finicking politeness of the ruling classes. And, with the meaninglessness death accords to life, it undercuts all that goes before.

Isobel Armstrong has argued that the dramatic monologue is ‘perhaps the type of the double poem, that mid-nineteenth-century form which offers two simultaneous readings by allowing the expressive utterance of a limited subjectivity to become the material for analysis’.\(^3^2\) While Armstrong is discussing *The Dynasts*, ‘The Man He Killed’ is a skilful precursor in which we both hear the soldier’s voice while also being aware that this is an act of ventriloquism through which we infer the voice of the poet. Such poems exemplify what Mikhail Bakhtin calls ‘double-voiced discourse’: ‘Such speech ... serves two speakers at the same time and expresses simultaneously two different intentions: the direct intention of the character who is speaking, and the refracted intention of the author.’\(^3^3\) The reader encounters the voice of a character while also being aware that the voice is produced by an authorial speaker. This creates a dialogic effect whereby the character-voice and the author-voice interact. As Armstrong points out, although Bakhtin argued that such dialogism was the preserve of the novel, Victorian poetry demonstrates extensive doubleness (particularly in its dramatic monologues) which anticipates the multivocality of modernism. In Gurney’s poem, this effect is intensified by the fact that his speaker is dead, and his act of prosopopoeia arises directly from his traumatic experience of the sudden deaths of comrades, alive by one’s side one moment, and destroyed the next.\(^3^4\) The vision is at once consoling and troubling: the dead man speaks but we are simultaneously aware that he does not speak, that the poet is ventriloquising a corpse. We therefore do not simply hear the killed man expressing a reassuring stoicism, but also hear simultaneously the poet’s heartbreaking attempt to present stoicism where he would dearly wish to find it.

This doubleness denies the univocal – we have a sense both of consolation and of trauma – but in a way which retains the strong presence of the poet as a suffering individual. The poem remains personal, the poet in the midst of the experience.
Gurney’s experience leads him to give a voice to all those dead men he has seen that is very different from the ‘begloried’ voice attributed to the dead in Brooke’s ‘The Soldier’, where a dead man’s life is imagined continuing, by some sleight of hand and mind, in an undying pastoral present. Brooke’s dead man is held improbably in a moment of eternal freshness, still ‘breathing English air’; Gurney’s dead man, with the often trivial specifics of his lived experience identifying him as an individual, is given a voice that, in its ordinariness, contains the opposite of that myth, the non-entity of death.\(^{35}\)

In the first of these poems, Gurney, in his own voice, intercuts the romantically poetic with the laconic; in the second, he dramatises a dialogue between the officer’s and the soldier’s voice, played out against the silence of the man hanging on the wire; finally he gives the dead man himself a voice, reflecting on his own life and death. It is no surprise that Gurney explores the essential contradictoriness and multiplicity of experience in the thick of war through the interplay of human voices, to which he responded so sensitively. David Jones, in *In Parenthesis*, takes the interplay of voices further still. This book-length poem combines an extraordinary amalgam of voices, registers, and discourses, and the ways in which they clash and combine strongly recall Isobel Armstrong’s description of *The Dynasts*, quoted above. Soldiers’ voices are joined by music hall songs, children’s rhymes, advertising slogans, and works of literature. Armstrong suggests that ‘by superimposing a number of limited and everchanging perspectives on one another’, Hardy extended the double poem into ‘the multiple poem with its contradictory and self-modifying juxtapositions’.\(^{36}\) This description fits *In Parenthesis* too. The difference is that, for all its shifts in voice and perspective, *The Dynasts* remains a tightly structured drama in which the identities of speakers are clearly indicated. Jones offers a series of dizzying fragments in which voices merge and part, languages intermingle, and thus the democratic element which Armstrong identifies in Hardy is intensified.

*In Parenthesis* was championed by Eliot and seems to share many features with *The Waste Land*: it is multivocal, it is fragmentary, the
poetic form is protean, and the poet draws on mythology to provide a kind of framework for contemporary events. However, Jones brings a very different sensibility to each of these elements. The heteroglossia in *The Waste Land* represents a fragmented civilisation (Eliot’s characters are divided from each other; Cleopatra and the typist will never exchange words), but, in the trenches, those fragments were forced together. Jones notes how the conditions of war brought a heteroglot community into being as men from various parts of Britain converged in the army (his regiment was made up of a mixture of Cockneys and Welshmen); he writes that soldiers arriving in the front line find ‘a folk-life here, a people, a culture already developed, already venerable and rooted’.

In representing their voices, Jones eschews inverted commas, blurring the distinctions between different speakers, and so representing ‘that hotch-potch which is ourselves’. Here, some soldiers discuss imminent battle orders in an estaminet behind the lines:

> There’s time for another one – wont you. We shall be in it alright – it’s in conjunction with the Frogs. The Farrier’s bloke reckons we move south after this turn on the roundabouts – he got it from Mobile Veterinary, and there’s talk of us going up tonight – no – this ’ere night of all – not tomorrow night my ducky – they’ve tampered with the natural law – same bit of line, but Supports – how they pile it on –

The lack of inverted commas also blurs the distinction between these soldiers and the voice of the poet-narrator who delivers sensory detail on their behalf, as in this description of soldiers boarding a ship for France: ‘Each separate man found his own feet stepping in the darkness on an inclined plane, the smell and taste of salt and machinery, the texture of rope, and the glimmer of shielded light about him.’ This voice is both a disembodied consciousness and one of the men. Rather than impersonality, Jones creates a sense of shared experience, frequently shifting into free indirect discourse, to depict either the thought processes of an individual soldier or of the collective, as in this account of soldiers preparing to attack:

> no one seemed to know anything much as to anything and you got the same served up again garnished with a different twist and emphasis
maybe and some would say such and such and others would say the matter stood quite otherwise and there would be a division among them and lily-livered blokes looked awfully unhappy

Jones often couples this use of the second person with the present tense, drawing the reader into imaginary membership of the company: ‘Cloying drift-damp . . . It hurts you in the bloody eyes, it grips chill and harmfully and rasps the sensed membrane of the throat; it’s raw cold, it makes you sneeze – christ how cold it is.’ As in Gurney’s ‘The Silent One’, Jones represents the tensions between the demotic of common soldiers and the voices of their officers, but also has the space to develop nuance. Sometimes the muttered voice of the common soldier comically undercuts the officer voice: as the company marches to the docks, Lieutenant Jenkins gives the order, ‘The men may march easy and smoke, Sergeant Snell’; at a sudden and unexpected halt, a wry comment comes from the ranks: ‘The bastard’s lost his way already.’ However, Jones’s soldiers are not stereotypes and there are shifts in the relationship. When Lieutenant Jenkins asks Private John Ball, ‘Have you a match Ball’, there is no question mark – it is a *de facto* command – but then Ball nervously scatters the contents of his pocket and, among the debris, is the latch-key to his home, the sight of which momentarily dissolves the distinctions between them: ‘The two young men together glanced where it lay incongruous, bright between the sets. . . . Keys of Stonden Park in French farm-yard.’ The poignancy of the moment affects their final exchange, in which they speak to each other as equals:

> Will you have these sir.
> Thanks – go and get some sleep. . . .
> Keep them – won’t you?
> Thanks. 38

Throughout *In Parenthesis*, this medley of voices is radically interlaced with the language of myth. When, in his Preface, Jones gives a long list of the elements that make up soldiers’ voices (representing centuries of linguistic accretion), the last item is ‘the Celtic cycle that lies, a subterranean influence as a deep water troubling, under every
tump in this Island’. By deploying the language of this legendary substratum, Jones goes further than Hardy and while this element of the text may seem congruent with the use of myth in high modernist texts, it operates very differently here, in a way that connects *In Parenthesis* with a specifically British folk-culture.

Eliot famously argued that the ‘continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity’ was ‘a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history’. Thus, in *The Waste Land*, he redeems a barren present by suggesting a parallel with the necessary barrenness of regeneration myths, enabling him to express a cautious hope for the future at the end, with ‘a flash of lightning. Then a damp gust / Bringing rain’.

In *Ulysses* (the book which occasioned Eliot’s remarks), the mythical parallel tends to challenge the values of the myth. By setting Leopold Bloom alongside Odysseus, Joyce questions ancient notions of heroism, elevating Bloom’s humble humanism and quiet forbearance to suggest that this may be a truer kind of heroism. While Eliot and Joyce take opposite views about which side of the parallel should be privileged (the ancient myth for Eliot, the modern everyman for Joyce), both regard Europe’s body of myth in the same way: it is a ‘myth kitty’ (in Larkin’s memorable phrase) to be plundered. It is the applicability of the myth that matters.

David Jones’s motives are different. He chooses his myths not because they suggest some analogy or contrast that will support a thesis, but because they are the ‘matter of Britain’. As he writes in the Preface to his later work, *The Anathemata*: ‘one is trying to make a shape out of the very things of which one is oneself made’. The result is not a programmatic parallel designed to express a position vis-à-vis contemporary history, but an ongoing series of connections and failed connections between the war as soldiers experienced it and the myths which underlie their cultural identities. We are shown not a parallel but a process, a series of attempts, in which the meaning comes from an intimate connection with the myth, rather than the light it may shed on the present.
Jones calls on a wide range of sources, but his central mythic material is Arthurian. In his Preface, he quotes Christopher Dawson’s statement: ‘if Professor Collingwood is right and it is the conservatism and loyalty to lost causes of Western Britain that has given our national tradition its distinctive character, then perhaps the middle ages were not far wrong in choosing Arthur, rather than Alfred or Edmund or Harold, as the central figure of the national heroic legend.’ It is this view of the cultural centrality of the figure of Arthur which leads Jones to lace the text with allusions to various Arthurian sources. For example, Part 4 begins with this description of dawn on the front line:

So thus he sorrowed till it was day and heard the foules sing, then somewhat he was comforted.

Stand-to.

Stand-to-arms.

In a note, Jones tells us that the first sentence is a quotation from Malory’s *Le Morte Darthur*. A second note explains the procedure for ‘stand-to’. This juxtaposition is ambiguous. The quotation refers to Lancelot who grieves because his sinfulness will deny him the Holy Grail. The sounds of the farmyard herald the morning and he is briefly comforted. As Paul Robichaud argues: ‘John Ball’s sorrow is the misery of the infantryman, unrelated to the mystical and chivalric circumstances of Launcelot’s grief. On the one hand, Jones represents Ball’s sorrow as being as heroic as Launcelot’s; on the other, Launcelot’s grief is common to all soldiers, at all times.’ In one reading, Ball’s relationship to Lancelot is like Bloom’s to Odysseus—here is true heroism in the real world; in another, their shared experience of anguish connects the two characters despite the great distance between them. For Eliot, the cry of ‘Stand-to’ might work as bathos, lamenting the distance between noble myth and dismal present. It is all of these things, and none. While the Arthurian reference might not seem conducive to modernism, Jones reaches for Malory because this is the language beneath our languages; it is who we are and so we remember it (or, Jones remembers it on our behalf).
As if to underline this, at times in the text the language of Arthurian myth becomes intermingled with the register of the common soldier, as here, when Private Saunders shares news he has overheard about the coming battle:

He said that there was a hell of a stink at Division — so he had heard from the Liaison Officer’s groom — as to the ruling of this battle — and G.S.O.2 who used to be with the 180th that long bloke and a man of great worship was in an awful pee — this groom’s brother Charlie ... reckoned he heard this torf he forgot his name came out of ther Gen’ral’s and say as how it was going to be a first clarst bollocks and murthering of Christen men and reckoned how he’d throw in his mit an’ be no party to this so-called frontal-attack never for no threat nor entreaty, for now, he says, blubbin’ they reckon, is this noble fellowship wholly mischiefed.  

Saunders’ own way of speaking is interwoven with Arthurian dictionary; the language of Malory takes its place among the heteroglosia of war, offering ambiguous glimpses of meaning and comfort.

Such attempts to find a language and form to express the existential contradictoriness of living up close to death are in a continuum with the fragmentariness and dislocation we find in Pound and Eliot. But where theirs is a willed response to modernity, the war poets are responding directly to a constitutively incoherent set of experiences. Eliot’s commitment to the impersonal voice and to the use of allusiveness and symbolism in its service, lead to its being expressive of the fracture and dissolution associated with the event of the war, but without directly referring to it, except in a way so generalised as not to be meaningful. The war poets, on the other hand, are always engaged with experience at the level of the human. Their use of fragmented form, intercutting of voices (sometimes to the point of cacophony), their pushing of language sometimes to its limits, are all in the service of showing both the humanity of man to man, and at the same time therefore what is lost of the human when both mind and body are stretched to their limits or, in the end, and regularly, ‘to shatters blown’.

What we have seen in Gurney’s and Jones’s poetry is a modernism which still preserves, and indeed is driven by, a sort of
lovingness to their subject. Their formal and linguistic counterparts to rupture, fragmentation, and dissolution are expressive both of the specific experiences of the First World War and of modernity. But in both they preserve their concern for those like them – the human speaking to and of the human, rather than impersonally distancing the human. This is a tender modernism. We see the same deep concern to attend to and honour the human at the very point when it is disappearing in the poetry of Mary Borden. Unlike Eliot and Pound, this American poet did have some direct experience of the effects of the war since she was a nurse first in Belgium and then in the Somme region. She was, like Whitman, a ‘wound-dresser’ and indeed, in her poem ‘Unidentified’ her cadences are pure Whitman, as is her stance in relation to ‘this man’ whom she determinedly and repeatedly calls on us as readers to ‘look at’. The poem’s title signals its doubleness, since she seeks to identify and make us take note of what will by the end of the poem become ‘unidentified’, just another and an unknown body. Noting that ‘Some of you scorned this man’, she exhorts,

But look! – look at the stillness of that face
Made up of little fragile bones and flesh,
Tissued of quivering muscles, fine as silk,

Rather than making the dead man speak, she makes us regard him intently; we are not allowed to look away. We see him in all his brutality as well as his nobleness (a nobleness granted purely by his being placed in the predicament of a soldier), and we see not just the about-to-be-shattered flesh but also his consciousness of the death to come:

He hears it coming –
He can feel it underneath his feet –
Death bearing down on him from every side,
Violent death, death that tears the sky to shrieking pieces,
Death that suddenly explodes out of the dreadful bowels of the earth.

Borden transposes the anticipated shattering of the body on to earth and sky – sky torn to ‘shrieking pieces’ and earth’s ‘bowels’ exploding, so that even the permanencies of nature are disrupted:
The sky long since has fallen from its dome.
Terror let loose like a gigantic wind has torn it from the ceiling of
the world
And it is flapping down in frantic shreds.
The earth, ages long ago, leaped screaming up; out of the fastness of its
ancient laws,
There is no centre now to hold it down;

In a reversal of the norm only the man is ‘solid’, but it is a temporary
state, as ‘One blow – one moment more – and that man’s face will be
a mass of matter, horrid slime – and little brittle bits –’.

‘Unidentified’ investigates unremittently the effect on a man’s
consciousness of constantly pre-figuring his own death, and then
shows his consciousness annihilated by that death. The normal order
is reversed as nature disintegrates in the same way as the man’s
fragile flesh; finally, all that is left is the void when the man gives
way to death, where only ‘those remnants of men beneath his feet
welcome him mutely when he falls beside them in the mud’. A
recurring note in these poems is the desire of the surviving soldier
to be alongside those who have died. When Gurney says, ‘You dead
tones – I lay with you under the unbroken wires once’ (‘Farewell’),
there is almost a nostalgia, a desire to lie alongside, a recognition that
it is mere chance that makes him live on while those ‘dead ones’ lie
silent. It is the recognition of the pure contingency of life, dramatic-
tically heightened by the conditions experienced by First World War
soldiers, that informs these poems and drives both their modernism
and their tenderness.

Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida*, his masterly study of the
relationship between photography and the passage of time, notes
the way that the photograph captures both that ‘This will be and this
has been’. The subject of the photograph is caught both impossibly
alive and impossibly dead (even if not yet dead, the death is implied).
Barthes tells us: ‘In front of the photograph of my mother as a child, I
tell myself: she is going to die: I shudder . . . over a catastrophe which
has already occurred.’ In front of those First World War poems
which seek to bring the alive and the dead together in a moment of
understanding, we as readers shudder, as Barthes shuddered. For
Barthes, the catastrophe is universal; for the First World War poets it was particular. For ourselves, reading Borden’s ‘Unidentified’, or Gurney’s ‘The Silent One’, or Jones’s In Parenthesis, we know both that ‘This will be and this has been’. In understanding these specific historical deaths, we also see the catastrophes of our own deaths, as we do in an entirely different way in Eliot’s The Waste Land. As the poet’s voice in ‘Unidentified’ bids us relentlessly to ‘look’, we see our own disintegration and meaninglessness, expressed in a language intensely modern. Poetic form itself almost disappears at times, while the elliptical dashes, like wounds in the flesh of the poem, remind us of what is missing – the blanks underlying the words. Modernism is always concerned with those blanks in language – allowing that they exist whilst always trying to fill them up. In the poetry of the First World War the blanks stand for the missing; that poetry, modernist or not, speaks to and for them.

Notes

3. Our terminology is distinct from the use of ‘low moderns’ in Maria DiBattista and Lucy McDiarmid, eds, High and Low Moderns: Literature and Culture 1889–1939 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), where the term is used to characterise popular writers of the period (e.g. Kipling, Wells).
Ford Madox Hueffer founded the *English Review* with its first issue in December 1908, and published both older generation and newer poets: issue 2.7, for example, contained poems by both John Galsworthy and Ezra Pound; 2.8 featured poems by both Laurence Binyon and F. S. Flint (who was later a contributor to *Some Imagist Poets*); Rupert Brooke was also an early contributor. Harriet Monroe’s *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse* (founding issue, Oct. 1912) set out to publish ‘some of the best work now being done in English verse’.


Extracted in appendix to T. S. Eliot, *Inventions of the March Hare: Poems 1909–1917*, ed. Christopher Ricks (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), 387. Writing eighteen years later, in *Poetry* (Sept. 1946), he further recalled that ‘At that stage ... Whitman had to be seen through French eyes’: extracted in appendix to Eliot, *Inventions of the March Hare*, 388.


28. Gurney, *Collected Poems*, 233, 112. See also the last two lines of ‘Serenade’ which similarly combines these two registers: ‘True, the size of the rum ration was still a shocker / But at last over Aube’s the majesty of the dawn’s veil swept’: *ibid.*, 240.


30. Hawlin demonstrates that as ‘Gurney’s engagement with Whitman begins significantly to grow, so his attack on the “polite” comes to the fore’; he traces Gurney’s pejorative use of the word in a series of poems and argues, ‘Whitman is clearly the main influence on these attitudes’: Hawlin, ‘Ivor Gurney’s Creative Reading of Walt Whitman’, 44, 45.

34. In that, it is distinct from Hardy’s ‘Channel Firing’, in which the corpses in a graveyard speak to each other, awakened by the sound of naval exercises. Hardy’s effect is ironic, his dead people are representative types of village life; Gurney’s speaker is someone he has known.
40. ‘Ulysses, Order, and Myth’, in *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), 177; Eliot’s review essay was originally published in *The Dial*, 75.5 (Nov. 1923).
42. As Declan Kiberd has put it: ‘Soldiers were dying in defence of the outmoded epic codes which permeate *The Odyssey*. . . . [T]he very ordinariness of the modern Ulysses, Mr Leopold Bloom, becomes a standing reproach to the myth of ancient military heroism’: Declan Kiberd, ‘Introduction’, in James Joyce, *Ulysses* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992), x.
48. Jones’s note tells us, ‘various passages of Malory have influence here’: *ibid.*, 219.
51. Gurney, *Collected Poems*, 266.
PART III
Gertrude Stein is the most radically inventive American poet of the modernist period. Yet recognition of the scale of her achievement has been thwarted by resistance to her language-centred practice, which, paradoxically, has kept her work at the cutting edge of poetics for a century. The greater the resistance to Stein, the more radical her work becomes. Yet, inevitably, despite new flashpoints, Stein’s work has finally, in the twenty-first century, moved, as she imagined, from ‘outlaw’ to ‘classic’.

But is Stein even American? Since her writing is in English, with an American accent, it is hard to see her classified as anything but. And yet she was a French resident writing in English and her Americanness is a term of art, an artifice, which is, ironically, what gives her the strongest claim to be an exemplary American poet – that is, if America is understood more as a utopian possibility than as a nativist condition. Stein well understood this. For her, the central ontological fact of American literature was that it was written by people who are new to their world. This is what made her ‘a real American’. As she wrote in ‘What Is English Literature’, the centuries-old vertical relation of names and place in the ‘island life’ of England was displaced by a newly emerging, horizontal, relation of name and place. Stein calls this American:

And so the poetry of England is so much what it is, it is the poetry of the things with which any of them are shut in in their daily, completely daily island life. . . . And now think how American literature tells something. It tells something because that anything is not connected with what would be daily living if they had it. . . .

Think about all persistent American writing. There is inside it as separation, a separation from what is chosen to what is that from which
it has been chosen. Think of them, from Washington Irving, Emerson, Hawthorne, Walt Whitman, Henry James. They knew that there is a separation a quite separation between what is chosen and from what there is the choosing.¹

Stein’s radically anti-nativist view of America is closely connected to a remark of Emerson in ‘Experience’: ‘I am ready to die out of nature, and be born again into this new yet unapproachable America I have found in the West’;⁴ and also to Charles Olson’s metaphorically westward view, in his book about Moby Dick, that ‘space’ is the defining dynamic for Americaness, where ‘space’ is as much linguistic as otherwise.⁵ Stein’s choosing her Americaness contrasts with her being chosen as Jew, an affiliation to which she is aversive. All of which makes Stein a kind of affiliative (self-defining) antinomianian, linking her to Emily Dickinson and the antinomian strain in American literature,⁶ something Stein also figures as her ‘genius’ and marks her anti-identitarian view of human mind over human nature in ‘Identity: A Poem’ (to which I will return).

Stein was a writer of non-national modernism, a foundational member of a permanent diaspora of writers-in-English who hail from otherwheres. English was not Stein’s native language but a language of the pen and in this she is a mother to the growing number of poets, from all over the world, who choose English as the language of their verse. That’s not to say that Stein’s writing is not rooted in American vernacular, but that this foundation was a choice: she is local by election not by circumstance.

In her modernist compositions, Stein found an alternative to the teleological thinking that underwrites much aesthetics as well as ethics: the idea that meaning lies outside or beyond what is at hand. She found meaning inside the words of which a poem is composed, a discovery and exploration of the wordness of words that has parallels in Albert Einstein’s discovery of relativity, Sigmund Freud’s uncovering of the unconscious, and Ludwig Wittgenstein’s encounter with ordinary language.⁷

In Stein’s work, every word has a potentially equal weight in a democracy of language. Rather than emphasise nouns or verbs, Stein created a writing in which articles and prepositions, pronouns and
conjunctions, would count as much as nouns and verbs, where the words and phrases are no longer subordinated to received prescriptions of grammar but shimmer in syntactic equality in poems that avert beginnings and endings for the ongoingsness of middles: poems that elide past and future in favour of continuous presents. As when paintings collapse figures onto ground so that the action of the painting occurs on the same plane, without the subordination of perspective, Stein’s compositional space, in her most radical works, collapses the separation of viewing and viewed, see-er and seen, providing a breakthrough for the Baudelairean impasse that had pushed the poem to the verge of voyeurism, objectification, and spectacle. Perhaps this achievement is best described in terms of representation, for Stein created works that do not represent something other than what is happening as it is happening, works where the entity of writing takes on a fullness it rarely is allowed to sustain, where literary figures are grounded in actual word stuff and where the hierarchic distinction between figure and ground is collapsed into a compositional plane where words sing not so much for their supper as for our collective succour.

Stein’s poetry is made up of everyday words, with a marked absence of literary allusion, symbolism, and the use of the traditional form of lyric poetry, including the verse line. This gives her work a distinctly different cast from that of her contemporaries T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound but aligns her, albeit obliquely, with William Carlos Williams, Wallace Stevens, and Mina Loy. In Stein’s early novel *Three Lives* (written 1905–6), she worked out some of the key issues of her subsequent work. She found poetry in African-American speech. ‘Melanctha: Each One As She May’, while steeped in racist primitivism, breaks open the prose sentence to rhythmic patterning, especially variation through repetition, that hewed close to the vernacular, bringing the spoken into the written:

It ain’t very easy for you to understand what I was meaning by what I was just saying to you, and perhaps some of the good people I like so wouldn’t think very much, any more than you do, Miss Melanctha,
about the ways I have to be good. But that’s no matter Miss Melanctha. . . . No, Miss Melanctha too, I don’t mean this except only just the way I say it. I ain’t got any other meaning Miss Melanctha, and it’s that what I mean when I am saying about being really good. . . . I don’t know as you understand now any better what I mean by what I was just saying to you. But you certainly do know now Miss Melanctha, that I always mean it what I say when I am talking.  

In her close listening to black speech (and to the broken German-English of ‘The Gentle Lena’11) Stein, foundering, found essential ingredients for her non-speech based, non-representational compositional practices, while developing the style of repeated saying as meaning that would reach fruition in *The Making of Americans: Being a History of a Family’s Progress*. For Stein, repetition, as it emerges from the vernacular, is a constantly shifting modality that allows the individual ‘insistence’ of each person to emerge. For Stein, repetition is the opposite of sameness, for each repetition is a variance. Repetition resists essence:

A thing that seems to be exactly the same thing may seem to be a repetition but is it. . . . Is there repetition or is there insistence. I am inclined to believe there is no such thing as repetition. And really how can there be. . . . Expressing any thing there can be no repetition because the essence of that expression is insistence, and if you insist you must each time use emphasis and if you use emphasis it is not possible while anybody is alive that they should use exactly the same emphasis.  

Stein’s first great, still unassimilated, masterpiece (I use this word less ironically than polemically) was *The Making of Americans* (1903–11), which begins as a nineteenth-century novel of the Jewish-American immigrant experience and ends as a breakthrough epic poem, where the phrasal repetition of her earlier work becomes, in ‘David Hersland’ and ‘History of a Family’s Progress’, the final two sections of the work, a spellbinding, pulsing modular repetition of word clusters that breaks with any sense of speaking or ‘insistence’ and resembles more logical, or quasi-procedural, permutations of propositions. In the linguistically opaque ‘wordness’ of the final section, Stein foreshadows the formal breakthrough she would make in *Tender Buttons*, while conveying a zen/existential sense of life-as-living, without logos or telos:
Anyone is one being one being living and anyone is saying something and anyone is saying anything again and anyone is one having been in family living and anyone is one not beginning anything of being in any family having and anyone is one being one being in family living and being one then not beginning anything again and being one then saying anything again and having been saying something and being then not saying anything and being then again not saying something and being then again saying anything. . . . Almost every one coming to be almost an old one, coming to be an old one is one having it then as being something existing being one going on being living. Almost every one being one coming to be almost an old one is one having been being in some family living. Almost every one coming to be an old one is one having been being in some family having. Almost every one coming to being an old one is one having been being in some family living. Almost every one coming to be almost an old one is being in some family living. Almost every one coming to be an old one is being in some family living. Almost every one coming to be almost an old one is being in some family living. Almost every one coming to be an old one is being in some family living.

Although *Three Lives* and *The Making of Americans* were radical innovations, neither was as revolutionary as *Tender Buttons* (begun in 1912 and published in 1914). *Tender Buttons* is the touchstone work of radical modernist poetry, the fullest realisation of the turn to language and the most perfect realisation of wordness, where word and object merge. No work from Europe or the Americas had gone so far in creating a work of textual autonomy, where the words do not represent something outside of the context in which they are performed and where the meanings are made in and through composition and arrangement. The sections of the work are not ‘about’ subjects that are discussed but are their own discrete word objects (verbal constellations). Meaning in these works is not something to be extracted or deciphered but rather to be responded to, so that the reader’s associations create a cascading perceptual experience, guided by the uncanny arrangement of the words. The more a reader can associate with the multiple vectors of each word or phrase meanings, the more fully they can feast on the unfolding semantic banquet of the work. The key is not to puzzle it out but to let the figurative plenitude of each word play out; for, indeed, this work is not invested in a predetermining structure or in precluding or abstracting meaning. *Tender Buttons* does not resist figuration but entices it. And the work
is rife with linguistic and philosophical investigation as well as an uncannily acute self-awareness of its own processes.

Consider the title, which has many associations that bear a direct relation to Stein’s poetics. Buttons are used to fasten (attach or join) discrete pieces of fabric; this suggests a compositional practice akin to quilting and collage and situates the work not only as a form of practical art or craft, but also suggests a connection to what has often been considered (and denigrated as) women’s work (buttons are often ornamental or decorative). The sense of domestic space is also suggested by the section subtitles – ‘Food’ and ‘Rooms’ – suggested only, because the association is loose. You press buttons: the operating system here is point and click in a touch-sensitive textual environment. A button is also a small protuberance: stud or knob or bud (its etymological root). Tender Buttons suggests nipples or clitorises: the poetics is decentred eroticism (meaning disseminated evenly over the body of the text not cathected onto nouns or plot) – which is to say that the work is aversive to phallic or climax-oriented satisfaction. Tender Buttons, while not a manifesto, advocates a poetics of acting ‘so that there is no use in a center’, where ‘the difference is spreading’. Tender, like the poem, is gently caressing, fragile, soft (rather than rigid or hard), edible (tender food), effeminate (weak or delicate). But tender also means money, something offered in exchange for something else, as in legal tender. In the semiotic economy of the poem, words are tender and the poem is fundamentally involved with language as a system of exchange (rather than ‘pointing’, word to object). Yet Stein’s work is not random but intended – as she says, ‘no mistake is intended’, even if she is a ‘mischief intender’. And Stein’s approach to composition is to be less a controlling of language than its tender.

Now let’s segue into the first part of the first section of the three-part work:

A CARAFE, THAT IS A BLIND GLASS.

A kind in glass and a cousin, a spectacle and nothing strange a single hurt color and an arrangement in a system to pointing. All this and not ordinary, not unordered in not resembling. The difference is spreading.
This poem addresses the relation of word and object (this first section of *Tender Button* is called ‘Objects’) – or, perhaps better to say, signifier and signified. It brings to mind Ferdinand de Saussure’s suggestion in his contemporaneous *Cours de linguistique générale* (1906–11) that language works by creating a system of difference of one sound from another. Difference also suggests sexual or gender difference. The poem tries to break down the difference between signifiers and signifieds, to have words ‘be’ themselves, stand for nothing but what they are. Stein says ‘The difference is spreading’ – on the one hand, this suggests that difference is proliferating, on the other, it suggests a way to see signifier and signified fused or melted onto one plane, when we ‘spread’ words instead of using words ‘in a system of pointing’. Think of painting with words or think, in painting, again, about breaking down the foreground and background of perspective to get the ‘radical flattening’ of some ‘abstract’ painting (namely, all surface, no depth). So, says Stein, this approach is not random or chaotic or meaningless because it doesn’t ‘point’ or doesn’t use resemblance (‘not unordered in not resembling’: not unordered but rather ordered differently). The poem then might be seen as a carafe (a transparent/glass container: one view of what language is) that is a ‘blind glass’ (one that you don’t see through because it is filled with something dark, so it takes possession of itself). Now, circle back to the double meaning of ‘spectacle’: eyeglasses and something one looks at from a distance, something one is separated from, as by a glass, or even the frame of a stage. But imagine if we could melt this difference between us and a world we look at as spectacle, imagine if we could avert looking at our words as glasses that project distance, that separate us from the world. How can we break down this difference, this separation? How can we turn objects, how can we turn words, into tender buttons? This is not what the poem means. This is not a paraphrase. But it sketches a set of investments that run through the full work.

Those investments come in the form of a constellation of repeated words: Stein’s approach is both to derange and rearrange: ‘There was an occupation’, she writes at the beginning of ‘Rooms’. Reading this work presents a necessary challenge to thematic close reading,
which won’t work, while still requiring close scrutiny through an associational/ambient reading of the linguistic prompts and an allegorical reading of form (thinking about what the form means).  

All key words in *Tender Buttons* are repeated numerous times but the repetition is distributed throughout the work, making much of the poem less rhythmically repetitive and more abstract than other Stein works. Among the most frequently used words (after articles and conjunctions) are such forms of *to be as is* (1,017 times, almost 7 per cent of the words used): the copulative is literarily procreative. There follows a very high frequency of *be, are, and being* (in keeping with Stein’s approach to the ‘continuous present’); as well as *was*. Other frequently used words include *little* (ninety times), *means* (forty-four), *strange* (twenty-five) as well as *makes, shows, color, white, whole, change, single, same, suppose, and nothing*. The word ‘difference’ appears thirteen times in the work; that word plus ‘differ’ and ‘different’ occur twenty-four times. *Center* occurs twenty-two times. *Come or coming or comes* makes thirty-five erotic ‘Cuddling comes in continuing a change’, but also ‘The truth has come’ (and keeps coming). *Resemblance* and *arrangement* each come into the text about a dozen times.

In ‘Roastbeef’, the opening section of ‘Food’, the second part of *Tender Buttons*, Stein briefly returns to rhythmic repetition through the use of gerunds that create a palpable sense of ‘continuous present’. This passage is among the most evocative and enthralling of the work:

> In the inside there is sleeping, in the outside there is reddening, in the morning there is meaning, in the evening there is feeling. In the evening there is feeling. In feeling anything is resting, in feeling anything is mounting, in feeling there is resignation, in feeling there is recognition, in feeling there is recurrence and entirely mistaken there is pinching. All the standards have steamers and all the curtains have bed linen and all the yellow has discrimination and all the circle has circling. This makes sand.

If Emerson saw meaning as inflected by mood, Stein brings it into a dynamically diurnal intimacy with the feeling of time passing, from morning to evening, as well as the movements of meaning through the changes of resting, mounting, resignation, recognition, and
recurrence. We are pinched awake by recognising these conditions and by recognising a view from ‘outside’ ourselves and ‘inside’ ourselves; indeed, it is this torquing of outside and inside that marks language’s semiotic play, hear/not here. Words shift in use so that our norms and standards can take flight in exception and our lives can be as grounded as grains of ‘sand’. The tender of our language is change and exchange:

All the time that there is use there is use and any time there is a surface there is a surface, and every time there is an exception there is an exception and every time there is a division there is a dividing. . . . tender and changing and external and central and surrounded and singular and simple and the same and the surface and the circle and the shine and the succor²³

In Tender Buttons, Stein was engaged in making a dialogic poetic of non-resemblance: words not dominating the world with their order but allowing the world to inhabit the words. Tender Buttons marks a decisive break with a voyeuristic poetics of subject and object, looker and looked at, figure and ground. It elides perspectival distance in favour of intimacy, non-goal-directed erotics, and gustation.

Stein’s most famous line, ‘Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose’, was written at the same time as Tender Buttons in a tribute to Emily Dickinson (‘So great so great Emily. / Sew grate sew grate Emily’).²⁴ Nothing better shows Stein’s insistence on ‘is’ and nothing better demonstrates her view that repetition (as a stitch is sewing) creates variance and meaning occurs though use and context. Stein begins ‘Rose is’, not ‘A rose is’, suggesting that Rose is the name of a person; the word morphs from proper name to flower name and from noun to verb. The line gives a sense of dynamic and erotic movement – rose arose aroused – with the implicit play on eros; it also insists that things (and words) are what they are and not symbols – a turn away from the symbolic use of the word ‘rose’ so common in English verse but also hearkening back to Juliet’s plea to Romeo that we are more than our names: ‘What’s in a name? that which we call a rose / By any other name would smell as sweet.’²⁵ The line also brings to mind Marcel Duchamp’s equally iconic pseudonym, ‘Rrose Selavy’ – eros, c’est la
vie — used first for Man Ray’s 1921 photo of Duchamp dressed as a woman. In 1947, Stein commented on her motto: ‘Now listen! I’m no fool. I know that in daily life we don’t go around saying is a is a is a. Yes, I’m no fool; but I think that in that line the rose is red for the first time in English poetry for a hundred years.’²⁶ Note ‘a hundred years’: not ever, just since the romantic period.

Stein created poems that do not resemble the look of the world; rather, they mime the world’s manner of existence. Her choice of prose gives her work a generic quality: it doesn’t look like poetry and yet it can be nothing but. Throughout her career, Stein flirted with different literary genres, from novel to mystery story to essay to primer to children’s book to autobiography. Her portraits are touchstone works in this respect and none more so than ‘If I Told Him: A Completed Portrait of Picasso’ from 1923. To fully experience this work, it is best to listen to Stein reciting it herself: her startlingly bell-like voice, with vividly precise pronunciation, provides a key to the moiré-like sound-patterning in the work.²⁷

The portrait is ‘Completed’ but not complete: it’s not all-encompassing but done, not perfect but worked, not a finished product but the record of a compositional process. The first line is a vernacular question without a question mark: ‘If I told him would he like it. Would he like it if I told him.’ ‘He’ is presumably Picasso, and you get the sense that no, he probably wouldn’t like it, but what is the ‘it’ he wouldn’t like, doesn’t want to hear? ‘Would he like it would Napoleon would Napoleon would would he like it.’²⁸ He probably wouldn’t like to be compared to Napoleon – the short guy with the big ego and the power to go with it. Stein then enters into a series of permutations of each of the words she used, breaking down the subject-verb-object stadium of the sentence, letting it be known that dominance is a kind of grammar. How can a textual composition sound not an ‘over there’ but as a here? How can a portrait avoid semblance and become its own entity?

‘If I Told Him’ is a portrait that doesn’t show but does. It’s teasing as it teases out the problems of resemblance. The next set of four sentences enacts the structure of the linguistic sign: ‘Now. / Not now. / And now. / Now’. ‘Now’ is always also ‘Not now’: language
is materially present as we hear it (make it here/adhere) but also evokes what is not here. *Now*, however, sounds what it is, its open vowel ‘ow’ makes the now of its enunciation palpable, as a kind of onomatopoeia. ‘Now. / Not now’ is similar to Freud’s *fort/da*: the game a child plays to come to accommodate the absence of his mother, throwing and retrieving a ball and saying ‘there’/‘gone’. This rhythmic toggling or oscillation of presence/absence is the essence of the sound-patterning in ‘If I Told Him’. This play is immediately followed by ‘Exactly as as kings’.30 ‘[A]s as’ is this work’s keynote: one thing looks like another, it is like or as the other. As is in between: as is like as: *exactly* identical in resembling resembling. As for kings – Picasso a king, but also king versus queen (female sovereign or queer, a use that goes back to the eighteenth century); king as the viewer in Renaissance perspective, which is here flattened by ‘as as’.

The poem then provides a bravura onomatopoetic riff, referencing *queens* in the sense of a female linguistic rule (in contrast to the spectacle of perspective – ‘father and farther’) and queer rule; there is also a marked sense of coital rhythmic contraction: ‘Shutters shut and open so do queens. Shutters shut and shutters and so shutters shut and shutters and so and so shutters and so shutters shut and so shutters shut and shutters and so. And so shutters shut and so and also’.31 In this passage we experience the toggling of the shutters opening and shutting. Once again there is play on the structure of the sign: a conventional idea of verbal reference is that words are like window glass, in that they transparently let you view what is on the other side; in contrast, by rhythmically opening and shutting the language’s shutters, Stein viscerally shows language itself as a ‘blind glass’, here/gone, here/gone.

In 1920, just three years before ‘If I Told Him’, Duchamp made a related work *Fresh Widow*, which is a picture of blinded French windows, the panes (pains) shuttered with black leather. This play of ‘exact resemblance to exact resemblance’, where the words sound like what they mean, is picked up, with *as* as key in ‘As trains. / Has trains. / Has trains. / As trains. / As trains’. Stein’s formulation for a portrait of ‘exact resemblance to exact resemblance’ is the fuller
statement of her poetics of ‘as as’. It is linguistically exact, word and object are overlaid, in the sense that a word is identical to itself and yet, through echo and repetition, always different: ‘Exact resemblance to exact resemblance the exact resemblance as exact as a resemblance, exactly as resembling, exactly resembling, exactly in resemblance exactly a resemblance, exactly and resemblance. For this is so. Because.’\textsuperscript{32} Perhaps Stein was thinking of Man Ray’s 1922 photograph of her, in which Picasso’s famous panting of her is pictured as if it were an exact resemblance of her exact resemblance: a mirror image of herself or herself a mirror image of the painting.

In 1926, Stein wrote ‘Composition as Explanation’ for lectures at Oxford and Cambridge. Along with ‘An Elucidation’ and her \textit{Lectures in America}, this is Stein’s most revealing work of poetics. In this work, Stein offers an alternative to persistent theories of the avant-garde. Stein’s textual invention was more avant-garde than most of the poetic innovations of the modernist avant-garde in Europe, although she was not part of a group or movement (Dickinson – ‘Sacred Emily’ – is her forebear in this respect).\textsuperscript{33} Moreover, while Stein’s work may suggest affinities with ‘postmodernism’, it is historically and aesthetically more accurate to rethink what modernism is after taking Stein’s work into account.

‘Composition as Explanation’ rejects the basic idea of the avant-garde as being advanced or ahead of its time: ‘No one is ahead of his time, it is only that the particular variety of creating his time is the one that his contemporaries who also are creating their own time refuse to accept.’ In contrast to the idea of a vanguard, Stein insists on the poet’s radical contemporaneity – a contemporaneity that puts her or him out of step with accepted opinion, which, she acerbically notes, is often ‘several generations behind’. The poet is not ahead of the times but rather the culture is behind the times, or, as she memorably puts it, is ‘out of it’. ‘The time of the composition is a natural thing and the time in the composition is a natural thing it is a natural thing and it is a contemporary thing.’\textsuperscript{34} Stein’s persistent commitment to the ‘continuous present’, as she invokes it in this essay, and her aversion to the formulaic plotting of beginning, middle, and end, extends not just to her art work but to her views about art and literary history;
progressivist ideas about the development of art were, for her, tied up in a nineteenth-century tradition that she contrasts with the continuous existential and textual present that she realises in the queer final sections of *The Making of Americans.*

Stein’s writing takes direct aim at teleology. Her poetics repeat over and again that meanings are not ulterior or interior but come into being by doing things. Fundamental to this ontological dimension in Stein’s work is her anti-masculinism, her critique of what she calls, in a signature 1927 poem, ‘Patriarchal Poetry’:

Let her try . . . Is no gain . . . Aim less / Sword less . . . Patriarchal Poetry is the same as Patriotic poetry . . . In differently undertaking their being there . . . Patriarchal poetry left left left right left . . . Patriarchal poetry the difference

The ‘difference’ continues to be ‘spreading’, to echo *Tender Buttons.* Stein refuses the idea that the poet is able to assert power or control over an inchoate world that is other than, or outside, oneself. She works out an alternative compositional practice that reimagines the reader/writer relationship and that avers representation through a collapsing of figure and ground.

‘Nothing changes from generation to generation’, she writes in ‘Composition as Explanation’, ‘except the thing seen and that makes a composition.’ The *entity* of a composition is akin to human mind and stands in contrast to the vicissitudes of human nature (identity): not what it is but how it can be apprehended, as she formulates it in her 1935 work ‘Identity: A Poem’. Since, for Stein, compositional process is primary, her poetics and her poems are both written as compositions: her critical writing is not secondary, expository, or explanatory. It does what it does by doing it, says what it says by saying it. In this, Stein sharply departs from the normative critical and polemical manifesto styles of many of her fellow modernist innovators. She refused to explain the inventiveness of unconventional art in conventional prose, challenging the writing assumptions not just of poetry but also of art and literary history and criticism.

In the 1930s, as she was writing about the difference between the virtually unknowable mind and an all-too-knowable identity, Stein
became famous – notorious, even – as a personality; all the while, her poetry remained relatively obscure.\(^{39}\) Her most popular book, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, her own story told in the voice of her lifelong lover and partner, was written in late 1932 and published the following year, just before her sixtieth birthday. The Virgil Thompson opera *Four Saints in Three Acts*, for which she wrote the libretto in 1927, opened on Broadway in February 1934 in a production directed by John Houseman, with sets by Florine Stettheimer, and with an all-black cast. Stein’s libretto included the line ‘Pigeons on the grass alas’: if the public didn’t understand what it meant, that just fuelled a very great, often delighted, commotion about Gertrude Stein.\(^{40}\) Stein’s wildly successful lecture tour in America began in the fall of the same year; *Lectures in America* followed soon after. In sharp contrast to this newly public Stein, consider two of her most aesthetically challenging and astounding works, *How To Write* (1931) and *Stanzas In Meditation* (1932), which had no public. No doubt Stein was quite conscious that her celebrity status would give her a standing in American culture that her aesthetic inventions had not. But perhaps her celebrity and her obscurity are complementary parts of her own self-fashioning. *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* is the signal example. But Stein’s self-fashioning of the scores of portraits made of her by painters and photographers is equally significant, according to Wanda Corn and Tirza Latimer in the catalogue to the 2011 exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery of the Smithsonian Institution and the Contemporary Jewish Museum in San Francisco.\(^ {41}\) The dual portraits of Alice and Gertrude have become iconic lesbian, feminist, and Jewish images. Given Stein’s deep engagement with portraiture, it makes sense to see her hand in the making of these images by so many different artists.

Though she made herself a celebrity, Stein is not always celebrated. She remains controversial not only because she challenged the prevailing notions of poetry, language, and communication, but also because she defied norms of gender and genre, ethnicity and nationality. While Stein was radical in many ways, like some of the other great modernists, she was quite conservative in other ways, as
exemplified by her adamant opposition to the New Deal. Stein was anti-German, anti-Nazi, and anti-Hitler; nonetheless she translated and wrote an introduction for the speeches of Philippe Pétain, the leader of Vichy France, who worked in collaboration with the Nazi occupation – something puzzling if we think of Stein as ‘American’, less puzzling (though hardly happy) if we frame her as an elderly French woman living in the Vichy-controlled countryside, protected by her neighbours. Despite Stein and Toklas’s extremely precarious situation living in the south-east of France during the time of the Systematic Extermination of the European Jews, she and Toklas survived and Stein’s great art collection was not looted. How that happened is a puzzle.

Stein takes on being puzzling in her last major work, the feminist opera *The Mother of Us All*, published and performed in 1947, the year after she died and a couple of years after she wrote her exuberant postwar celebration of American GIs, *Brewsie And Willie*. *The Mother of Us All* is the second opera libretto she wrote for Virgil Thomson. In words Stein gives to suffragette Susan B. Anthony, she says, ‘It is a puzzle. I am not puzzled but it is a puzzle. . . . I am not puzzled but it is very puzzling.’ There is no repetition in these lines because each use of the word ‘puzzle’ means something different. Looking back on her own life and work, Stein says in *The Mother of Us All*, in the voice of Susan B. Anthony: ‘We cannot retrace our steps, going forward may be the same as going backwards.’ As Emerson might also have said, what counts most is not what is ‘won’ but what is ‘done’, a distinction that is at the heart of her anti-teleological ethics and her ontological aesthetics.

In a 1946 interview, Stein says that she got from Cézanne the idea that in composition one thing was as important as another thing. Each part is an important as the whole. . . . 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.

Fundamental to this practice is Stein’s conception of the ‘entity’ status of verbal language, similar to the entity status of the picture plane in Cézanne: language not used for the goal of expressing
ideas through it; rather, language is valued for itself, in itself, and as itself.

Stein’s is a poetry of the everyday that takes us not to some other place but, rather, puts us in contact with where we are: not a re-presenting of ideas but a merging with things. Stein dissolves the antagonistic relationship between word and object, the thing and its description. The writing and the reading enters into a dialogue: listening and performing in place of apprehension or fixing. Stein puts it this way at the end of The Mother of Us All: ‘Do you know because I tell you so, or do you know, do you know.’

The problem Stein keeps coming back to in her last work is that, if the structures of power are not changed, then bringing women into power, getting the vote, doesn’t change a thing. ‘You have only got the name, you have not got the game,’ says Jo the Loiterer, who cannot vote, even after women’s suffrage, because he, like a nomadic play by Gertrude Stein, has no fixed address.

Stein, as she writes of Susan B. Anthony, was a ‘martyr all my life not to what I won but to what was done’. So, then, it is not what you’ve got that counts, nor the gold in your pocket, nor the marble in your mind’s eye. Not, that is, the canonical statue symbolising the achievement of the goal but our loitering in between where we were and where we are going; our lingering in reality without dissembling that we have gotten to an other side.

Stein’s haunting critique of teleology comes in an ordinary phrase: ‘has it not gone because now it is had’ — and have we not been had by it. It’s a matter of struggle and ‘strife’ not victory.

‘In my long life in my long life’.

Notes


2. Stein writes in the opening page of The Making of Americans (1925): ‘It has always seemed to me a rare privilege, this, of being an American, a real


8. Stein uses the term ‘continuous present’ in ‘Composition as Explanation’: Stein, Writings 1903–1932, 525.


11. ‘You don’t know how nice you like it Herman when you try once how you can do it. You just don’t be afraid of nothing, Herman’: ‘The Gentle Lena’, Three Lives, in Stein, Writings 1903–1932, 260.


14. Gertrude Stein, Tender Buttons, ed. Seth Perlow (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2014). Perlow has made some changes in previous presentations of the work, based on a review of relevant documents. They include a change in the way the titles appear. References to this work are given by both section title and page numbers. There are about 15,000 words in the work, which is in prose format, though not a prose poem as that term has been previously defined. This is about five times the length of Eliot’s The Waste Land (1922), the most canonical American long poem of the era.
15. The iconic ‘Act so that . . . ’ is the first sentence of ‘Rooms’, the third part of the work; ‘The difference is spreading’ is from the first section of ‘Objects’, the first part of the work: Stein, *Tender Buttons*, 63, 11.

16. ‘Tender’ appears ten times in the work, always suggesting tenderness, but also note ‘a transfer is not neglected’: ‘Roastbeef’, ibid., 40. While I don’t think the ten/tender was planned, the modus operandi of the works potentiates such serendipitous collusions.

17. ‘Breakfast’ and ‘Mutton’, the third and second sections of ‘Food’: ibid., 44, 42; emphasis added.

18. Ibid., 63.


20. In contrast, ‘is’ constitutes less than 2 per cent of the words in *The Waste Land*. Moreover, none of the key words from *Tender Buttons* occur with any frequency, if at all, in Eliot’s poem.


22. ‘Life is a train of moods like a string of beads, and, as we pass through them, they prove to be many-colored lenses which paint the world their own hue, and each shows only what lies in its focus’: ‘Experience’, in Emerson, *Essays and Lectures*, 473.


24. ‘Sacred Emily’, in Stein, *Writings 1903–1932*, 390. In her preface to Dickinson’s *Poems*, second series, Mabel Loomis Todd writes about Dickinson’s ‘sew grate’ stitches: ‘Most of the poems had been carefully copied on sheets of note-paper, and tied in little fascicules, each of six or eight sheets’: Emily Dickinson, *Poems*, 2nd ser., ed. Mabel Loomis Todd and T. W. Higginson (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1891). ‘Rose’ appears a number of times in the three early collections, as flower and verb (*a rose* and *rose*), including, in the first volume (1890), a poem (XVII) the editors titled ‘The Wife’: ‘She rose to his requirement, dropped / The playthings of her life / To take the honorable work / Of woman and of wife’.


27. Sound file and text available at <writing.upenn.edu/library/Stein-Gertrude_If-I-Told-Him_1923.html>.


31. Ibid., 507, 506.

32. Ibid., 507, 506.

33. See Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, tr. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984). For those following his gender-biased schema, America’s two most avant-garde poets, Dickinson and Stein, would not be considered avant-garde at all.

34. Ibid., 521, 528. Contrast this with the lament of Hugh Selwyn Mauberley: ‘For three years, out of key with his time, / He strove to resuscitate the dead art / Of poetry; to maintain “the sublime” / In the old sense’: *Personae: The Shorter Poems of Ezra Pound*, ed. Lea Baechler and A. Walton Litz (New York: New Directions, 1990), 185. Mauberley is ‘out of key with his time’ while Stein proposes that the modern composition makes the time and that it’s those that fail to get with it that are the ones who are out of key.

35. In ‘Beginning Again with The Making of Americans’, a chapter in his dissertation (in progress at the University of Pennsylvania), Vaclav Paris views the work as a ‘queer epic . . . with different parameters than those of “straight” time’.


37. Ibid., 520.


41. Wanda Corn and Tirza Latimer, *Seeing Gertrude Stein: Five Stories* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011); Corn has elaborated
on this point in subsequent lectures. See the web exhibit from the National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, available at <http://www.npg.si.edu/exhibit/stein/>.

42. For a full account, see ‘Gertrude Stein’s War Years: Setting the Record Straight’, which I edited for Jacket2 (2012), available at <jacket2.org/feature/gertrude-steins-war-years-setting-record-straight>.

43. Stein, Writings 1932–1946, 817, 819.


46. Ibid., 818.

47. Ibid., 819.

48. Ibid.
Guillaume Apollinaire, William Blake, E. E. Cummings, John Donne, Homer, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Ben Jonson, James Joyce, D. H. Lawrence, Lucretius, F. T. Marinetti, Marianne Moore, Alexander Pope, Ezra Pound, all of the Pre-Raphaelites, Arthur Rimbaud, Gertrude Stein, Jonathan Swift, William Carlos Williams, W. B. Yeats, Louis Zukofsky – these are just some of the authors to whom critics have likened the modernist Mina Loy.¹ ‘There’s little in Mina Loy that resembles anyone’, Keith Tuma and Maeera Schreiber exuberantly proclaim in their introduction to the ground-breaking, compendious 1998 essay collection, Mina Loy: Woman and Poet.² Yet when that introduction was written, Tuma himself had already yielded to the critical temptation to compare.³ With rare exception, Loy is juxtaposed with canonical figures to generate short-hand descriptions of her style and back-handed compliments on her skill. The comparisons shore up her fragmented reputation: in the first half of the twentieth century, Loy was a British expatriate prominently associated with Futurist, Dada, and surrealist circles in Florence, New York, and Paris respectively, but for reasons historical, cultural, and personal she fell out of literary favour more than three decades before her death in 1966.⁴ Loy now shares the fate of all marginalised writers: her reader requires orienting coordinates by way of introduction. The margin marks a limit, a boundary, a necessary exile: borders demarcate the writing on a page, lesser-known writers define the literary canon. But as Mina Loy well knew, it is not entirely disadvantageous to be the outsider: to exist to exist within a margin is to occupy a space beyond need, a space of potentially exultant and liberating excess.
Loy started publishing poems in 1914. The poem sequence ‘Songs to Joannes’ remains Loy’s best-known work, not least because it explicitly details sexual relationships from a woman’s point of view. Its release in Others magazine in 1917 brought condemnation from the American poetry community. Loy’s second major sequence, ‘Anglo-Mongrels and the Rose’, was written between 1920 and 1925; portions of this autobiographical verse satire appeared in the Little Review, the periodical renowned for first publishing sections of Joyce’s Ulysses. Loy’s poetry also appeared in the same 1922 Dial issue that included T. S. Eliot’s The Waste Land. Loy produced just a single volume of original verse in her lifetime: The Lunar Baedeker (1923). A book forever cursed with a misspelt title, Loy’s travel guide to the moon was published by Contact Editions. Ernest Hemingway allegedly agreed to publish with Contact because he was delighted at the prospect of sharing a press with the likes of William Carlos Williams and Mina Loy; such was the prestige conferred by an affiliation with Loy in the 1920s. But as early as 1944, the American poet Kenneth Rexroth republished Loy’s poems to resuscitate her dormant reputation, even as Loy continued to produce art and literature in her home in Aspen, Colorado. In 1958 Jonathan Williams and Jargon Editions reproduced a selected edition of Loy’s work entitled Lunar Baedeker and Time-Tables, and, come the latter part of the twentieth century, Roger Conover’s double editorial efforts – The Last Lunar Baedeker (1982) and The Lost Lunar Baedeker (1996) – were eagerly received. Nevertheless, Loy was continuously, confidently described as ‘one of modernism’s greatest forgotten poets’. Given that Loy was praised in print by modernist giants Pound and Eliot, her slow if persistent critical revival seems long overdue.

In part, Loy remains marginal precisely because she identified with, and gave language to, all things shunned. Critics often cite transgression as a defining feature of her writing. Loy not only crossed boundaries, she deliberately mired her writing in the lowest, most disregarded territory of all: the abject, or that which, when properly separated or repressed, allows the self to believe in its fallacious wholeness. As Julia Kristeva argues, the abject includes
bodily waste — vomit, saliva, excrement — and anything that opposes the individual; in patriarchal cultures, womankind is abject other to the male-defined subject. A woman operating on the edges of the masculine modernist avant-garde, Loy articulated abjection within her obscure poetry as a knowing, critical reflection of her perceived self. As Kristeva writes: ‘what is *abject* . . . is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses. . . . It lies outside, beyond the set, and does not seem to agree to [the master’s] rules of the game. And yet, from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master.’ Amorphousness, dissolution, dejection: these are the physical and emotional states Loy describes in oxymoronic phrases, arcane language or neologisms, and references philosophical, scientific, and literary. Doses of unconventional punctuation and humour are thrown in to upset good measure. Loy’s difficulty slows the reader down, often forcing us to linger over her unappealing or disconcerting content. Did Loy aim to shock? Indubitably. Loy engages with bodies society considers abject: her poems are populated by women, the mentally ill, the physically disabled, the impoverished, the aged, vermin. But this shock is not gratuitous: Loy examines abjection to challenge the master-narratives of Western culture. In what follows, I will narrow consideration of Loy’s broad engagement with abjection to her depictions of the corpse. Kristeva asserts that in our secular, sceptical age, the corpse ‘is the utmost of abjection’. If Kristeva is correct, Loy’s corpses — which appear in poems of love, birth, war, and ageing — should offer us concentrated insight into her deployment, from the margins, of the abject as a form of political protest. Loy’s abjection is unique and indebted, and, as such, her corpses will be juxtaposed with those of her poetic forebears and peers, namely Charles Baudelaire, Emily Dickinson, Eliot, and the Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven.

‘A decaying body, lifeless, completely turned into dejection, blurred between the inanimate and the inorganic, a transitional swarming, inseparable lining of a human nature whose life is indistinguishable from the symbolic — the corpse represents fundamental pollution.’ This repugnant object — once a self, now lacking clear
definition or identity – is repeatedly eroticised by Baudelaire in *The Flowers of Evil*, perhaps nowhere more dramatically than in the poem ‘A Carcass’, where the speaker asks his lover to recall a lovely June morning when they encountered a corpse on a path. Most of the poem is given over to a microscopic account of the prone, rotting female cadaver; the slow-building lyric resolves itself in an ecstatic recognition that the speaker’s lover will also, one glorious day, moulder away whilst he, the immortal poet, will retain her ‘essence divine!’15 Those who eroticise the abject, Kristeva argues, fear severance and loss; in order to overcome this fear, they fixate upon the perpetual flows of the body – excrement, discharge, haemorrhage.16 So too does Baudelaire’s speaker reference flows in a bid to turn the carcass into a living being:

The flies buzzed and droned on these bowels of filth
Where an army of maggots arose,
Which flowed with a liquid and thickening stream
On the animate rags of her clothes.
And it rose and it fell, and pulsed like a wave,
Rushing and bubbling with health.
One could say that this carcass, blown with vague breath,
Lived in increasing itself.

This carcass is abject, and animated by abjection: her flows signal life, even fecundity, justifying the speaker’s lust. But these flows become gyre, as they inevitably suggest the mortality from which the voyeur of abjection cannot escape. Kristeva contends: ‘Such wastes drop so that I might live, until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit – *cadere*, cadaver.’17 This eternal return is perhaps why the poem ends with the symbolic murder of the beloved – she who is abject to the masculine speaking ‘I’ – and with a reference to the poet’s legacy, or that which just might transcend mortality as the poet himself cannot.

Baudelaire’s speakers aspire to corpsehood: death is the stuff of their delirious personal fantasies. But the actual corpses in his poems tend to be the female lover or the accursed enemy: the corpse is and remains the abject other.18 Loy takes explicit issue with the
inequalities associated with this paternalistic view of abjection, even as her comfort with the grotesque is assuredly influenced by her decadent precursors. In the first of her ‘Songs to Joannes’, Loy articulates a ‘Pig Cupid’ replete with ‘rosy snout’ who ‘Root[s] erotic garbage’ and pulls weeds from ‘wild oats sown in mucous-membrane’. These lines echo the sexual delight Baudelaire takes in the ‘liquid and thickening’ fluids oozing from an abandoned corpse. And although Loy’s corpses are primarily symbolic, her sequence forthrightly intertwines ecstasy with death. As elsewhere in Loy’s work, love disappoints the speaker in ‘Songs to Joannes’ while sex offers a mutually-agreed upon *petit-mort* in which man and woman alike find a brief but appealing level ground. Thanks to the long-standing embattlement of the sexes, this ground does not last. So, where Baudelaire revels in the flows issuing from the eroticised abject, Loy contends that these streams take us nowhere:

The contents
Of our ephemeral conjunction
In aloofness from Much
Flowed to approachment of – – – –
NOTHING
There was a man and a woman
In the way
While the Irresolvable
Rubbed with our daily deaths
Impossible eyes

‘[T]he Irresolvable’ divide between the man and woman is excised by daily deaths – orgasm, but perhaps also a reference to the dead and dying of the First World War, which was well underway as Loy reworked this sequence between 1915 and 1917. Those disembodied, proto-surrealist ‘Impossible eyes’ suggest a willed, wondrous blindness to the world around the lovers, one conducive to euphoria, and just as fleeting. Their intimacy propagates flows ecstatic, abject, autonomous. And Loy’s couple almost yields to the ecstatic death Baudelaire celebrates; their ‘ephemeral conjunction’ is said to have ‘Flowed to approachment of – – – –’. The line begins fluidly, but ‘approachment’ ruffles the waters; though Loy’s term recalls a
'rapprochement’, it does so only by its absence: these relations are not harmonious. ‘Approach’ infers proximity without destination. More hopefully, ‘approach’ can be a new way of doing something, although the possibility of novelty collapses within Loy’s arcane formulation of the verb. With the clunky ‘approachment’ in view, it is hardly surprising that the promising, anticipatory aposiopesis at the end of this line concludes with a resounding negation on the next. Ultimately, daily deaths facilitate not a sinuous, possibly sublime, merging of subjective, gendered boundaries, but, rather, a still-stronger certainty about the inviolate, separate entity that is each obstinately entire lover.

While Loy refuses Baudelaire’s sustaining, erotic corpse, Baudelaire’s close contemporary, Dickinson, brings us closer to a depiction of the corpse in league with Loy’s own, particularly in her famous poem 465, ‘I heard a Fly buzz – when I died –’. It could be argued that Dickinson maintains the deific stance of Baudelaire’s speaker in ‘A Carcass’. The first line implies as much, as a completed death can only be described from the vantage of an afterlife; Dickinson’s use of the past tense throughout further reinforces our sense that the event has just passed. But while Dickinson’s speaker-poet appears to assert her own immortality, this is not a writer asserting a position of power, voyeuristically watching an eroticised corpse from afar. This speaker is the corpse, and instead of Baudelaire’s triumphant, conclusionary murder, the poem ends with the faltering voices of both fly and speaker:

There interposed a Fly –
With Blue – uncertain stumbling Buzz –
Between the light – and me –
And then the Windows failed – and then
I could not see to see –

Throughout the poem, the fly hovers at the ready, as does the dying person’s expectant family, whose tears are finished, and who have dissected the just-breathing cadaver by sharing out all of his or her remaining material possessions. The will, human and legal, is neatly ‘Signed away’. Less tidy is the manner in which abjection begins in
the last moments of life: the speaker is already fragmented object and rotting, bestial carrion. And Dickinson remains fond of blurring these boundaries between the living and the dead. In poem 943, ‘A Coffin – is a small Domain’, both wooden box and freshly-dug grave hold paradise and all of the earth’s dominion for the corpse. But for the mourner, the demarcated burial site ‘Bestows ... Circumference without Relief – / Or Estimate – or End – ’. Faced with the beloved’s corpse, this unnamed individual longs for the consolations of animate, subjective wholeness, a boundary that defines rather than perversely perpetuating the limitless agony of grief, itself another death in life.

The plight of Dickinson’s mourner is shared by the speaker in Loy’s early poem, ‘Parturition’ (1914), which begins:

I am the centre
Of a circle of pain
Exceeding its boundaries in every direction

Giving birth, this woman occupies a ‘congested cosmos of agony’ so intense that in an appropriately truncated line she acknowledges that she can no longer identify herself as a complete being: ‘Negation of myself as a unit’. There is an attempt to recuperate the pain that ‘Confuses while intensifying sensibility / Blurring spatial contours’. When sensibility climaxes, Loy writes, the ego proves capable of ‘lascivious revelation’. As they will in the later ‘Songs to Joannes’, the particularities of this ribald epiphany go unnamed here. Nevertheless, the speaker suggests that her pain is equally countered by her resistance, and that this experience, like heterosexual love-making, is both transformative and democratising: she is equal to her foe. It bears repeating that ‘Parturition’ was published in 1914, and that its ecstatic veneration of pain-induced revelations determinedly call our attention to the disgust associated with female sexuality and biology. In a Freudian economy, mothers are abject because they are the figures from whom we must dissociate ourselves in order to assert our individuality. But, as Kristeva tells us, the mother is perceived as abject long before the time at which the developing
child learns the distaste for the maternal universal to patriarchal cultures. In the Old Testament Book of Leviticus, discussion of the post-natal confinement of the impure (because still bleeding) woman is immediately, and not accidentally, followed by discussion of the decaying, diseased body. If birthing evokes potential life, disease signifies its potential end, and, in an emulation of this biblical linkage, Loy’s ‘Parturition’ conflates the ecstatically birthing body with the abject corpse, or that which Kristeva describes as ‘the most sickening of wastes . . . a border that has encroached upon everything’. Like Loy’s birthing body, Kristeva’s corpse is a boundary exceeded in every direction.

The speaker’s self-alignment with abjection intensifies throughout ‘Parturition’. ‘The abject’, Kristeva writes, ‘confronts us with those fragile states where man strays on the territories of animal.’ Midway through the poem, Loy’s speaker suggests that her delirium is so great that the likenesses she observes between herself and animals – ‘the gurgling of a crucified wild beast’ and ‘the foam on the stretched muscles of a mouth’ – appear to her as if belonging to another place and subjectivity. Confronted with her bestiality, this woman maintains her distance. But after the birth is completed, she envisions a cat, with newborn offspring wound through its limbs, and states declaratively, confidently: ‘I am that cat’. Her identifications with the animal as corpse similarly intensify. Again, midway through, she wonders:

Through the subliminal deposits of evolutionary processes
Have I not
Somewhere
Scrutinized
A dead white feathered moth
Laying eggs?

This speculation about death and fecundity, replete with a scientifically distant ‘scrutiny’ of abstracted ‘evolutionary processes’, takes on a different tenor in the second-to-last stanza:

Rises from the sub-conscious
Impression of small animal carcass
Covered with blue-bottles
And through the insects
Waves that same undulation of living
Death
Life
I am knowing
All about

Unfolding

This stanza repeats the language Loy uses to articulate the moment of birth, where the baby’s ‘Undulation’ against the woman’s thigh generates a ‘Stir of incipient life’. In fact, this stir belongs both to baby and parent, as the speaker contends that it violently, completely overthrows her established sense of self. Immediately post-partum, the mother gains access to a ‘cosmic reproductivity’ in which she is resuscitated — again, this diction compounds her proximity to a corpse-like state during the titular parturition. But in addition to her own rejuvenation, after delivery, the woman freely acknowledges that as a reproductive being, she is no different from a lactating cat, or a seething mass of blue-bottles feeding off a corpse. Baudelaire’s speaker watches flies devour a corpse from a carefully maintained distance; Dickinson’s corpse identifies with a fly hovering over her gasping self; Loy’s speaker is a mass of flies ingesting death as perpetuating sustenance. Loy’s ‘Parturition’ maintains that engaging with abjection is necessary to survival, and that the abject is universal and primal, defining us from birth until death.

The female protagonist of ‘Parturition’ is, frankly, comfortably at home with the lived reality of her own abjection. As the Epicurus she references propounded, pleasure is good, pain is bad, and death is nothing to fear. This new mother confronts shunned experiences with certitude — ‘I am knowing’ — and expansiveness: ‘All about / Unfolding’. Her ease is facilitated by the confident argument put forth on behalf of women early on in the poem. As Loy’s birthing speaker summits each new mountainous contraction, she overhears a man in a nearby building dashing up the stairs, casually singing a popular ditty, and observes:
At the back of the thoughts to which I permit crystallization
The conception Brute
Why?
    The irresponsibility of the male
Leaves woman her superior Inferiority

This speaker likens herself to corpses and scavengers, but recognises that she accesses significant knowledge and experience from within her abject margins. Her supreme confidence may be as deliberately comic as the praise of God, the ostensible creator of humankind, at the poem’s end: ‘I once heard in a church / – Man and woman God made them – / Thank God.’ But this humour enhances Loy’s abject agenda: ‘Facing abjection, meaning is only comic’. Real or performed, this certitude acts as a counter to the ambiguity that Kristeva argues is the determining principle of abjection. Loy’s feminist speaker may not like her place, but she knows precisely where she is thought to belong. This knowledge allows her to use her marginalisation as a vantage from which to voice, mock, and celebrate abjection.

Loy’s early approach to the abject differs markedly from the contemporaneous work of her celebrated peer, Eliot, whose speakers cannot quite summon up the courage to embrace either traditional masculine authority or an actual lady in the flesh, and oscillate restlessly – ambiguously, abjectly – between stances characterised by superiority and victimisation. Loy’s labouring woman curses the casual confidence of a man loudly ascending a neighbouring staircase; by contrast, Eliot’s agonised protagonists, in ‘Portrait of a Lady’, go up the stairs ‘as if ... mount[ing] on ... hands and knees’. Where Loy’s birthing woman scrutinises the reproductive habits of insects, Eliot’s sexually-frustrated Prufrock imagines himself as an insect under the gaze of womankind, ‘formulated, sprawling on a pin, / ... wriggling on the wall’. Loy is fascinated by life under the microscope; Eliot’s Prufrock is horrified by the same: ‘Arms that arebraceleted and white and bare / (But in the lamplight, downed with light brown hair!)’. What does Prufrock fear? Many things, all abject: loss of control, death, balding. This anxious masculinity inflects Eliot’s presentation of the corpse in section one of
The Waste Land, ‘The Burial of the Dead’. Even from their apocalyptically levelled, post-Great War vantage, Eliot’s lyric voices strive to assert authority over the abject, to pronounce it perverse. For Loy, whose 1919 poem ‘The Dead’ touches on the same terrain, wartime corpses are another opportunity to assert that human beings are inseparable from and liberated by abjection.

Throughout ‘The Burial of the Dead’ Eliot alludes directly and indirectly to Baudelaire; alongside direct quotations, he establishes relationships between flows, the erotic, and the corpse. In the opening lines, a dead land breeds and winter, the deathliest season, warms and nourishes. The hyacinth girl’s ambiguous status – she claims she is ‘neither / Living nor dead’ – is attributed to overwhelming desire: she is cadaver, living woman, lacking boundary. In Greek mythology, the hyacinth emerges from a flow of blood, an abject growth inspiring sensual appreciation. This female hyacinth’s narrative follows lines from Wagner’s Tristan and Isolde, a classic tale of tragic love which, in some variations, concludes with the female lead swooning over her lover’s corpse. Eliot moves from the desire-laden abject to phobia: anxieties about flows – life-threatening, life-engendering – permeate the tarot reading that follows. Desire, death, and fluidity then define the final stanza, which begins with a quotation from Baudelaire’s poem, ‘The Seven Old Men’, in which the city is a nightmarish, giant body whose lifeblood is mystery. Baudelaire’s speaker encounters a gruesome man who seems incapable of life – ‘You would not call him bent, but cut in two’ – who twins himself again and again, forming a ‘parade from Hell’. This sinister figure regenerates horrifically, supernaturally, and his eternal death-in-life is reconfigured in Eliot’s famous observation: ‘I had not thought death had undone so many.’ Eliot’s post-First World War masses flow through the byways of the city; they are undone, a word connoting ruin and decay, but also a potentially violent lust echoed by the choppy breathing of Eliot’s next line. Like Baudelaire in ‘A Carcass’, Eliot makes the tedious, gruesome present fertile; when his speaker recognises Stetson among the ghoulish crowd, the bond they share is one of trying to make life from a history of interminable
This speaker is party to Stetson’s burial of a corpse in his garden the previous year. ‘Has it begun to sprout?’ he asks, recalling Eliot’s earlier ‘Morning at the Window’, where ‘the damp souls of housemaids / Sprou[t] despondently’. A sprout is a simpleton, a greenhorn, a descendent, and a sucker, meaning a shoot emerging from a plant or a mammal before weaning. Stetson’s corpse is not buried but planted; it is not dead but fecund, generative. The abject female is excised from reproduction, only to produce a still-more-grotesque, proliferating corpse.

Make no mistake, Eliot does not identify with the impurities of parturition. A distanced, controlling voice is maintained in the final lines of ‘The Burial of the Dead’, and it is disrupted only in the last line by appropriating the words of Baudelaire. Eliot quotes the damning conclusion of the prefatory poem of *The Flowers of Evil*, ‘To the Reader’: ‘– Hypocrite lecteur, – mon semblable, – mon frère!’ To the outset of that line, Eliot adds a still-more accusatory ‘You’! Ostensibly directed at Stetson, that second-person pronoun puts the emphasis on the other, rather than the speaking self, further separating sprouting corpse from lyric voice. Baudelaire’s ‘To the Reader’ is another poem that articulates flows deathly, generative, perverse, and abject, meaning its tonal and contextual influence on ‘The Burial of the Dead’ is as extensive as his ‘The Seven Old Men’. Baudelaire merits allusion, but Eliot does not fully imitate his abject approach: ‘To the Reader’ uses plural pronouns to exuberantly argue that the love of the loathsome, the sinful, and the repugnant is humanity’s shared, fallen state – this joyously perverse view is not Eliot’s. That said, Eliot’s and Baudelaire’s speakers are aligned in bids for stereotypical masculinity: Eliot’s poses as a battle-scarred fighter, whilst Baudelaire’s tells his male readers that ‘we’ are all like libertines seeking ‘furtive pleasure’ from whores. But in Baudelaire, the pursuit of abjection is defended on the basis that it vanquishes our worst enemy, boredom. Fear of ‘tedious argument[s]’ certainly inflect Eliot’s work, but he remains far more distressed by abjection than monotony. Fascination draws Eliot’s speakers towards the abject,
but it is a fascination mitigated by a contempt that is, ironically, palpable.

Like Baudelaire, Eliot details flowing, abject parades of death; these events are told in the past tense and represent a long history of war-torn spectres – from the Roman Empire to the twentieth century – haunting an uneasy present. In ‘The Dead’, Loy’s response to the annihilation of the Great War is to incorporate it directly into the survivors’ bodies, and to demonstrate how these corpses define the present and a future determined by the gruesome particularities of abject loss. The first stanza reads:

We have flowed out of ourselves
Beginning on the outside
That shrivable skin
Where you leave off

From the outset, this poem is poised to toy with boundaries. Representing a multitude, this speaker does not watch a flow from afar, but is a fluid-producing amorphous entity. The skin that contains and binds the individual is demarcated by a very proximate otherness, by ‘you’. The skin is ‘shrivable’, an adjective not yet in the OED. The wonderfully replete verb ‘to shrive’, however, contains many meanings and their opposites: contrition and forgiveness, revelation and questioning, obligation and relief. This verb perpetuates Loy’s boundary-blurring, her musing on the indistinguishability of individual human beings, and of the dead from the living. Who is the ‘we’ that flows, who that ‘you’ leaving off?

It emerges that this ‘we’ refers to the survivors of a world defined by death, where the temporality of mortality itself is confused: the dead age, even as they are ‘Born in our immortality / Stuck fast as Life’. Life should flow, and death should be static, but with the colloquial phrase ‘stuck fast’ Loy delimits this death-inflected, hasty modernity with confusions, entrapments, cessations. As the poem continues, Loy intensifies the indivisibility of ‘us’ and ‘them’: ‘Our tissue is of that which escapes you / Birth-Breaths and orgasms / The shattering tremor of the static.’ As in the opening lines, the
substance of the self exists only in relation to the ‘you’. Loy replaces Eliot’s and Baudelaire’s voyeuristic eroticisations with reverence: in ‘The Dead’ our very breath, origins, and ecstasies are fundamental flows that come to us via corpses. These flows ‘escape’, as if life is death’s fugitive, or a mere distraction from an infinite state, or perhaps, in a combined reversal and extension of the abjectified corpse, a leakage. Intensifying the earlier formulation ‘Stuck fast as Life’, the flows Loy identifies here precipitate an all-engulfing, climactic ‘shattering tremor’ that disrupts present stasis. The stanza concludes: ‘Legerdemain of God’. What is the trickery at stake? The flimsy distinction between the living and the dead, a boundary Loy aims to make porous, if not completely indistinct. But however fluid, these intimacies do not elide the complications of grief and rage:

Curled close in the youngest corpuscle
Of a descendent
We spit up our passions in our grand-dams

Regeneration takes place on a microscopic, individual scale, but its pleasures are undermined by Loy’s multivalent diction. The archaic term ‘corpuscle’ was outmoded in Loy’s day, and refers to the molecular. Homophonically, corpuscle evokes corpses and a body of troops, as if to suggest that the very atoms of the self are irrevocably defined by recent events. Passion, too, signifies pleasing, intense states like desire or excitement, but also suffering and rage; borrowed from French, ‘grand-dam’ suggests great displeasure. If ‘we’ are the survivors privileged to continue flowing out of ourselves, these flows are more abject than sublime, more wrath-laden spit than ecstatic orgasm. Perhaps nowhere does the abject assert itself more palpably in this poem than in the lines: ‘We are turned inside out / Your cities lie digesting in our stomachs’. Fully exposed innards reveal a speaker surrendering completely to the dead.

Loy’s ‘The Dead’ gives over subjectivity, space, and even time to the lost, absent, haunting ‘you’. The dead direct the movements of the sun: ‘Fixing the extension of your reactions / Our shadow lengthens / In your fear’.

Note the present tense: post-war, Loy
articulates a daily life driven not by an individual fear of mortality, but by the responses of the deceased to the living. 46 Within the poem, Loy refigures the cannibalism inherent to the Christian Eucharist, making revered martyrs of all of the dead the poem addresses. Her survivors ingest these corpses, and the future is defined by this incorporation:

Having swallowed your irate hungers
Satisfied before bread-breaking
To your dissolution
We splinter into Wholes
Stirring the remorses of your tomorrow
Among the refuse of your unborn centuries
In our busy ashbins
Stink the melodies
Of your
So easily reducible
Adolescences 47

Loy prophesies that the cityscape will be littered for centuries to come with things not usually associated with the abject: lost time, youthful song. The phrase ‘our busy ashbins’ suggests both a modern receptacle for waste and a vile metaphor for the modern self. In an abject lampoon of authority and productivity, Loy’s ‘we’ stirs the sorrow-laden, stinking mess within their own ashbins as if in preparation for a desirable or satiating meal; pointless death is not a dish to savour. But where Eliot brings *The Waste Land* to a close by expressing a longing to create, at the very least, a pastiche of subjective wholeness, Loy’s ‘The Dead’ offers a salve lesser and greater. Loy inverts what Kristeva describes as the self-defining desire to be entire: any ‘Whole’ is only ever partial — a splinter, an abject fragment. In ‘The Dead’ this truth responds to the ingested dissolution of death, but it is also an equaliser: Loy’s ‘we’ is liberated by a lack of boundary that brings the departed into constant nearness, providing consolation to most.

Most, but not all. The poem concludes:

Only in the segregated angles of Lunatic Asylums
Do those who have strained to exceeding themselves
Break on our edgeless contours
The mouthed echoes of what
Has exuded to our companionship
Is horrible to the ear
Of the half that is left inside them.48

If ‘The Dead’ addresses the aftermath of the First World War, these final lines might reference its shell-shocked remainders, or those who are deliberately kept separate from Loy’s other survivors, her ‘we’. Their lunacy is then associative with the systematic diminishment of their youth, those ‘So easily reducible / Adolescences’. But Loy suggests that this lunacy is also ascribable to their unawareness that in feeling subjectively incomplete, they are not alone, but are simply like every other survivor. They rail against boundaries, in other words, where none exist: ‘edgeless contours’. Exceeding the self, if there is no definitive subject to be had, is certainly a crazy-making proposition. And the last stanza describes individuals who are cruelly stuck fast: capable of mimicking but not enunciating speech, their inarticulate, gestural communication tortures some repressed portion or version of their subjectivity. They attempt to give voice to ‘what / Has exuded to our companionship’. This plural possessive pronoun, like the ‘our’ in the preceding stanza, excludes the group in question, reinforcing its marginalisation. ‘Exuded’ returns us to Loy’s foundational abjection: to exude is ‘To ooze out like sweat; to pass off in bead-like drops through the pores, an incision, or orifice’; it also suggests a frank and open expression of a state of being or an emotion. Exuding usually occurs from and not to – the oddity of Loy’s formulation suggests that the companionship she describes is sustained by a discharge or affectivity. And the poem consistently asserts the need for both abject and passionate exudations, which flow from the dead to the grateful living. But if abjection is as fundamental as Loy argues, the horrific lunacy of her final stanza might be rooted in a refusal or inability to come to terms with the surprisingly sustaining corpse. Unlike Eliot’s monumentalised interrogation of waste which appears three years later, Loy is not seeking a regeneration that re-establishes the divide between the self and the abject. Abjection in Loy’s ‘The Dead’ is not so much bodily flow as it is the cataclysmic failure to accept and acknowledge the
marginalised. In this regard, the inmates of the ‘segregated angles of Lunatic Asylums’ might just as readily be those who occupy the corridors of power.

This poem is perhaps too reverential towards the corpse, too ready to perpetuate the glorified mythology of the fallen soldier; Loy certainly falls prey to a simplistic patriotism in lesser poems written during the Second World War.49 ‘The Dead’ is saved from sentimentality by Loy’s expert use of complex diction, philosophical interrogation of autonomy, and deployment of a universalising abjection. Loy’s frankness is taken to still greater extremes – as are most things – by another marginalised modernist poet, the Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven. Increasingly renowned as America’s living embodiment of Dada practice, the Baroness strutted the streets of New York in birthday cake or coal scuttle hats, tin-can bras, skirts replete with fleets of stolen toy cars, and small, live animals as ornaments. Loy and the Baroness lived in New York and Paris at the same time and moved in the same avant-garde circles; both published in the Little Review.50 These biographical details underscore the convergences in their work, which are extensive, particularly as both writers used abjection as a political tool. But while the Baroness shares Loy’s interest in bodily and sexual flows, her corpses are abject and triumphant; her poems explore Kristeva’s assertion that ‘The abject is edged with the sublime’.51 Or, as one of the Baroness’s poems marvellously concludes: ‘Aie – proud malignant corpse!’52 Another, ‘Flameashes’, combines Dickinson’s deathbed scene with Zarathustrian ecstasy: ‘in gravebed stretched I – laughing dead!’ Like her peers and forebears, the Baroness addresses the relationship between life-giving flows and the stasis of death, but she treats these subjects as an enormous joke, as in the provocatively titled ‘Fluency’:

Death
Is
‘A good one’
On
Life

And
Altogether – –53
'Fluency' refers to flowing, copiousness, abundance, ‘Readiness of utterance’, and ‘Absence of rigidity; ease’. The Baroness rejects the scarcity and brittleness of Eliot’s wasteland, and the fear and biological regeneration exuded to the living in Loy. Instead, for the Baroness, death transmits a victorious, all-encompassing laughter from the beyond. ‘Fluency’ was written between 1924 and 1925, and compares readily and directly with lines we have already seen from Loy’s 1917 ‘Songs to Joannes’: ‘our ephemeral conjunction / . . . / Flowed to approachment of—–—– / NOTHING’. In both poems, multiple dashes follow words denoting relationships of either affinity or entirety; attempts to assemble, connect, collect, or unify are at stake, but the punctuation leaves these intimacies and coherencies as fragmented as the quotidian ‘daily deaths’ at the heart of their texts. The Baroness and Loy agree that the corpse is cipher for the ubiquitous abject.

If, following Kristeva, the corpse and womankind are particularly pungent categories of abjection, perhaps nothing can be as abject as an ageing woman, an experience that the Baroness and Loy both detail. In the Baroness’s poetry, this period of life is a joyously ambiguous place. For Loy, old age is less revelry than collapse into the abjection she has previously discussed and mocked from the safer vantage of youth. Neither approach lacks a political outcome. Consider the first stanza of the Baroness’s ‘Spring in Middle’, a poem bearing the epigraph: ‘I am 50’:

This early in spring – I notice my shouldersweat
Of such rife – penetrating – rank – frank redolence –
As advanced cadaver – fresh myrrhstuffed
Mummy let’s off – maybe.
(Surmise)

Address to sun.

In middle age, April is not the cruellest month, but an opportunity to reacquaint ourselves with a life-affirming abjection, in which the body exudes good, honest sweat like a long-dead corpse. But the corpse-self in question is both abject and honoured: embalmed, preserved, mummified. ‘Mummy’ is abject mother and corpse,
while the ‘let’s off’ suggests adventure, odorous emission, and/or reinforces the authority of this parental figure. But authority is undermined by ‘maybe’ — there is a degree of ambiguity at work in this condensed articulation of redolent, corpse-like fecundity, one that is emphasised in the apostrophe-cum-subtitle ‘Address to sun’ (evoking ‘son’) under which the rest of the poem falls. The Baroness enacts a favoured Loy tactic of rapidly deploying contradictory statements and oxymoronic figures: her address affirms the proximities of old age and youth, the practised ability of the old to climb — literally and figuratively — to great heights, even as she tells us that she is cautious when walking so as not to stumble on ‘Toetips’ that ‘Hum!’ in springtime. But the poem concludes with typical conquest: ‘High / I / Fly!’55 The Baroness refutes the incapacities of old age, and, in so doing, actively challenges presumptions about her marginalised, abject state.

Loy’s address of old age is bound up in a broader consideration of New York’s street people; Loy lived near the impoverished Bowery district between 1948 and 1953. During this period, Loy regularly likens the homeless to the dead in her poetry, as in ‘On Third Avenue’, where she details ‘the heedless incognito / of shuffling shadow-bodies / animate with frustration’. Or, ‘Chiffon Velours’, the description of a single destitute woman:

Her features,
  verging on a shriek
  reviling age,

  flee from death in odd directions
  somehow retained by a web of wrinkles.

That the woman fails to escape death is assured by Loy’s description of her as ‘Rigid / at rest’ — she is a scarcely-living corpse. Her resting place is crucial: she is ‘at rest against the corner-stone / of a department store’. This woman is a waste product of a consumerist system devoted to a productivity she neither embodies nor engenders. As a result, she wastes away: ‘skimpy even for a skeleton’, while her worn skirt ‘reflects the gutter — ’.56 The woman’s plight echoes Loy’s own; widowed at 35, Loy writes poems accusing her
husband, Arthur Cravan, of ‘secretly ... cuckold[ing her] with death’ and likening herself to a ‘cloud-corpse / Beshadowing [his] shroud’. But Loy’s most detailed examination of her own old age occurs in ‘An Aged Woman’, a late poem that bookends the earlier ‘Parturition’. In ‘Parturition’, pain led to a ‘Blurring’ of ‘spatial contours’ that facilitated revelation; in the painful present of ‘An Aged Woman’ ‘events are vagueing’, but the sensation is only unpleasant. Lacking ‘that precision / with which it struck in youth-time’, pain is not sublime, but:

More like moth
eroding internal organs
hanging or falling down
in a spoiled closet

Enduring labour, the speaker of ‘Parturition’ recalls observing a dead moth laying eggs; confronting a more quotidian and relentless discomfort, ‘An Aged Woman’ figures pain as a moth eating slowly away at the futile innards contained within her rotting self. This old body is similar to the ‘small animal carcass / Covered with blue-bottles’ at the end of ‘Parturition’, yet here sympathy lies not with the insects’ ‘undulation of living’ but with the still-more abject paralysis of death. While this image refuses regeneration, Loy considers the Baroness’s postulation that old age might facilitate dizzying ascensions, asking: ‘is the impossible / possible to senility’? The impossible proves merely a return to the agile, competent self of youth. And so, at the end of the poem, Loy makes a charge and a prophecy:

Dilation has entirely eliminated
your long reality.

Mina Loy
July 12th
1984

Dilation that was expansive is now destructive: in ‘Parturition’, the first-person speaker affirms her ability to ‘Exceed[d] ... boundaries in every direction’, but this woman is told that she has become too
dispersed. From her most self-conscious margins – the poem was written when Loy’s reputation had long foundered – the poet announces the death of Mina Loy aged one hundred and two. Unlike Dickinson’s near-dead poet cadaver writing about a very recent death, this speaker predicts Loy’s lifespan, yet describes her as a ‘Bulbous stranger’ replete with an ‘excessive incognito’. The distance between speaker and subject collapses with the concluding self-identification wherein the unnamed ‘you’ becomes a finite Mina Loy. Woven into this prophecy is a quietly despairing, comical critique of the impossibility of separating the self from the fascinations and disgusts of the abject, however desirable it might be, or become, to do so. The Baroness insists that death is a joke on life; in her old age, Loy tells us how it feels to be the punchline.

With ‘An Aged Woman’, Loy explores an abjection from which she cannot escape: she is forgotten author, rejected woman. The poem is among the most brutally honest of Loy’s accounts of marginalisation, or what Kristeva labels dejection. A deject embraces abjection, deliberately segregates his or her self. The deject ‘therefore strays instead of getting his [or her] bearings, desiring, belonging, or refusing’ and always asks not ‘Who am I?’ but ‘Where am I?’; the confines of the deject’s world and self are fluid, and in a state of perpetual renewal. This fluidity is vital to Loy’s work, where she resists the very borders distinguishing life from death, and figures each of these territories as porous: it is no coincidence that ‘There is no Life or Death’ is the first line of one of her earliest, untitled poems. The corpse is the outstanding, abject symbol of this indistinguishability. Alongside her calculated articulations of spit and sexual flows, Loy turns to the corpse as the ultimate encounter with abjection that can neither be denied nor repressed. Her cadavers are prosaic, commonplace: in ‘Anglo-Mongrels and the Rose‘ a workaday egg takes on the boundary-defying status of an amorphous corpse:

An egg is smashed
a horrible
aborted contour
a yellow murder
in a viscous pool
Similarly, in the later poem ‘Property of Pigeons’, Loy asks us to consider the economies of vermin, which remain as ‘inobvious as the disposal / of their corpses’. Loy will not let us ignore the horror of abjection because she understands that the category ‘abject’ permits exclusions and denunciations with the power to do significant harm. A political righteousness drives Loy’s explorations of the marginalised, particularly women and the poor. Loy sought to reconfigure abjection by challenging the disgust it engenders and honouring its ubiquity. This is her aim in the First World War poem ‘Italian Pictures’, where she describes nuns wrapping up a cadaver, ‘Until that ineffable moment / When Rigor Mortis / Divests it of its innate impurity’. It is still her aim in ‘Photo After Pogrom’, first published in 1961, where she tells us that ‘Corpses are virgin.’ If the abject can be reconfigured, Loy suggests, so can inequity more generally. To suggest that Loy’s use of abjection achieves political and poetic ends is not to diminish Baudelaire, Eliot, and the Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven. All literature that confronts abjection, Kristeva states, inevitably blurs the otherwise ‘dichotomous categories of Pure and Impure, Prohibition and Sin, Mortality and Immortality’. This writing demands a diminishment of the authoritative self, or the self complete and entire, because, in Kristeva’s words, it ‘implies an ability to imagine the abject, that is, to see oneself in its place and to thrust it aside only by means of the displacements of verbal play’. This linguistic play is endemic, even defining, in the nineteenth-century poems of Baudelaire, and is taken up again in the twentieth century by the Baroness, who offers us Baudelaire’s extremes from the still-riskier place of the embodied abject. In countering the abject, and rueing its prevalence, Eliot inevitably illustrates what Loy avows: the abject cannot be delimited or set aside. Kristeva tells us that twentieth-century literature is defined by the perverse, that the absence of a deific authority permits, even demands, exploration of the abject. This literature, which she labels apocalyptic, does not resist but unveils abjection. But all of the authors Kristeva uses to exemplify apocalyptic literature are male. Loy does not just unveil abjection, she lives and breathes the very ramifications of this
category: it is no accident that Loy, like Dickinson and the Baroness, identifies so intensely with the corpse, whilst Baudelaire and Eliot eroticise it. Loy is not content to dwell quietly in her margin; she was – and remains – among the most restless and innovative of dejects.

Notes

Permission to reprint lines from the poetry of Mina Loy has been granted by Roger L. Conover, her editor and literary executor. Irene Gammel and Suzanne Zelazo have sanctioned the use of material from Body Sweats: The Uncensored Writings of Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven.


4. Historical: avant-garde artists generally struggle to gain a canonical foothold, and tend to do so by the most flagrant means of promotion. Where Marinetti, Eliot, Pound, and Joyce embraced these means, Loy openly disparaged and rarely courted this type of literary celebrity. Cultural: see historical, but also a paternalistic literary history in which female writers have long been consigned to the margins, so that Virginia Woolf only came into literary favour with the second wave of feminism. Personal: archival evidence suggests that although Loy remained an active writer of prose and a ground-breaking visual artist throughout her life, her poetic output had significantly diminished after 1930; no certain rationale exists for this change in artistic direction. Some of Loy’s later unpublished prose can be found in *Stories and Essays of Mina Loy*, ed. Sara Crangle (Champaign: Dalkey Archive, 2011).


6. The first half of ‘Anglo-Mongrels’ was published in the *Little Review* in 1923; the remainder was published in 1925 in *The Contact Collection of Contemporary Writers*; see Alex Goody, ‘Empire, Motherhood and the Poetics of the Self in Mina Loy’s Anglo-Mongrels and the Rose’, *Life Writing*, 6.1 (2009), 63.

7. *Baedeker* should be *Baedeker*, as it refers to the family name given to the pioneering series of travel guides that began in the nineteenth century and continues today.


17. Ibid., 4.

18. ‘The Happy Corpse’ and ‘Dream of a Curious Man’ illustrate how Baudelaire romanticised self-abjection. Like ‘A Carcass’, ‘The Love of Illusion’ offers another vision of the beloved’s death; ‘Burial’ is a poem in which an enemy is cursed with a sensate afterlife.


20. Though a common formulation in French – approchement – why wouldn’t Loy just use the more common ‘approach’? The suffix ‘-ment’ turns the verb into a noun. With ‘approachment’ Loy celebrates the oxymoronic fusion of a cautious, processual verb – ‘to approach’ meaning ‘come near to’ or ‘to develop a new way of dealing with a situation’ – with
a suffix that generates a static, completed object. In so doing, she deliberately vexes the flow of her line. All dictionary definitions are drawn from the OED.

24. Ibid., 5.
25. Loy, Lost Lunar Baedeker, 5, 7, 6, 7, 6, 7.
26. Ibid., 7, 5.
27. Kristeva, Powers, 209, 35.
29. I take my cue here from Kristeva, who tells us that ‘For the subject firmly settled in its superego’ writing that confronts abjection ‘is necessarily implicated in the interspace that characterises perversion; and for that reason, it gives rises [sic] in turn to abjection’: Kristeva, Powers, 16.
31. The god Hyacinth dies an accidental death, and lovelorn Apollo generates the flower from the blood of his corpse.
32. Stanza three features a tarot reading recipient counselled to ‘Fear death by water’. In his footnotes, Eliot tells us that ‘The Man with Three Staves’ who surfaces in the reading is associable with the legendary wounded Fisher King, whose impotence extends to his deadened kingdom, which, in turn, awaits his healing for its own regeneration; as is well known, this figure returns throughout the poem, and defines its conclusion: Eliot, Complete Poems and Plays, 62, 76.
33. The quotation, ‘Unreal city’, recurs in ll. 207 and 373–376: ibid., 68, 73.
34. Baudelaire, Flowers, 179, 81.
36. The speaker, it is intimated, has known Stetson since the dawn of time, or at least since the battle between Carthage and Rome at Mylae in 260 BC.
37. Eliot, Complete Poems and Plays, 63, 27.
38. Baudelaire, Flowers, 6. This line can be translated as: ‘— Hypocrite reader, — fellowman, — my twin!’ In addition to the ‘You!’ at the outset, Eliot tacks an exclamation mark after ‘reader’.
39. For instance, stanza six of ‘To the Reader’ reads:

   Close, swarming, like a million writhing worms,
   A demon nation riots in our brains,
   And, when we breathe, death flows into our lungs,
   A secret stream of dull, lamenting cries.
The OED qualifies its descriptions and definitions of a libertine with the following: ‘(typically a man)’.


According to the OED, ‘corpuscle’ was originally used in the seventeenth century to refer to minute bodies of matter, parts of bodies, and small animals. Come the late nineteenth century, it was taken up to refer to what we now call electrons, but as early as 1902, writers for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* suggested that ‘electron’ had become the more popular term.


Loy’s quotation is countered by the prophetic intonation of Eliot’s ‘The Burial of the Dead’, wherein normalcy and comfort are established by shadows that fall and rise with the sun, but fear – in that symbolic ‘handful of dust’ – is engendered by individual thoughts of mortality: Eliot, *Complete Poems and Plays*, 61.


For examples of Loy’s lesser works on the death wrought by war, see the fiercely patriotic ‘America * A Miracle’ and the similarly reverential ‘Aviators’ Eyes’; both poems were likely written during the Second World War, and are published in Mina Loy, *The Last Lunar Baedeker*, ed. Roger Conover (Highlands, NC: Jargon Society, 1982; repr. Manchester: Carcanet, 1985), 227, 215.

According to the dates offered by their respective biographers, Carolyn Burke and Irene Gammel, the two poets would have inhabited New York between 1916 and 1917, and again between 1920 and 1921. Both were in Paris between 1926 and 1927. In New York, Loy and the Baroness were considered part of the influential Arensberg circle that met regularly after the Armory Show in 1913. Additionally, both women were very close friends with Djuna Barnes, meaning their knowledge of one another is certain, even as their biographers are enticingly silent about their relationship.


Ibid., 232, 231.

57. See ‘The Widow’s Jazz’ and ‘Letters of the Unliving’: *ibid.*, 96, 131.
Ezra Pound embarked on his monumental (and unfinished) epic, *The Cantos*, in 1915, publishing a provisional version of its opening in *Poetry* in 1917, under the suggestively Dantesque title of ‘Three Cantos’. The idea for a poem modelled, at least in part, on the threefold structure of the *Divina Commedia* had been in Pound’s mind for a decade or so, since his student-days at Hamilton College, NY. Dante is mentioned in the ‘Three Cantos’, but his presence is less notable than that of two other writers, Robert Browning and Homer, whose long poems also influenced Pound’s thinking in formulating his epic design. The three ‘Ur-Cantos’ open with a reference to Browning’s *Sordello* and conclude with an English translation of a neo-Latin version of the beginning of the eleventh book of the *Odyssey*. One connection between Homer–Dante–Browning germane to comprehending Pound’s purpose in these cantos is provided by the speaker’s claim in *Sordello* that ‘poets know the dragnet’s trick, / Catching the dead’. For, in the words of Ur-Canto I, ‘Ghosts move about me / Patched with histories’ — much like the audience of dead poets whom Browning addresses at the opening of his poem, the shades pilgrim-Dante converses with in his journeys through Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise, and the revenants summoned from the underworld by means of Odysseus’ necromancy. The Ur-Cantos are a poetic dragnet, in which Pound trawls cultural depths, to ‘dump my catch, shiny and silvery / As fresh sardines flapping and slipping on the marginal cobbles’ (Ur-Canto I); and it is a somewhat mixed catch: a ‘rag-bag’, as the first of the ‘Three Cantos’ admits, in which literary allusions to, among others, Catullus and Arnaut Daniel ‘move about’, without
really engaging profitably with, recollections of Pound’s 1908 sojourn in Venice.³

Reconfiguring the opening of his poem in the early 1920s, Pound wisely rejigged what he chose to retain of these cantos, adroitly placing the Nekyia with which the original Canto III had ended as the starting-point of what is now, generically, more recognisable as epic.⁴ As published in 1925, in A Draft of XVI. Cantos of Ezra Pound for the Beginning of a Poem of Some Length, Canto I commences with Odysseus’ mission, on Circe’s advice, to raise from the underworld the spirit of the soothsayer Tiresias. Dispensing with the traditional proem, or introductory passage, a quest is thereby immediately invoked, thrillingly conveyed through Pound’s manipulation of the epic convention of commencing in media res: ‘And then went down to the ship, / Set keel to breakers, forth on the godly sea’. In the confrontation with Tiresias, the stock device of prophecy is (literally) cited, introducing in its turn the prospect of the conclusion, after long travails, to epical wandering: “Odysseus / Shalt return through spiteful Neptune, over dark seas, / Lose all companions.”⁵

The narrative momentum of Canto I, however, is broken at this point: the fact that we are reading a translation of a translation is abruptly foregrounded by reference to the now-stirring spectre of the neo-Latin Renaissance author on whose version of Homer Pound is dependent: ‘Lie quiet Divus. I mean, that is Andreas Divus, / In officina Wecheli, 1538, out of Homer.’ Odysseus’s necromancy becomes comparable to Browning’s poet’s dragnet; their shared aim of ‘Catching the dead’ reiterated in Canto I’s interlingual translation, as the ancient Homeric source text reaches Pound’s target text by way of revivifying Divus’ intervening version of 1538 (itself now both target and source). In their cultural indebtedness, the first sixty-seven lines of Canto I constitute an ‘overdraft’, as Basil Bunting designated his own translations – a label punningly close to the image, in a late canto, of The Cantos’ intertextuality as analogous to the ancient and medieval ‘palimpsest’ (CXVI). The intense self-reflexivity of Canto I to its status as ‘secondary’ or written epic continues in the canto’s concluding fragmentary allusions (again via Latin re-workings) to the First and Second
Homer's Hymns to Aphrodite; that the goddess is said to be ‘Bearing the golden bough of Argicida: So that:’ inexorably brings into the poem’s orbit Aeneas’ katabasis in Aeneid 6, a descent to the land of the dead self-consciously modelled on that of Odyssey 11. Yet these obscure allusive snatches, coupled to the truncated last line to the canto (‘So that:’), signal equally Pound’s resistance to the traditional epic’s narrative construction, in imitation of which the canto had begun. The continuing influence of Browning, arguably, can be felt in the abjuration of heroic narrative with which Canto I concludes. As Ronald Bush observes, in the Ur-Cantos Pound had absorbed the lesson of Sordello: that ‘to be authentically modern, a poem must forgo narrative continuity and render the fragments of a modern consciousness’. This belief still colours the early Cantos in their final form. It is thus revealing that the first lines of Canto II (in A Draft of XVI. Cantos and thereafter) reiterate almost verbatim those of Ur-Canto I: ‘Hang it all, Robert Browning, / there can be but the one “Sordello.” / But Sordello, and my Sordello?’ These lines follow on immediately from Canto I’s ‘So that:’, the colon implying some sort of syntactical relation between the clauses. The disjunctive quality of that relation – the seeming lack of continuity – is partly the point; and so too is the emphasis the beginning of Canto II throws on the consciousness behind the poem (‘my Sordello’, as opposed to Browning’s ‘Sordello’). Although the centrality of that ‘modern consciousness’ diminishes in the course of The Cantos’s publication as instalments in the years leading up to the Second World War, its fitful presence will undergo a resurgence in the autobiographical dimension to the post-war Pisan Cantos (1948). More importantly, the paratactical or fragmentary mode of poetic organisation remains constant, if, perhaps, in a less nuanced manner in the cantos written at the end of the 1930s and published in Cantos LII–LXXI (1940). Mary Ellis Gibson rightly says that ‘The Cantos then remain both epic and ragbag: an epic that, unlike the Aeneid or the Commedia, “has no clear teleology or coherent story to guarantee the epic poet’s authority”’. Or, as Pound pithily stated, in an interview of 1962, ‘you haven’t got a nice little road map such as the middle ages possessed of Heaven’.10
The teleology of The Cantos is thus in flux rather than predetermined, and this provides one context in which to view Pound’s high admiration for Ovid’s Metamorphoses and his corresponding denigration of Virgilian epic. The bulk of Canto II consists of a versioning of the mariner Acoetes’ admonitory account to King Pentheus of his encounter with Bacchus, and the god’s transformation of his irreverent crew (‘Fish-scales over groin-muscles’), in Metamorphoses 3, mediated once again through a Renaissance translation, Arthur Golding’s 1567 Metamorphosis. Ovid’s construction of his epic through a series of thematically-connected yet self-contained narratives (epyllia) bears some comparison with Pound’s collage-like procedure here and elsewhere in The Cantos. The Malatesta Cantos (VIII–XI), composed at the same crucial juncture as Pound revised the opening of his ‘poem of some length’, provide a case in point. These memorable cantos document the political imbroglios and cultural achievement of Sigismondo Malatesta (1417–68), Lord of Rimini and embattled condottiero. The sequence centres on Sigismondo’s construction of the Tempio Malatestiano – ‘a temple so full of pagan works’ (IX) – against the backdrop of involved political machinations. The Malatesta Cantos can be read in isolation from the surrounding cantos; like the individual Ovidian epyllion, they have their own internal coherence, and were first published as a group in The Criterion in July 1923. Yet the story of the Tempio’s creation amongst historical vicissitudes is ascribed by Pound to Sigismondo’s ‘POLUMETIS’ (IX) – that is, his wily capacity, Homer’s standard epithet for Odysseus. Canto I and the Malatestas thereby have continuity with one another, not through narrative coherence, but through what Hugh Kenner influentially coined Pound’s use of ‘subject-rhymes’, of which ‘The Cantos afford a thesaurus’. A concise example of this technique (which also features the Tempio’s creator) occurs in a late canto: ‘he, Andy Jackson / POPULUM AEDIFICAVIT / which might... rhyme with Sigismundo’ (LXXXIX).

Rhyming Odysseus/Sigismondo/Andrew Jackson is representative of the manner in which The Cantos ‘cut through time or cross it withershins’ (in W. B. Yeats’s phrase), its structure, like that of
Sigismondo’s Tempio, an assemblage and echo-chamber of cultural references. Thus, in Eleven New Cantos XXXI–XLI (1934), the third US president Thomas Jefferson, among others, embodies polumetis, a point driven home in the related prose-work, Jefferson and/or Mussolini (1935), the backslash in the title of which signalling the chiming political virtù, in Pound’s eyes, of the Italian statesman. Joseph Brodsky has rightly remarked that ‘rhyme . . . is itself a metamorphosis . . . not a mirror’, and the internal subject-rhyming of The Cantos does not collapse cultural specificity into transhistorical sameness. The inscape of Sigismondo’s and Jefferson’s life and times is captured most vividly in Pound’s innovative, and much-imitated, use of a ‘documentary’ poetics: the marshalling through citation of contemporary texts as material evidence of ‘the state of things’ (XXXI). The reproduction in Canto IX of snippets from the contents of the ‘post-bag’ seized from Sigismondo by his enemies inaugurates this form of verbal montage in The Cantos; it becomes a structuring principle of cantos XXXI, XXXII, XXXIII (on Jefferson and John Adams), XXXIV (on John Quincy Adams), XXXVII (on Martin van Buren), and, most strikingly, Cantos LII–LXXI (1940), a rapidly-composed two-part sequence concerning, respectively, Chinese history from its legendary past to the eighteenth century and the thought of John Adams, Bostonian revolutionary and second president of the United States. Formally, both the China Cantos and the Adams Cantos draw heavily on Pound’s sources in a fashion familiar to readers of earlier Cantos, hammering home, through their amassing of data, Pound’s preoccupation with equitable government and – its corollary, in his eyes – society’s need for linguistic precision. Yet, here, the found material has for many readers seemed to constitute little more than – in Massimo Bacigalupo’s words – ‘two elephantine quotations . . . quite lacking in critical and combinatory strategies’. While Cantos LII–LXXI has had few admirers, the recent conceptual writing of, for example, Kenneth Goldsmith and Vanessa Place continues to explore the aesthetic possibilities of a poetics of transcription or (in Goldsmith’s ludic phrase) ‘uncreative writing’.
If Pound’s interest in the *Metamorphoses* bears upon the structure of *The Cantos*, it also points to the religious impulse behind the wandering trajectory of the poem. The Ovidian epyllion frequently concerns the confrontation of the human and the divine (as in Acoetes’ meeting with Bacchus in *Met.* 3/Canto II). ‘[W]ith all pretence of scientific accuracy’, writes Pound in *The Spirit of Romance*, Ovid ‘ushers in his gods, demigods, monsters and transformations’.22 Drawing attention to this passage, George Kearns finds in Pound, ‘the rationalist *philosophes*, the counter-pressure of ‘the poet in need of gods’; and the early cantos are studded with what Pound called, in a 1927 letter to his father, ‘the “magic moment” or moment of metamorphosis, bust thru from quotidian into “divine or permanent world”. Gods etc.’23 Witness, for instance, the ‘moment’ recorded in Canto III: ‘Gods float in the azure air, / Bright gods and Tuscan, back before dew was shed.’24 Pound’s paganism, in such epiphanies, complements his deepening interest in Confucianism from 1913 onwards; his translation *Ta Hio: The Great Learning* was published in 1928. The title page’s announcement that the Confucian text has been ‘newly rendered into the American Language’ emphasises Pound’s commitment to the importation of its tenets to the West, echoing Confucius’s (Kung’s) words, in Canto XIII, that ‘The blossoms of the apricot / blow from the east to the west, / And I have tried to keep them from falling’.25 Feng Lan summarises Pound’s brand of Confucianism as the belief in ‘a holistic universe inhabited by both spiritual and material beings, and a rational arrangement of cosmic relations bringing human beings the benefits of material abundance as well as the blessing of moral revelations’.26 This is, of course, a politics as much as a theology; and, in the inferno of the ‘Hell Cantos’ (XIV–XV), Pound rounds on those he holds accountable for the financial iniquities and moral and aesthetic bankruptcy he sees in the immediate aftermath of the Great War: David Lloyd George, Woodrow Wilson, ‘Addressing crowds through their arse-holes’, ‘Profiteers drinking blood sweetened with sh-t’, and the ‘perverters of language’.27 These marvellously scatological cantos date from shortly after Pound’s interest in economics had been quickened by his meeting with Clifford Hugh Douglas, proponent...
of ‘Social Credit’. Whatever the niceties of Pound’s economic beliefs (and their complex relation to his anti-Semitism), it is noteworthy that *The Cantos* proved a capacious enough carpet-bag to include them (see, for instance, the excursus on Douglas’s ideas in Canto XXXVIII). *The Fifth Decade of Cantos XLII–LI* (1937) is an extraordinarily varied collection, moving from the documentary exactness of cantos XLII and XLIII, which praise the practices of the seventeenth-century banking in Siena, through the justly-famous jeremiad ‘With Usura’ (XLV), to the tranquillity of the ‘Seven Lakes Canto’ (XLIX), in which, Pound said, there is a ‘glimpse of Paradiso’, as a Confucian harmony of human and natural environment yields to an intimation of ‘The fourth; the dimension of stillness’.

But such stillness would soon be broken. In 1944, amid ‘the wreckage of Europe’ (LXXVI), Ezra Pound composed two cantos in Italian (LXXII and LXXIII), in the first of which the ghost of the recently deceased Futurist and fellow-fascist F. T. Marinetti appears to the speaker, brusquely demanding the latter’s body in order to continue ‘the struggle’. Demurring that ‘already old, / I need it’, Pound offers the shade of Marinetti ‘a place in a Canto / giving you voice’ – an invitation made good in the prosopopoeia that follows, in which the Italian writer admits to his failings, that (unlike Pound) ‘[I] knew not the ancient sages / nor read Confucius & Mencius’, and that ‘I sang war, and you wanted peace.’ Like Eliot’s encounter with a ‘familiar compound ghost’ in the aftermath of a German bombing-raid on London in ‘Little Gidding’ (1942), Pound’s dialogue with Marinetti in ‘la guerra di merda’ (‘the dung war’) interrogates his poetic vocation at this fraught conjuncture after the example of Dante: through converse with the dead. And, at this stage of his career, Pound had few other significant colloquists.

The Italian Cantos (published in part in 1945) brought to a close a cessation in the composition of Pound’s epic: the previous instalment, the China-Adams Cantos, had appeared in 1940. The two wartime cantos’ political defiance is at one with their author’s increasingly vociferous commitment to Italian fascism over the course of the 1930s, culminating in a series of radio broadcasts
that, commencing in early 1941, Pound unwisely delivered to American listeners from Rome on behalf of Mussolini’s regime.\textsuperscript{32} Indicted for treason by the US authorities in July 1943, and arrested in May 1945, Pound was incarcerated at the Disciplinary Training Centre near Pisa, in which unpropitious circumstances he commenced work on *The Pisan Cantos* (published in 1948). The Pisans unregenerately reiterate the politics of the 1944 cantos in the pugnacious lament for the ‘enormous tragedy’ (LXXIV) of the Republic’s demise that Pound finally settled on to open this section of his poem. Yet the post-war cantos’ poignant but tough-minded essays in mental recovery and attempted recuperation distinguish them from the largely impersonal historiography of *Cantos LII–LXXI*, and signal, as Patricia Cockram observes, an ‘exquisite recovery’ from the ‘aesthetic and ethical collapse’ of the Italian Cantos.\textsuperscript{33}

However uneven an achievement, *The Cantos* fulfils Pound’s epic ambitions, if only in that his poem became a lodestone for those contemporary and later poets, such as William Carlos Williams and Charles Olson, who belong to what Marjorie Perloff has designated as the Other Tradition.\textsuperscript{34} As Philip Hardie has argued, epic is generically constituted through a process of reception; in this regard, in the modernist era *The Cantos* performs a comparable function to that of the great classical and Renaissance epics.\textsuperscript{35} Notwithstanding this, however, Pound’s tendentious politics imperilled his poetic reputation in the late 1940s: witness the furore over the awarding of the inaugural Bollingen Prize to *The Pisan Cantos* in 1948. In the same year, T. S. Eliot was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. As Lawrence Rainey observes, ‘By then Ezra Pound, under indictment for wartime broadcasts that he had made through Radio Rome, was in St Elizabeths Hospital for the Criminally Insane.’\textsuperscript{36} Indeed, as Rainey has shown, as early as 1923 Pound had relied on his compatriot, Eliot, to provide a forum for the Malatesta Cantos in *The Criterion*. This relationship of dependence would extend after the Second World War, when, in his role as editor at Faber, Eliot ensured the publication, in Britain, of instalments of *The Cantos* (a comparable service was performed by James Laughlin’s New Directions press in the US).\textsuperscript{37}
Eliot’s editorial support was payment in kind. Pound had edited *The Waste Land*, and the poem he had so radically reshaped is dedicated to him:

> For Ezra Pound  
> *il miglior fabbro* [the better craftsman]

Pound had performed a caesarean section on Eliot’s poem, cutting *The Waste Land* into the compact form in which it would be published out of its much larger body of manuscript materials. Thanks to Pound’s surgical intervention, and in comparison to the sprawl of his own *Cantos*, *The Waste Land* is a pocket-epic, a 433-line stripling. But Eliot’s poem punches well above its weight: published in 1922, the year Michael North has nominated as the *annus mirabilis* of literary modernism, *The Waste Land* is the single most significant poem of the twentieth century. For all its imagery of dust and of drought, *The Waste Land* is a watershed in the history of modernist poetry, and would be acknowledged as such even by those, like William Carlos Williams, who resisted what they saw as the baleful influence of the expatriate Eliot’s Eurocentric and bookish masterwork.

Eliot’s poem, Williams said, ‘returned us to the classroom’. His charge, which is motivated by Williams’s animus against the expatriate poets who chose to ‘run to London’ instead of developing a homemade American modernism as he had done, may not be wholly just. David Chinitz and others have shown that *The Waste Land* is richly eclectic in its range of cultural reference, demotic as well as learned, populist as well as elitist, with the Cockney Ophelia and Jazz Age syncopations of its ‘Shakesperherian Rag’. That said, *The Waste Land* is hardly ‘modernism lite’. A radical experiment with spatial form and with multiple focalisation, and a dazzling display of technopoetics – of cinematographic cuts-and-dissolves, and of radiophonic fade outs, frequencies, and static interference – *The Waste Land* is at the leading edge of ‘multimedia modernism’. In comparison with the monologues of *Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917), *The Waste Land* – polyglot, polyvocal, densely allusive – is a machine-age
Tower of Babel. The poem, which in book form came complete with its own scholarly apparatus in the extensive and putatively ‘explanatory’ notes appended to the text, more than proves the point Eliot had made in his 1921 essay ‘The Metaphysical Poets’, that ‘poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be difficult’. If *The Cantos* is, as Pound envisaged it, a ‘poem including history’, then *The Waste Land*, by virtue of its procedure of composition through allusion, is a poem including literary history. ‘No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone’, Eliot had insisted in ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’, the 1919 essay which is an advance manifesto of sorts for the intertextual praxis of *The Waste Land*, and flags the post-war context of that poem’s composition. For Eliot, no less than for Pound, the modern poet (Individual Talent) channels the voices of the ‘dead poets’ of the past (Tradition), and in doing so reanimates the corpus upon which his own poetic integrity depends, since the newness of ‘the new (the really new) work of art’ is proved by the modifications it performs on the ‘existing monuments’ of Western culture. Amid the ‘ruins’ of a culture laid waste, however, only the ‘fragments’ of tradition remain, making the task of the new work of art – *The Waste Land* – daunting, if not impossible. Can the modern – the ‘really new’ – poem piece together the shards of tradition, and reconstruct Western culture from its ruins? Is the new poem a revivification of tradition or its terminus? Can the dead poets show us how to live and what to do? When things fall apart, is poetry ‘so much waste paper’, or is culture a wellspring of social regeneration and of spiritual rejuvenation?

*The Waste Land* begs such questions from its opening gambit, ‘April is the cruellest month’. These words, in which we might detect Eliot’s dismay at the onset of the financial year – he was then an employee in the Colonial and Foreign Department of Lloyds Bank – reprise and revise the beginning of the General Prologue to the foundational English epic, Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*: ‘What that April with his shoures soote / The droghte of March hath perced to the roote.’ Like *The Canterbury Tales*, *The Waste Land* is a polyvocal poem of pilgrimage, but one in which the April showers of Spring, the season of natural growth and of Christian
resurrection, do little to regenerate the desert terrain the poem traverses, the harsh environment of the Old Testament God:

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
A heap of broken images

These lines register the crisis of meaning and of belief, exacerbated by the physical and philosophical dislocations of the Great War, which both impels and impedes the transaction between the modernist artwork and a traumatised modernity.

In the first three parts of The Waste Land, modernity is synonymous with London, the great vortex of modernist experiment and the hub of empire. King William Street, the Cannon Street Hotel, Lower Thames Street, Richmond — rather than Burbank with a Baedeker, The Waste Land is Eliot with a London A–Z. The poem’s topographical markers notwithstanding, however, Eliot’s London, like William Blake’s, is a hallucinated city, an ‘Unreal City’. The London metropolis is a necropolis in which commuters bound for the City resemble the ranks of the living dead:

Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
I had not thought death had undone so many

The five discontinuous sections which make up The Waste Land are supported, albeit more precariously than Eliot’s own notes may suggest, by the ‘mythical method’ also deployed in James Joyce’s Ulysses, published in the same year, and which, in his 1923 review-article ‘Ulysses, Order, and Myth’, Eliot would define as the manipulation of ‘a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity’. According to Eliot, Joyce’s, and, before him, Yeats’s, recourse to mythology offers ‘a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history’ — a description which more closely comports with the world view of The Waste Land than with that of Ulysses. If we take our bearings from Eliot’s notes, the arbiter of the poem’s mythical method is Tiresias, the blind seer
of classical mythology and of Homeric (and Poundian) epic. Transported in Eliot’s Tardis-poem from ancient Thebes and deposited in twentieth-century London, Tiresias is a deep-time traveller who, we are told in Eliot’s note, is ‘the most important personage’ in *The Waste Land*, ‘uniting all the rest’ — even the sexes meet in the hermaphroditic prophet. Consequently, ‘What Tiresias sees . . . is the substance of the poem.’ In a literal sense, the blind Tiresias sees nothing, although as a prophet he has ‘foresuffered all’: he has ‘sat by Thebes below the wall’, and, as Odysseus’ guide, has ‘walked among the lowest of the dead’ in Hades. In contemporary London, however, he is little more than a fly on the wall of a dingy bedsit, where he bears disaffected witness to the machine-age modernity of ‘food in tins’ and the mechanical sex of the typist and her lover. The latter, ‘the young man carbuncular’, is, as his epithet indicates, no Homeric hero, and Tiresias accordingly leaves him to grope his way alone down the unlit stairs into the London netherworld.\(^{53}\)

Tiresias may embody *The Waste Land*’s critique of a degraded modernity, but the poem draws on composite mythic materials, notably the pre-Christian fertility rituals catalogued in J. G. Frazer’s study on magic and religion, *The Golden Bough* (1890–1915). Many modernist poets, among them Yeats, Pound, H.D., and D. H. Lawrence, dipped into Frazer’s myth-kitty, the comparativism of which appealed to the Eliot who wanted his poem to contain but not be confined to the Christian narrative of death and rebirth. The other major source for *The Waste Land*’s mythical method is Jessie L. Weston’s *From Ritual to Romance* (1920), a study of the Grail legend which itself reverts to Frazer: the origins of the Grail, which Weston defines as a sex symbol, lie in the pre-Christian belief-systems, like Tarot divination, documented in *The Golden Bough*. Eliot borrows the Tarot pack from Weston, and gives a customised version of it to *The Waste Land*’s resident clairvoyant, Madame Sosostris (who is herself an imitation of Sesostris, the Sorceress in drag from Aldous Huxley’s satirical novel *Crome Yellow* (1921)). Her ‘bad cold’ implies that Madame Sosostris’s channels may be blocked, but her mediumistic powers nonetheless make her a surrogate of kinds for the modern poet as
described in ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ – both communicate with the dead. And Madame Sosostris does predict what will come to pass in the poem (‘death by water’), as, with her ‘wicked pack of [Tarot] cards’, she deals out the archetypal characters of *The Waste Land*: the Lady of Situations, the Drowned Phoenician Sailor, and the one-eyed merchant.\textsuperscript{54} Ominously, she does not find the Hanged Man, the symbol of the dying god, associated in ancient Egypt with Osiris and subsequently with Christ.

In Weston, Eliot also found the particular version of the Grail quest ghosted in *The Waste Land*: the legend of the impotent Fisher King, whose malady not only brings a corresponding drought to his land but also exposes his people to ‘the ravages of war’. In medieval redactions of the romance, the quester – Percival, or, in later versions, Galahad – eventually heals the Fisher King, and the operations of sympathetic magic ensure ‘the restoration to fruitfulness of a Waste Land’.\textsuperscript{55} No such cure is effected in Eliot’s poem, in the final part of which the wounded King remains ‘upon the shore / Fishing, with the arid plain behind me’. *The Waste Land* is modernist quest-romance, in which redemption, while the promise of it may be glimpsed, is withheld. In its concluding section, the poem turns away from Europe altogether towards India and the East, as Spengler had done in *The Decline of the West*, the revised version of which was published, like *The Waste Land*, in 1922. What consolation there is at the end of Eliot’s text is expressed in the plaintive repetition of ‘Shantih’, the Sanskrit word which marks the formal conclusion of the Hindu *Upanishads*, and which Eliot parses somewhat opaquely in his note as ‘The Peace which passeth understanding’.\textsuperscript{56} As Maud Ellmann suggests, *The Waste Land* may be a Sphinx without a secret, ‘a riddle to itself’.\textsuperscript{57}

‘These fragments I have shored against my ruins’: this lone line, interpolated into the jumble of quotations into which *The Waste Land* eventually implodes, may be parsed either as a last-ditch defence of the poem’s effort at cultural reconstruction, or as an acknowledgement that everything is broken, that the fragments of the cultural monuments of the past are in fact coterminous with the ruins, the stony rubbish, of the post-war present.\textsuperscript{58} The interpretative binary yielded
by the poem itself has been reproduced in recent critical debate as to *The Waste Land*’s position in the history of modernist poetry. In Marjorie Perloff’s judgement, its ‘temporal and spatial dislocations’ are avant-garde surface effects which belie *The Waste Land*’s ‘perfectly coherent symbolic structure’.\(^59\) For Lawrence Rainey, that symbolic structure is a house of cards: rejecting Perloff’s consignment of the poem ‘to an earlier but now exhausted age of Symbolist aesthetics’, Rainey argues that its ‘lacerating opacity’ and radical discontinuity affirm *The Waste Land*’s experimental credentials and thus confirm its place in the modernist vanguard of the Other Tradition to which Pound’s *Cantos* also belongs.\(^60\)

As Rainey has demonstrated, *The Waste Land* was almost famous even before its publication. Among the venues mooted for its debut appearance were the *Little Review*, the acme of the modernist ‘little magazine’ which had serialised Joyce’s *Ulysses*, and *Vanity Fair*, a high-circulation magazine with highbrow pretensions; in the event, in October 1922 the poem was published in *The Dial* in the United States, and in *The Criterion* in England. December of that year saw the first book publication of *The Waste Land*, which was brought out, together with the notes with which Eliot bulked out his slim volume, by Boni and Liveright in New York.\(^61\) *The Waste Land* quickly became required reading for the intellectual smart set, as Evelyn Waugh would recall in the scene in *Brideshead Revisited* (1945) in which Anthony Blanche recites the Tiresias passage through a megaphone from a balcony in Christ Church, Oxford. Waugh had already paid his own, no less extraordinary, tribute to *The Waste Land* in his 1934 novel *A Handful of Dust*. Published in the same year, and taking issue with Eliot, Scottish modernist Hugh MacDiarmid’s ‘On a Raised Beach’ is a praise-poem which celebrates ‘These stones with their resolve that Creation shall not be / Injured by iconoclasts and quacks’. ‘This is no heap of broken images’, MacDiarmid asserts, in an explicit rebuttal of Eliot’s vision of decline.\(^62\)

On the other side of the Atlantic, the fallout from Eliot’s poem proved less toxic than Williams supposed, when, in his *Autobiography* (1967), he likened the impact of *The Waste Land* to that of the dropping of the atomic bomb.\(^63\) F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (1925) is a New
World reworking of the poem, as is Bob Dylan’s ‘Desolation Row’ (1965), which, along with its crew of sailors, hanged man, fortune-telling lady, and blind commissioner, includes cameo appearances by Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot themselves, ‘Fighting in the captain’s tower [of the Titanic] / While calypso singers laugh at them.’ Dylan’s lyric seems to anticipate the creatively irreverent reception of Eliot in Caribbean poetry, and in particular in the oeuvre of Barbadian poet [Edward] Kamau Brathwaite. In his History of the Voice (1984), Brathwaite recalls that it was the global transmission, via BBC radio, of ‘Eliot’s actual voice – or rather his recorded voice, property of the British Council – . . . which turned us on. In that dry deadpan delivery, the riddims of St. Louis . . . were stark and clear for those of us who at the same time were listening to the dislocations of Bird, Dizzy and Klook.’ ‘The Dust’ (1967), Brathwaite’s Bajan version of The Waste Land, which puts the Little Tradition of the Caribbean periphery in vivid vernacular dialogue with the Great Tradition of the colonising centre, is exemplary of what Jahan Ramazani has described as post-colonial poetry’s capacity to ‘modernize the indigenous and indigenize the modern’. ‘The Dust’ adapts The Waste Land to the conditions of twentieth-century Barbados, its theme that of ‘de pes- / tilence’, when ‘suddenly so / widdout rhyme / widdout reason / / you crops start to die’. These words return as the epigraph to the radically experimental X/Self (1987), a volume which reverts to Eliot – ‘london bridge is fall / en down’ – as Brathwaite has continued to do in his recent work. Ark: a 9/11 continuation poem (2004), is his elegy for the

so so so so so many. the crowd
flow-
ning over Brooklyn Bridge. so so so many. i had not thought death
had undone so many.

In X/Self, Brathwaite had discovered his ‘muse / / in computer’, the ‘sycorax video-style’ generated by his Apple SE30 word processor and Style Writer printer. The sycorax-style in which the ‘black Caliban Maroon’ aesthetic of the Third World is encoded is also a cybernetic operating system of the kind that Robert Crawford proposes is latent in The Waste Land. According to Crawford,
Eliot’s poem ‘functions as a hypertext system’ in which the ‘constant use of textual and cultural allusion sets up a potentially endless knowledge and information flow’.  

The Waste Land’s different voices dwindle, in ‘The Hollow Men’ (1925), into the first person plural of the ‘dried voices’ of the straw men who subsist in ‘the dead land’, the ‘cactus land’. The hollow men are suspended in the limbo between world and Word, between the temporal and the absolute, the poem itself composed on the cusp between nursery rhyme and litany, between silence and a stammered Lord’s Prayer. Where ‘The Hollow Men’ enacts Eliot’s own dilemma as a ‘potential convert, still hollow of belief’, Ash-Wednesday (1930), the first part of which appeared in 1927 – the year Eliot was confirmed in the Church of England and became a British subject – is ‘the Reverend Eliot[s]’ conversion-poem proper. Here, the antinomies of ‘The Hollow Men’ are again enacted in the ‘between’ which denotes division (‘separated’) and unity (‘come unto Thee’), but with the difference that Ash-Wednesday is Eliot’s Vita Nuova, in which the sexual self is sublimated into poetico-religious vocation, and the syncretism of The Waste Land distilled into the plangent and purely Christian mysticism of the quest to redeem Time. Lyndall Gordon has observed that the poem’s turns –

Because I do not hope to turn again
Because I do not hope
Because I do not hope to turn.

– are those that Lancelot Andrewes had ‘prescribed for a conversion: a turn that looks forward to God and a turn that looks backward to one’s sins’. The Anglican turn of Ash-Wednesday also marks the juncture in Eliot’s poetry between the high modernist apex of The Waste Land, and the masterpiece of inter- and Second World War modernism, Four Quartets (1935–42).

Notes


3. *Personae: The Shorter Poems of Ezra Pound*, ed. Lea Baechler and A. Walton Litz (New York: New Directions, 1990), 229. Pound’s Venetian experiences were not ignored when he settled on the final versions of the early cantos: see, for example, III and XXVI.


12. For a full account of these cantos, see Lawrence S. Rainey, *Ezra Pound and the Monument of Culture: Text, History, and the Malatesta Cantos* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991). Rainey notes that Canto II (then numbered VIII) appeared ‘only a few months before the Malatesta Cantos were written’: *ibid.*, 256.


25. Ibid., 60.


27. Pound, Cantos, 61.


29. Qtd in Carroll F. Terrell, A Companion to The Cantos (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 192; Pound, Cantos, 245. For a


37. As Peter Makin comments, by the late 1930s Pound was ‘so isolated that the Cantos were only publishable thanks to his friends T. S. Eliot at Faber and James Laughlin of New Directions – neither of whom believed in large parts of his current verse’: Peter Makin, Pound’s Cantos (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1985), 212.


56. Eliot *Complete Poems and Plays*, 74, 75, 80.


70. Brathwaite, *X/Self*, 84.

71. Ibid., 130.


When Hugh Kenner published *A Homemade World: The American Modernist Writers* in the mid-1970s, he could still be disparaging about certain American poets (in particular Wallace Stevens) who did not become émigré writers. Since then, literary historians and critics have more commonly argued that America’s ‘homemade’ poets produced an alternative strain of modernist verse that is culturally no less important and aesthetically no less valuable than that of their expatriate counterparts (principally Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, H.D., and Gertrude Stein). More recently still, the ‘new modernist studies’, with its focus on transnational interactions and suspicion of neatly defined cultural-geographic identifications, has made it necessary to re-conceptualise the roles of figures such as Stevens, William Carlos Williams, Marianne Moore, and Hart Crane in the larger modernist enterprise.

In this more recent critical context, clichéd oppositions between American provincials and internationally oriented émigrés cede to more nuanced analyses of complex cultural tensions at work in modernist poetry anywhere. Although such tensions are manifested in a diverse range of individual voices and styles, they may be regarded in general as the result of poets’ simultaneous national and transnational orientations, which found their expression in a recurrent artistic struggle between alertness to local specificity and the desire to express the cosmopolitan energy of big cities. From a twenty-first-century perspective, the manner in which these tensions impinge on American modernist poets on either side of the Atlantic serves as the symptomatic starting point of a process that turned the twentieth century into one of increasing economic and cultural
globalisation, culminating in the dynamics of the ‘glocal’, in which scholars have come to see the local and global as mutually defining and impossible to disentangle. When for a chapter such as this we wish to return to the early parts of the century, we need an understanding of Americanness that is sufficiently capacious to accommodate the simultaneous pull of nationalism and internationalism to be found, in different guises and to varying degrees, among the poets who were living in the US and starting their writing careers there in the 1910s and ’20s.

New York was the city that embodied these tensions most clearly and was even, in many ways, constituted by them. It was no coincidence, then, that European modernism made its earliest American impact on this city. During the first two decades of the twentieth century, New York was the most internationally oriented city in the US, particularly when it came to the production, distribution, and public display of the visual arts. It was the only place in the country where one could see, on a regular basis, the latest art from Paris. Alfred Stieglitz’s 291 gallery, which opened in 1908, showed works by such European artists as Paul Cézanne, Pablo Picasso, and Henri Matisse, as well as by advanced American artists such as John Marin and Georgia O’Keeffe. Stieglitz’s periodical Camera Work (1903–17) also featured modern painting, sculpture, and architecture. But it was not until 1913, with the arrival of the so-called Armory Show, that New York fully opened the door to international modernism and became the American centre for avant-garde art and literature.

The International Exhibition of Modern Art, held in the Sixty-Ninth Regiment Armory at Lexington Avenue and 25th Street in Manhattan, displayed nearly 1,300 works by both European and American artists. It has been deemed a watershed event in the transnational history of modernism because it first introduced the American public to post-Impressionism and cubism. The revelation of these strange artworks caused a veritable sensation. Ultimately, it had a transforming effect on all the arts in America, but its effect on poetry was immediate and profound. Indeed, the leading characteristic of the New York avant-garde that arose in the wake of the Armory Show is the close relations between poetry and painting that
prevailed there. Stevens, Williams, Moore, E. E. Cummings, and Crane were all deeply interested in the visual arts and consciously drew analogies between poetry and painting.

One of those most affected by the Armory Show was the future art collector Walter Conrad Arensberg, who became a devout convert to modernism virtually overnight. He purchased from the Armory Show the first works that eventually grew into his famous collection of modern art, now part of the Philadelphia Museum of Art. In 1914, he and his wife Louise moved to New York from Boston to be at the centre of avant-garde activity. Soon they started holding a kind of ‘salon’ in their apartment several nights a week to show their growing collection. There, at 33 West 67th Street, Stevens and Williams could see the latest work from Paris by Cézanne, George Braque, Picasso, Matisse, Marcel Duchamp, and others. The atmosphere of the salon was distinctly international. French was often spoken because many of the guests were French artists driven abroad by the First World War, such as Albert Gleizes and his wife Juliette Roche, Francis Picabia, and Duchamp. Here they mixed with American writers and artists, including Stevens, Williams, Djuna Barnes, Carl Van Vechten, Marsden Hartley, Charles Demuth, Charles Sheeler, Mina Loy, Joseph Stella, Alfred Kreymborg, and Man Ray. This group is now known as the New York Dada movement. Its leading figure was Duchamp, whose *Nude Descending a Staircase* had been the succès de scandale of the Armory Show. Duchamp’s revolutionary invention of the ‘readymade’ – a mass-produced object the artist displayed as his work of art – would be even more influential, paving the way for Pop Art, minimalism, and conceptual art. The French bias of the Arensberg circle helped to establish the close ties between Paris and New York that characterised modern art for most of the twentieth century. The New York-centred poets during the 1910s and ’20s tended to be better informed about the latest Parisian developments in the visual arts than were their counterparts in London.

The oldest among these poets, Stevens, had befriended Arensberg during his days as a student at Harvard (1897–1900), when Stevens first demonstrated his interest in writing poetry as editor of the
Harvard Advocate. The two men lost touch after graduating, until Arensberg moved to New York in 1914. To Stevens, the atmosphere of the Arensberg circle was crucial in his emergence as a modern poet: he later described his participation in it as his poetic and artistic ‘awakening’.2 Already close to thirty-five at the time, Stevens no longer seemed a likely candidate for literary prominence. After his studies at Harvard, he had moved to New York to try his hand at journalism. Disillusioned by the job, he had allowed his father, a lawyer and self-made businessman from Pennsylvania, to persuade him to enter New York Law School. For almost ten years, after passing his exams for the bar in 1904, Stevens had struggled to make a living in New York, failing to set up a law firm of his own, then moving between various law offices. His situation had been so insecure that he had stretched out his engagement to Elsie Viola Kachel for five years. His eventual marriage had in turn alienated him from his parents and brought personal disappointment, though Stevens’s strong need for a private domestic haven would keep him from ever seeking a divorce.

Besides being a lawyer who was finally beginning to make a career in the insurance industry, the Stevens who was awakened by the Arensberg circle was a rather shy dandy who stood apart from this company of more eccentric artists, musicians, and writers. Even so, the Arensberg salon allowed him to develop lifelong friendships with Williams and Walter Pach, one of the organisers of the Armory Show who acted as a go-between with the modern art world in Paris. The flamboyant Dadaist Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven even developed an aggressive passion for Stevens, from which he barely managed to escape.3 All such encounters put their stamp on the intellectually inquisitive and playful Stevens, who kept in touch with the Arensberg circle after he moved to Hartford in 1916. There he took up a position with the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company that would lay out his career path as an insurance lawyer for the rest of his life. Both Stevens and his wife gradually came to prefer the quietly regular, semi-suburban life on the periphery of New York, to which Stevens kept commuting over weekends as a participant-observer of all things cultural, even long after the Arensberg circle dispersed in 1922.
Although Stevens composed two slim sets of conventional love poems as a private gift to Elsie in 1908 and 1909, it took him until 1914 to convince himself to return to his Harvard habit of publishing poetry in literary magazines. Almost immediately, he met with enthusiastic encouragement from Poetry’s editor Harriet Monroe and Alfred Kreymborg of Others. As a result, Stevens’s resolutely new and unique voice, with its many lexical, syntactic, and imaginative surprises, seemed to appear on the poetry scene almost out of the blue. Within the first year of his modernist awakening, he produced such inventive and mature poems as ‘Cy Est Pourtraitte, Madame Ste Ursule, et Les Unze Mille Vierges’, ‘Peter Quince at the Clavier’, ‘Disillusionment of Ten O’Clock’, and the text with which his early verse has been associated ever since, ‘Sunday Morning’. In this last poem, Stevens showed himself a modern-day heir of the romantic tradition (principally Keats and Tennyson) as well as of a post-Nietzschean and fin-de-siècle lineage of secular aestheticism, but also a poet who was able to move beyond such nineteenth-century inspirations with the typically surprising images, new music, and ironic reversals of the modern artist.

Despite the quickly-spreading admiration for such verse among an in-crowd of peers, Stevens continued to submit small batches of poems to a range of little magazines for nearly a decade before he could finally bring himself to collect seventy-four poems in his first volume, Harmonium (1923). Even then, he complained about the harrowing selection and organisation process: ‘To pick a crisp salad from the garbage of the past is no snap.’ The results were, inevitably, heterogeneous, and the book’s non-chronological organisation has served to mask some of the evolution Stevens’s writing underwent in this first productive decade, from the irregularly chopped-up free verse steeped in Imagist techniques early on, to a number of riddle-like lyrics such as ‘Earthy Anecdote’, ‘Anecdote of the Jar’, and ‘The Snow Man’, and culminating in the all-out verbal play with diction and sound in which Stevens delighted by 1922 (‘Bantams in Pine-Woods’, ‘The Emperor of Ice-Cream’, and, most excessively, the mock-epic ‘The Comedian as the Letter C’).

Harmonium appeared shortly before Stevens’s forty-fourth birthday—one of the very late debuts in the history of American poetry. Partly
because it came out just after the impact made by Eliot’s culturally pessimistic *The Waste Land*, it met with less than unanimous enthusiasm. Marianne Moore’s slyly titled review in *The Dial*, ‘Well Moused, Lion’, was among the few to recognise the book’s exceptional qualities—those fundamentally affirmative and lavishly inventive features that would turn *Harmonium*, over the years, into Stevens’s best-loved volume. For about a year after publication Stevens continued to write as before, only to fall silent, all of a sudden, for the rest of the 1920s. Between the demands of his job and of raising his only child, Holly (born in 1924), he felt he had too little time for poetry. It would not be until 1933, at the nadir of the Depression, when Stevens’s personal financial situation was fully secured, that he would start to publish again. By then it also became clear that he would stay forever in his home country and remain an armchair traveller—a biographical oddity that has made it all too easy to forget that, throughout the decade leading up to *Harmonium*, Stevens felt a strong desire to travel to Europe and, throughout his career, he drew his poetic and artistic inspiration from cultures near and far. In his imagination he practically lived in Paris.

By contrast, Stevens’s friend Williams took a very different stance towards international inspiration. For most of his writing life, it was Williams’s explicit ambition to create a new kind of poetry in deliberate opposition to the Europeanised, elitist modernism of Eliot and Pound. He called *The Waste Land* ‘the great catastrophe to our letters’. In the tradition of Whitman, his aim was to ground his poems in the American soil and to build them from the language of ordinary Americans. Williams took as a fundamental principle ‘the universality of the local’. Yet unlike so many of the voices espousing the local today, Williams’s outlook was not narrowly provincial or nationalistic, nor was it driven by an essentially conservative agenda. His father was born in England and his Puerto Rican mother spoke French and Spanish at home. Williams had much more immediate international experience than a figure such as Stevens: he spent two of his high-school years in boarding schools in Geneva and Paris (1897–9); he attended medical school in Germany and travelled through Europe for another year in 1909–10; and he made two further extended trips to
Europe in 1924 and 1927. Although he lived all his life in Rutherford, New Jersey, the town in which he was born, working full-time as a doctor to support his wife and two sons, he regularly went across the Hudson River into Manhattan to mingle with a cosmopolitan community of writers and artists. Like Stevens, but in different ways, Williams was deeply inspired by the modern paintings he saw at the Arensberg salon. He had originally wanted to be a painter himself and, as a much more gregarious and sociable man than Stevens, often visited artists’ studios and knew many artists personally, becoming close friends with the painters Hartley and Demuth in particular. In his poetry, he claimed to treat words on the page as a painter uses paint on canvas, explaining in an interview, ‘I’ve attempted to fuse the poetry and the painting to make it the same thing.’

Williams’s poetic emergence was more gradual than that of Stevens – and would last longer, eventually covering more than half a century of poetry writing. After the largely derivative Poems (1909) and The Tempers (1913), both composed while still a young man in his twenties, Williams found his own poetic voice in Al Que Quiere! (1917). The originality of this voice is immediately clear from the deliberate choice of a Spanish title rather than the snobbishly ‘arty’ French titles popular at the time. The sharp visual observations in a poem such as ‘Pastoral (When I Was Younger)’ reflect both his painter’s eye and his training as a doctor. Another signature poem, ‘Tract’, combines the iconoclastic drive and the colloquial American idiom characteristic of his mature work. And the Whitmanesque narrative poem ‘The Wanderer’ concludes the volume no less typically with a descent into the gritty reality of life (a baptism in ‘the filthy Passaic’) and a consequent rebirth, thereby enacting the essential creative process as Williams came to understand it.

His next volume, Sour Grapes (1921), contains a number of poems clearly illustrating his interest in the visual arts, including several ‘still lifes’ of flowers like ‘Queen-Anne’s-Lace’ as well as the poem he read at the opening of the First Independents Exhibition at the Grand Central Palace in 1917, ‘Overture to a Dance of Locomotives’. The last poem in the book, ‘The Great Figure’, is a description of a fire truck racing through the dark city that conveys (Williams said) his
contempt for ‘great’ public figures. The poem records an experience that happened on a visit to Hartley’s studio and it inspired the most famous of Demuth’s ‘poster-portraits’, I Saw the Figure 5 in Gold. Sour Grapes also includes such moving lyrics as the intensely felt but unsentimental ‘The Widow’s Lament in Springtime’ and the spare parable of old age, ‘To Waken an Old Lady’.

In addition to composing such freshly inventive poems, Williams also wrote a great deal of prose during the 1910s and ’20s. Kora in Hell followed close upon the heels of Al Que Quiere! in 1919. Subtitled Improvisations by analogy with Wassily Kandinsky’s series of abstract paintings, the book presents an elaborate experiment in automatic writing that points to Williams’s close relation to Dada and surrealism. It may actually have anticipated what is usually considered the first automatic surrealist text, The Magnetic Fields by André Breton and Philippe Soupault, likewise published in 1919. Other important prose works during this period include The Great American Novel (1923), really an ‘anti-novel’ with its virtual lack of plot and continual self-reflexive digressions; In the American Grain (1925), his exploration of American history in search of figures and episodes that would illuminate the enormous hopes and challenges still facing the ‘new world’ in the twentieth century; and the first of his four novels, Voyage to Pagany (1928), based on his European adventures in 1924.

Williams’s next book of poetry, Spring and All (1923), was largely neglected when it appeared – like Stevens’s Harmonium – one year after The Waste Land. Yet it is now generally recognised as his most important single work. It embeds (sometimes for apparently arbitrary or irrational purposes) twenty-six poems in prose that is by turns meditative, hortatory, fragmented, and hilarious. Williams acknowledged the Dada spirit of the book: ‘I didn’t originate Dadaism but I had it in my soul to write it. Spring and All shows that.’ The primary effect is one of jarring, alert immediacy, as in the poem now called ‘Spring and All’ but originally untitled (like all the poems in the book): with its rigorously unsentimental observations of a messy, cold, early spring landscape, its choppy rhythms and urgent tone, it seems to be creating itself on the page as we read. One of Williams’s most
famous anthology pieces, ‘The Red Wheelbarrow’, bears comparison with Duchamp’s readymades, while ‘The Rose’ refers specifically to the cubist painting of Juan Gris. As these examples demonstrate, Williams’s implied audience was always more than national even when his descriptions sought to capture the here and now of his American environment.

Only a few years younger than Stevens and Williams, Marianne Moore became a good friend and ally of both. Early on she complimented Williams’s ‘instinctive craftsmanship’ as well as his insistence on ‘the authentic’, identifying ‘compassion, color, speed, accuracy’ as the essential qualities of his writing; yet she was perhaps even more enthusiastic about Stevens, praising Harmonium for its ‘sharp, solemn, rhapsodic elegant pieces of eloquence’.

They, in turn, praised her consistently in print. Moore is like Williams in her accurate, almost scientific observation; she is like Stevens in her ornate diction and delight in artificiality. Like both, she was keenly interested in modern art, making a point of visiting Stieglitz’s 291 gallery on her first trip to New York in 1915. (She had grown up in Missouri and Pennsylvania, and travelled through England and France prior to this.) She noted that in New York the painters led the way: ‘Over here’, she wrote to a London correspondent, ‘it strikes me that there is more evidence of power among painters than among writers’.

This was also the time when she began to publish poems in little magazines, from Poetry and The Egoist to Others and The Dial. In 1918, she decided she needed to move to New York to be closer to its avant-garde activity. Her highly original syllabic verse, with the precise observations and rational tone of discursive prose, gave her the reputation of a poets’ poet well before she had even published a book. She knew and corresponded with the leading modernist poets on both sides of the Atlantic: not just Pound and Eliot, but also H.D., Cummings, Stevens, and Williams.

Moore’s first book, Poems (1921), was published in London, without her knowledge, by her friends H.D. and Bryher. She felt deep ambivalence about this first appearance between covers: gratitude for her friends’ efforts, but ‘consternation’ because ‘I wouldn’t have the poems appear now if I could help it and would not have some of them ever appear and would make certain changes’.

She finally published
her own collection, *Observations*, in 1924. This book gathered together fifty-three poems, many revised, with added notes and an index that listed not only titles but also quixotic subject-headings, such as ‘Parakeet, trivial, 40; from Brazil, 53’. In general, *Observations* was well received, with ‘mixed to positive reviews’, including a ‘glowing full-page review with photo in the *New York Times Book Review*’.\(^\text{15}\) On the basis of this volume, Moore won the prestigious Dial Award for 1924 (the same award given to Eliot two years earlier for *The Waste Land*). She was appointed editor of *The Dial* that same year, a position she held until 1929, when the magazine collapsed along with the international economy. As editor of this important New York-based literary magazine, she wielded considerable cultural influence, although the job proved so demanding that she herself published no poetry during this period.

Moore’s poetry is widely admired for its originality. She often remarked that she called it ‘poetry’ only for lack of a better term (‘observations’ was one alternative). In many of her poems, she invents her own elaborate stanza-forms, defining lines by syllable-count rather than metrical rhythm, sometimes interspersing rhymes at regular but unobtrusive intervals so that her complex form is barely noticeable when read aloud. Also unique is her lavish use of quotations. Her longest poem, ‘Marriage’, is made up almost entirely of quotations from an idiosyncratic group of sources – ‘Statements that took my fancy which I tried to arrange plausibly’, as she explains with characteristic modesty and evasiveness in the notes to her *Complete Poems*.\(^\text{16}\) Unlike Eliot or Pound in *The Waste Land* or *The Cantos*, however, Moore does not quote in order to invoke a particular source or establish a cultural or literary context. Even though she cites sources in her notes with apparent meticulousness, her documentation is not consistent or complete, and the sources themselves are not necessarily pertinent to the poems. As a rule, her quotations are there because she likes the sentiment and the wording; the purpose is always to make them part of her own creation.

A continuing obstacle for readers wanting to find a firm foothold in Moore’s poetry has been her penchant for revision. Like Henry James or W. H. Auden, Moore kept changing and rewriting texts
after they had been published, so that there exist multiple versions of
most poems and there is no one standard, stable text. The most
notorious example is her much-anthologised ‘Poetry’, which began
as a thirty-line poem in five regular six-line syllabic stanzas. In
subsequent publications, she changed words and phrases, trimmed
stanzas so that they were no longer regular, and eliminated or
rewrote entire passages, until the poem could be found in anything
from twenty-nine-line to thirteen-line versions. In her ironically
named *Complete Poems*, ‘Poetry’ is finally reduced to only three
lines. An indefatigable editor of verse-lines – both others’ and her
own – by the end of her life Moore had managed to edit some of her
own best work almost out of existence.

While Stevens, Williams, and Moore all grew up in the nineteenth
century and witnessed the arrival of international modernism in
adulthood, Harold ‘Hart’ Crane embodies a younger generation
that immersed itself from the beginning in the bustle of artistic and
literary innovations. Crane staked out his poetic position with
reference to the preceding generation, as in a 1920 letter to his friend
Gorham Munson: ‘I like Marianne Moore in a certain way. She is so
prosaic that the extremity of her detachment touches, or seems to
touch a kind of inspiration. But she is too much of a precieuse for my
adoration. Of this latter class even give me Wallace Stevens, and the
fastidious Williams in preference.’ After reading a set of Stevens’s
poems including ‘Anecdote of the Jar’ and ‘The Paltry Nude Starts
on a Spring Voyage’, Crane waxed ecstatic in another letter to
Munson: ‘Have you given the poems of Wallace Stevens in the
Oct. “Poetry” any attention? There is a man whose work makes
most of the rest of us quail. His technical subtleties alone provide a
great amount of interest.’

This easily ignited enthusiasm, coupled with mature aesthetic
insight, was typical of the gifted Crane, an avid reader who would
pour out his ideas in sometimes brilliant letters to a diverse circle of
correspondents. Yet this only child of a self-made businessman from
the Midwest would also acquire a reputation, in due course, as a
Rimbaudian *poète maudit* who had to battle his demons: torn by the
acrimonious fights between his parents and given to drinking
recklessly, Crane tried to live a guiltless and active homosexual life that occasionally got him beaten up and arrested. His Keatsian poetic promise was unmistakable, though: ‘My Grandmother’s Love Letters’, ‘Chaplinesque’, and ‘For the Marriage of Faustus and Helen’ are all accomplished poems, written in his early twenties. They would wind up in one of the most impressive first collections to come out of American modernism, *White Buildings* (1926). The poems collected there were the glowing results of a number of concentrated and dedicated years, first in Cleveland and then in New York, where Crane’s love for a Danish sailor inspired the powerful cycle of love lyrics, ‘Voyages’. Throughout this period, however, Crane’s professional and financial situation was fickle. He had to rely on external support and patronage, most prominently by the philanthropic banker Otto Kahn. When Crane subsequently embarked on the ambitious project of a modern epic designed to change the course of American poetry, he started to drift and doubt his purpose, taking several years to see *The Bridge* through to completion in 1930. The major breakthrough that failed to follow contributed to his suicide two years later, when Crane jumped off a ship in the Caribbean on his way from Mexico to New York.

Crane’s main importance in the history of modern poetry lies in an ambitious attempt that has been too easily dismissed as a misguided resolution of inner contradictions: his endeavour to take up the inheritance of Whitman in the modernist language of Eliot. Like so many poets in the early 1920s, Crane was spellbound by *The Waste Land* and saw its radical fragmentation, dense imagery, and juxtaposition of voices and styles as the prime model for all new poetry. But as a writer with a late-romantic visionary drive and a deep belief in the cultural value of poetry, he deplored the pessimism and elitism of his emigrated compatriot, believing instead that American poetry should turn to the celebratory spirit, democratic inclusiveness, and optimistic vitality of the country’s great poetic father figure, Whitman. Crane’s epic *The Bridge* is the pre-eminent embodiment of this aesthetic ambition: launching itself from the symbolically connective device of Brooklyn Bridge in New York, it casts its tentacles across the American continent as well as its
history, dramatising cultural oppositions in a fragmentary form and combining personal testimony with heroic quest motifs. The poetic result is necessarily uneven, the grand vision never fully realised.

In following through on the stylistic experiments of Eliot and others, moreover, Crane developed a theory and practice of his own that centred on the irrational power of metaphors. His complex metaphors have been responsible both for the enchanted quality of his best work and for some of its radical obscurity. Composing often in a state of white heat (and, at times, drowned in alcohol), Crane tapped into private images and associations, which his virtuoso command of vocabulary and undeniable ear for music allowed him to work over in endlessly metamorphosing drafts. The referential drift of the published results is sometimes harder to catch than with Eliot, Pound, Stevens, Williams, or Moore, but Crane’s most exalted verse continues to exert its spell as powerful clusters of image and sound. It presents a uniquely modern instance of the kind of writing championed by America’s most idiosyncratic poetry critic, Harold Bloom, as the twentieth-century American sublime.

While Stevens, Williams, Moore, and Crane have repeatedly been viewed as the most forceful writers to emerge out of the history of modernist poetry on American soil during the 1910s and ’20s, a chapter such as the current one would be incomplete if it did not also tip its hat, however briefly, to a handful of additional figures who survive in poetry anthologies. It is typical of the movement we tend to summarise pragmatically as ‘modernism’ that these additional figures build a diverse cohort who may share little to nothing in terms of aesthetic views, biography, or politics. That they have become less central to critical narratives of American modern poetry than the writers through whom we have focused our chapter is due to a combination of reasons: sometimes their intrinsic literary merits have been disputed and the quality of their work deemed less consistent; frequently, the extent to which they were inclined to engage in linguistic and formal experimentation was very limited; and, partly because of this, most of them tended to write reader-friendly verse that during the heyday of ‘high’ modernist canonisation was held to constitute a kind of ‘low’, ‘popular’, or even ‘populist’ branch of modernism at best.
Among these figures, the best-known with the strongest claim to the status of major poet is Robert Frost. Frost’s marginal status within surveys of modernist poetry rests largely on his formal conservatism, his apparent regionalism, and his wide popular appeal, all of which have managed to obscure the layered quality of his work, the dark, alienated, and sardonic world view sometimes hidden by such layers, and his moderate if undeniably twentieth-century innovations of style and voice. Because Frost came to assume the cloak and persona of the folksy New England sage who lived a pastoral life away from the metropolitan cauldrons of modernism, tossing off lines of spontaneous humanist wisdom in metrically regular, occasionally rhyming verse, there is a tendency to forget that he was, like Stevens and Eliot, Harvard-educated, or that his work emerged from an extended period of personal struggle that involved a transatlantic experience in England. Taking his large family there in 1912, Frost published his first book of poems, *A Boy’s Will* (1913), in London, already close to the age of forty. The individual quality of his work was instantly picked up by Pound, who hailed him as a ‘VURY Amur’k’n’ talent and helped Frost get his second volume, *North of Boston*, published one year later. That volume, containing several of his first popular poems (‘Mending Wall’, ‘Home Burial’, ‘After Apple-Picking’, ‘The Wood-Pile’), would launch his public success as a poet and allow him to return to New England for good. By the end of the 1920s, Frost had three additional volumes to his name: *Mountain Interval* (1916), *New Hampshire* (1923), and *West-Running Brook* (1928). These include a great many of the shorter lyrics that have become staple ingredients of twentieth-century anthologies, from ‘The Road Not Taken’ and ‘Birches’ to ‘Fire and Ice’ and ‘Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening’. They reflect Frost’s sense of the contingent nature of a poem as a hard-won ‘momentary stay against confusion’.

In many ways, Cummings could be regarded as Frost’s poetic antipode. Although he, too, enjoyed a Harvard education and became a popular poet, he was a decidedly metropolitan, flamboyant artist who mixed quirky visual form with sentiments that were often conventionally romantic. Cummings was an ambulance driver in France during
the First World War when he was mistakenly arrested and imprisoned as a spy. This experience, recorded in *The Enormous Room* (1922), turned him into a lifelong pacifist as well as a poet who celebrated sexual and romantic love (often in the traditional form of the sonnet) and satirised all collective behavior. Upon returning home from France, he divided his artistic life between painting and poetry. He drew inspiration from Pound and the visual arts to develop his own energetic and quixotic experiments, playfully breaking with conventions of spelling, punctuation, and syntactic organisation. Yet despite his radical outward difference from Frost, and his winning light-heartedness, Cummings shared with his New England contemporary a deep commitment to individualist and humanist values.

A New York-based individualism also characterised some of the works of another poet who, like Cummings, lived in the Bohemian enclave of Greenwich Village, and who became widely known as the emblem of the ‘modern woman’ during the ‘roaring twenties’: Edna St Vincent Millay. After attending Vassar, Millay published her first volume, *Renascence and Other Poems* (1917), at the age of twenty-five, and she went on to become an actress and a briefly successful playwright involved with the Provincetown Players. Her fame (or, to some at the time, notoriety) rested on her early evocations of a world-weary, sexually emancipated young woman-about-town, in frequently reprinted poems such as ‘Recuerdo’. When she returned after a few years spent in Europe, Millay went to live a more pastoral life. By the later 1920s, never having forsaken traditional poetic form, she became, like Frost, a writer interested in giving something of a modern twist to a New England regionalist tradition.

Finally, the figure of Carl Sandburg ties together a few of the strands from the foregoing critical narrative. Associated with the larger movement of the Chicago Renaissance in the arts and letters, and author of the iconic poem ‘Chicago’ (1914), Sandburg reminds us again of the importance of the metropolitan centres of modernism, even as he represents those populist American voices on the periphery of canonised modernism who cast a sceptical eye at excessive difficulty and avant-garde experimentation. Sandburg’s most representative quality resides in his attempt to translate the stylistically and politically
inclusive heritage of Whitman into twentieth-century American poetry. This Whitmanian heritage, while itself a hybrid of transnational and metropolitan influences typical of New York as America’s first and foremost city of immigration, has been one of the more palpable localising forces, by and large, among American modern poets who chose to write on native soil.

Notes


In the October 1955 Harper’s an omnibus poetry review by Randall Jarrell appeared, and among the books considered was Wallace Stevens’s *Collected Poems*, published in autumn of the previous year. This was neither Jarrell’s first consideration of the *Collected* nor his first attempt to assess Stevens. In spring 1955 he had published an extended essay on the book in the *Yale Review*, and four years earlier he had provided an extensive overview of the poetry in the essay ‘Reflections on Wallace Stevens’. Perhaps inevitably, given Stevens’s death shortly after the book’s publication, Jarrell’s 1955 reviews have a memorial tone, reflecting on the *Collected* as a kind of epitaph. Each essay carries one of Jarrell’s insistent themes, reflecting on how the poetry will appear to readers of the future, asking what will last for posterity. What makes the Harper’s review so striking is the clear sense that the modernist generation represented by Stevens is itself passing. The other books in the omnibus review (1954–5 being a distinguished year for American poetry) were Johnson’s edition of Emily Dickinson’s poetry, making her poetry truly available for the first time, and books by Dylan Thomas, Robert Graves, W. H. Auden, Stephen Spender, Elizabeth Bishop, Isabella Gardner, Louis Simpson, and Howard Nemerov. Stevens is dutifully dealt with, in a paragraph suffused with funerary imagery, but it is Bishop’s collection that engages Jarrell most fully and enthusiastically when he thinks about posterity: ‘one of the best books an American poet has ever written’. The vocabulary he uses for Stevens’s *Collected*, with words such as ‘epitaph’ and ‘requiem’, and his comment that the poems of *The Rock* ‘show . . . what the
world looks like when we leave it’ is here replaced by a keen and exuberant sense of the future.2

In miniature Jarrell’s review is Janus-faced, providing a clear sense of modernism’s passing in the mid-1950s, and of an emerging fresh generation of poets, a kind of burial of the dead followed by an assessment of American poetry’s future. It is easy to find support for this representation of the literary history of the 1950s, when American poetry took a variety of routes out of modernism. What M. L. Rosenthal labelled the ‘confessional movement’ (misleading both in the adjective and the noun) gathered impetus with Theodore Roethke’s changing voice in The Waking (1953), took shape with W. D. Snodgrass’s Heart’s Needle (1959), and became the central idiom for a generation with Robert Lowell’s Life Studies (1959) and John Berryman’s Dream Songs, begun in 1955, with the first book, 77 Dream Songs, published in 1961. With its varied roots, Allen Ginsberg’s Howl and Other Poems (1956) truly revolutionised poetry, and John Ashbery introduced a radically elliptical version of modernism with his first collection Some Trees (1956), a direction also evident in Frank O’Hara’s Meditations in an Emergency (1957). A seam of modernism that had been there since the 1920s was newly mined by Charles Olson in the publication of the first Maximus poems (1953), and his 1950 poem ‘The Kingfishers’ was for Donald Allen the starting point of American poetry’s next generation, awarded first place in his seminal anthology The New American Poetry (1960). As well as key publications which shifted poetry away from modernism in the 1950s and saw the development of a new generation of poets, the decade also saw the emergence of ‘schools’ of poetry. Certainly, anglophone modernism had its own schools or movements, Imagism and Vorticism being the most prominent, but the schools that developed in the 1950s possessed a narrower, more exclusive sense of readership. That is, belonging to Black Mountain or to the New York School or to The Beats meant a subscription to something more than the poetry; to a view of life, a particular belief in what poetry should do, where it should fit in a larger philosophy. These were schools and movements that fostered disciples as much as readers; indeed, the Black Mountain School has
been described as a ‘cult’. As the 1950s saw the transformation of the American poetry scene, the sense of modernism as a completed movement was evident by the early 1960s, by which time American poetry’s major figures who had generated a defining presence for forty years – Stevens, Robert Frost, T. S. Eliot, and William Carlos Williams – were all dead.

It is incontrovertible that American poetry underwent serious and lasting changes from the mid-1950s onwards, and that these were shifts away from the precepts of modernism as it had emerged since the 1920s. But the implied clear picture that this entails is considerably complicated by the continuing presence of modernism in the new movements and schools, with a sense not of radical shift but of forms of renewal and continuity, renewals entirely in keeping with the spirit of how modernism itself had developed and changed since the 1920s. In a 1962 essay on Williams, Lowell called modernism ‘the revolution that . . . renewed poetry’. It is a notable choice of phrase, recapitulating the Poundian exhortation to make it new with the sense of renewal; renewal of the tradition, the revitalisation of poetic energy. It also implies that for Lowell the poets after modernism were renewing poetry in the same spirit. Olson had indicated as much in ‘The Kingfishers’, with its opening line ‘What does not change / is the will to change’. In this regard it is truer to think not so much of modernism ending in the 1950s as itself being renewed by a new generation. Certainly, many poets and schools had their roots in versions of modernism or in key individual figures, and at times the new generation of poets actively engaged with modernists as part of their sense of learning. Lowell came to be liberated from his earlier Eliotic writing style with the encouragement of Williams; Ginsberg also chose Williams, who was also a mentor to Roethke (with whom he hoped to evade the potentially overpowering influence of W. B. Yeats). Certainly such engagement might involve a Bloomian rebellion, an overthrow of influence, just as Bishop had to find her own voice apart from Marianne Moore, and as Berryman charted his own poetic development as firstly trying to be Yeats, and then wanting to write a long poem ‘spectacularly NOT The Waste Land’, adding ‘maybe hostility keeps us going’.

But the relation
may be more benign than hostile, Oedipal, or otherwise, more a sense of adapting a poetic to changing social and political landscapes. There is much continuity and connection between modernists and the subsequent generation, a strong sense that as a movement modernism facilitated rather than inhibited other developments. Think for instance of the temporal and thematic proximity, and the intertwining, of two major statements on poetry: Williams’s 1948 lecture ‘The Poem as a Field of Action’ and Olson’s 1950 pamphlet ‘Projective Verse’ (which Williams will cite in his 1951 *Autobiography*). The legacy of modernism was not some kind of static object, but a source of energy for continual renewal and re-engagement.

While we inevitably and rightly think of the 1920s as the great decade of high poetic modernism there is also the danger of distorting that time, and of exaggerating the reception of what we now recognise as key works. *Spring and All*, Williams’s radical and transformative challenge to the conventional poetry collection, and Stevens’s *Harmonium* sold hardly any copies on their publication in 1923. Conrad Aiken recalled seeing piles of *Harmonium* remaindered in Filene’s Basement in Boston and, with R. P. Blackmur, buying these up to present to friends. The print run of *Spring and All* was a mere 300 copies, and Williams’s other key work of the 1920s, *In the American Grain*, sold so poorly that his original plan for it to be the first of two volumes was scrapped. E. E. Cummings had such trouble finding a publisher for one of his typographically unconventional collections that when it was published he titled it *No Thanks* and dedicated it to the fourteen publishers who had said just that. While the low-key reception of *Harmonium* and *Spring and All* may be used as evidence that these books were the truly new (and, in Williams’s case, proof also of his uncompromising wilfulness), it also provides evidence for a key aspect of modernism after the 1920s, which is that the 1930s and ’40s saw the consolidation of modernism from avant-garde towards centre, to mainstream. In some ways this is familiar hegemonic narrative, one decade’s shock at the new turning into absorption and familiarity by the next. But this shift is more complex than that, and the consolidation of modernist poetry between 1930
and 1950 shows some key factors at work. Specifically, modern and contemporary poetry entered the academy, and did so in particular ways: the practice of teaching and writing about poetry underwent transformations that facilitated the creation of an informed readership for modernist poetry. This was of course the period of the rise of New Criticism, a new professionalism replacing a kind of amateurism, reading the poem as a special linguistic event, and with a strong pedagogical approach laying emphasis on close reading as a practice. The very theoretical basis of New Criticism develops from within modernism; seeing the poem as a ‘verbal icon’ is akin to accepting Eliot’s ruling that an ‘objective correlative’ is essential for successful poetry, and his emphasis on impersonality and objectivity are key New Critical strands. Furthermore, the New Critical assumption that poetry needed its own mode of reading and explication, with the words on the page closely attended to, arose in the 1920s alongside modernism. In this respect it is not far-fetched to think of Eliot’s ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ (1919), I. A. Richards’s Principles of Literary Criticism (1924) and Practical Criticism (1929), Pound’s ‘How to Read’ (1929) and ABC of Reading (1934), and Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren’s Understanding Poetry (1938) not only as criticism but also as significant modernist texts. For a generation or more they opened up a mode of reading, a way of approaching modernism, initiating a practice that still retains a strong hold on classroom mediation of poetry; Ron Silliman called Understanding Poetry ‘the hegemonic poetry textbook’. A good example of the relation between New Criticism and modernism is Brooks and Warren’s masterly analysis of The Waste Land, since it simultaneously explains a major modernist poem and shows the reader the adjustments that must be made in approaching such texts.

The general acceptance and assimilation of modernist poetry by 1950 may be conveniently demonstrated by F. O. Matthiessen’s The Oxford Book of American Verse, published in that year. The previous Oxford anthology had been published in 1927, edited by Carmen Bliss. To be fair to Bliss, modernist poetry was of course still new as he made his selection, but Matthiessen’s anthology is dominated by modernism and after. More than half of the 1,100 page anthology is
devoted to poets after Amy Lowell; of the fifty-one poets represented, twenty-two were living when he made the selection, and he chose from work published as recently as The Pisan Cantos (1948). To put the 1927 anthology alongside Matthiessen’s is to see a revolution in sensibility, accomplished in less than twenty-five years. This does not even compute the popularity of poetry, or the celebrity figures that some poets became in the 1950s, when Eliot could attract a crowd of 14,000 to hear him lecture on ‘The Frontiers of Criticism’. While this was certainly extraordinary and exceptional, what we’d now think of as huge audiences for poets were not. For instance, 3,000 people attended a reading by Williams at Wellesley in 1950, and this appears to have been by no means untypical, however unimaginable it would have seemed in 1923, and Richard Wilbur has commented on Stevens’s status as a ‘celebrity’ in the early 1950s.

Matthiessen was also generous in representing the range of work by his chosen modernists. Stevens is a good example. His selection comprises fifty-two pages of Stevens’s poetry, and it is not dominated by poems from Harmonium as it includes recent work from Transport to Summer, published in 1947. In reflecting on modernism, Matthiessen’s anthology is a useful corrective to the general feeling that modernism was at its high point of originality in the 1920s, and is more in line with Lowell’s idea of modernism as continually refreshing itself. This correction is especially significant with respect to Stevens. There is something of a critical tendency to think of Stevens laying down a set of themes in Harmonium and working out variations of these in the subsequent two decades. While there’s a superficial truth in this, it is a misrepresentation. After Harmonium Stevens develops in particular ways. He is less inclined to condense expression in the short lyric, coming to engage with the meditative (even conversational) long poem, no longer based on narrative as ‘The Comedian as the Letter C’ had been. Very little in Harmonium prepares the reader for the longer poems in short sections: ‘The Man with the Blue Guitar’ (1937), ‘Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction’ (1942), and ‘An Ordinary Evening in New Haven’ (1949). These longer forms are essential for Stevens in his complex engagement with a shifting dialectic, his searching examinations of the variety of
relations between the need for the imagined and the need to be responsible to the actual. In some ways Stevens also becomes an increasingly anxious poet. The marvellous American energetic exuberance of being freed from the past in a poem like *Harmonium*’s ‘Ploughing on Sunday’ is never quite available to Stevens afterwards. There is exuberance and playfulness in the later volumes, of course, but the mood is complicated, and deepened, by other moods and the presence of an always-reflecting mind. The anxiety is partly social and partly aesthetic as Stevens reflects in the 1930s and 1940s on the role of poetry firstly in severe economic depression and then in time of world war. Finally, his poetry of these decades does become more intensely personal; not in a ‘confessional’ manner of self-exposure, but in deepest interrogations of one’s own mortality and one’s own accomplishments. This strain culminates in the poems of *The Rock*, never published separately but incorporated into the 1954 *Collected*, the poems that Jarrell considered Stevens’s farewell to the world. Harmonium is a starting point for Stevens, not the entire journey, a point he made in wanting his *Collected Poems* to be titled *The Whole of Harmonium*.

From the publication of *Harmonium* up until the mid-1930s it seems that Stevens wrote very little poetry. In *The Palm at the End of the Mind* Holly Stevens lists only eleven fairly short poems composed between 1924 and the end of 1934. There appear to be none at all composed between the end of 1924 and 1930. While the poems listed show no diminution of his poetic power (1934 sees ‘Evening Without Angels’ and ‘The Idea of Order at Key West’, for example), the suggestion of some kind of crisis is present in Stevens’s letters of this period. In 1932 he writes to Harriet Monroe, saying ‘Whatever else I do, I do not write poetry nowadays’. The sense of a predicament as a poet could be modified by other evidence. It is worth remembering, for instance, that the poems in *Harmonium* had been composed since about 1915, and that as a professional insurance lawyer with a developing career there was indeed a lot of ‘whatever else’ in his life. But it also comes to be a crisis about the social role of the poet, and of poetry, in a time of social crisis – the post-1929 Depression. In 1935, with some misgivings, he published his second
collection, *Ideas of Order*, and reviewers generally shared his own view that it was inferior to *Harmonium*. It was a hostile review in *New Masses*, by Stanley Burnshaw, which articulated the differences between the collections. Burnshaw characterised *Harmonium* as an attempt at ‘pure’ or ‘sense’ poetry, which current social and economic conditions made impossible. Where *Harmonium* could be ‘free of ideas’ the later book could not, and Burnshaw saw it as ‘the record of a man who [has] lost his footing’.

While there is much that is captious and problematic in Burnshaw’s review, it did coincide with Stevens’s own growing sense of urgency, his sense of the need to articulate his aesthetic and its relation to the social. Pound had felt this in the 1920s, and *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* records that struggle between aesthetic commitment and the need to respond to what ‘the age demanded’. ‘The Man with the Blue Guitar’, comprising thirty-three short sections in generally unrhymed couplets, is an often profound meditation on this relation. The poem oscillates between the need for art to be reflective of our reality, to partake responsibly of it in some way, for it to be recognisably ‘ours’, and the artist’s responsibility to art as imaginatively transformative, enlarging and deepening our lives, extending our sense of reality. A work of art that is purely mimetic, giving us ‘things as they are’, is restricted and limited, adding nothing to our sense of the world, having no capacity for surprise, unresponsive to our hunger for something ‘beyond ourselves’. It is also stuck in its own time, its own sense of the real. Conversely, art that is too removed from the real means nothing at all to us, is unable to engage with the actuality of our desires, and is in danger of being only gaudy confectionery, evading the poem’s responsibility of providing ‘A new knowledge of reality’. While these contrasting views of art are laid out in the first sections, ‘The Man with the Blue Guitar’ becomes increasingly complex as it comes to embody, to enact, the poetry it calls for, and to use a variety of tones as it does so, by turns sombre, comic, playful, reflective. At its most straightforward, ‘The Man with the Blue Guitar’ is Stevens’s ‘missal’, a manifesto on the human need for the imagination. At its most complex, it is a challenging enactment of that desire, a re-seeing and an enlargement of our reality.
This urgent sense of struggle between the need for the aesthetic and the pressure of the actual continues in two major long poems, ‘Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction’ and ‘Esthétique du Mal’ (1944). Given their dialectical and shifting focus on the need for the imagination to enrich our sense of the real, it is easy to overlook the fact that these are war poems, written during the Second World War, and they include references to the conflict. The opening of ‘Esthétique du Mal’ embeds the poem in the American campaign in Italy: ‘He was at Naples writing letters home/ And, between his letters, reading paragraphs / On the sublime.’ Although at times an awkward and uneven poem, ‘Esthétique du Mal’ is Stevens’s meditation on the need to acknowledge pain and suffering as part of an aesthetic, not antithetical to the imagination. While it ends with a triumphant flourish, it remains a troubling poem and, as with ‘The Man with the Blue Guitar’, it clearly arises from Stevens’s own disquieting reflections on contemporary events. Stevens senses the need for the poem, as he puts it in ‘An Ordinary Evening in New Haven’, to be ‘the cry of its occasion’ – that is, it must be born from and be true to its particular moment. But it must also transform and enrich that moment, not be restricted or dominated by it: ‘Reality is the beginning, not the end’. Stevens could and did make great poetry out of this tension, though when he commented on it in his prose, he could sound awkward, even Olympian, as in his brief ‘Prose statement on the poetry of war’. Anything remotely like this statement would have been unimaginable in *Harmonium*’s aesthetic economy, and unsatisfactory though it may be, it indicates how much Stevens was troubled by the pressure of contemporary events of the 1930s and 1940s.

As noted above, in his later work Stevens increasingly reflects on his own mortality, and sometimes couples this with a re-engagement with his core poetic beliefs. This is accompanied by an increasing use of the first person (either as ‘I’ and ‘we’ or more obliquely as ‘one’), and by dominant imagery of north, cold, winter. Earlier Stevens tended to balance north and south, summer and winter, and all they represented. The south is the exotic, the fertile place for the imagination to unfold, the luxuriant: the north is impoverishment, the
unadorned real, necessary corrective to the putatively irresponsible imagination but limiting – ‘The World Is Larger in Summer’. The poems in *The Rock* are poems of the north, of autumn and winter, of an overly familiar non-exotic landscape, the language declarative, non-figurative, even prosaic, yet moving because of that very lack of the adorning oblique. ‘It makes so little difference, at so much more / Than seventy, where one looks, one has been there before.’

> After the leaves have fallen, we return  
> To a plain sense of things. It is as if  
> We had come to an end of the imagination,  
> Inanimate in an inert savoir.

But retrospection also invokes a sense of legacy that is at times doubtful; in one late poem he wonders ‘have I lived a skeleton’s life, / As a disbeliever in reality?’ But in another he casts himself as Ariel, ‘glad he had written his poems’, which were about ‘a remembered time / Or of something seen that he liked’. The poem concludes with pleasure at having created poems that both include yet transform one’s own reality, one’s own sense of the world:

> What mattered was that they should bear  
> Some lineament or character,  
> Some affluence, if only half-perceived,  
> In the poverty of their words,  
> Of the planet of which they were part.

Where Stevens was troubled by what ‘the age demanded’, Williams embraced the changes that this might entail, and his poetry from the mid-1930s onwards is both exasperating and exhilarating in its shifts and changes. This flexible responsiveness has several sources. One is simply his belief in the right of the poet to change, even if this involves self-contradiction. As he wrote in 1944: ‘A man isn’t a block that remains stationary’, asserting that sanity itself necessitated development and variation of character. The 1930s saw Williams developing his political radicalism, and, like Auden, asserting that the lyric may be a space for the political and the public communication as much as for the private. It is important to emphasise that Williams’s developing poetic has a political dimension that
is grounded in an ethical attitude. It is not only in the choice of language, an unadorned non-allusive colloquial demotic accessible to all. Nor is it merely that the things of which he writes represent democratic openness, assert an equality of things, of people. Mostly it is that the attitudes taken represent an ethics, a claim to equality of observing mind and observed things. Objectivism, for which Williams provided much impetus in the early 1930s, may be rooted in phenomenology, but it is also a form of ethics. While Williams’s political radicalism was evident in the 1920s (he had no interest at all in the ‘pure poetry’ that was so seductive to his friend Stevens), it is intensified in the Depression years, and this intensification developed alongside his self-conscious move towards the literary mainstream. In 1923 Spring and All was avant-garde to the point of being forbidding for a casual reader: a stimulating if confusing mish-mash of prose reflections and assertions, out-of-sequence numbered sections, and poems without titles that seem to arise unexpectedly from the prose meditations. But he modified these practices as those poems were reprinted for the 1934 Collected Poems. Wrenched from the prose contexts in which he had embedded them in 1923, they are transformed into apparently autonomous titled poems: ‘The Red Wheelbarrow’, ‘To Elsie’, ‘At the Ball Game’, and so on.\(^{27}\) Williams’s political radicalism collided unfortunately with his growing reputation after the 1930s, however. In 1952 Williams was to take up the post of Poetry Consultant to the Library of Congress, postponed since it had first been offered to him, three years earlier, because of his poor health after a heart attack at that time. However, in the scrutinising atmosphere of McCarthyism, Williams was deemed too close to communism and the offer was withdrawn.\(^{28}\)

Williams shared with some of the other American modernists a feeling of duty, a duty of connecting modernism with US history and idiom; In the American Grain was his prose attempt at this project. Hart Crane is the other major modernist who shared this preoccupation, adapting modernist lyric technique to a version of the American past. This is most evident in his magnificent lyric sequence The Bridge (1930), asserting connection and the need for continuity between contemporary urban America and its past. Crane’s rich
vein of narrative-based lyric economy, a style that moves fluidly between the abstract and the concrete, is radically different from the style developed by Williams. Yet driving both is the pull of the local, the actual, and the ways that these contain history and meaning in their materiality; as Crane puts it, they are ‘in thrall / To that deep wonderment, our native clay’. To some degree both are setting their face against the cosmopolitan and increasingly non-American Eliot. Williams’s enduring hostility was partly based on his feeling that Eliot’s seductive allusiveness returned poetry to the classroom, and partly on a sense that his poetry made no room for the local and the actual. Crane thought of *The Bridge* as a counter-text to *The Waste Land* by its locating continuity between past and present, whereby the present was enriched and enlarged, rather than diminished and impoverished. In *Ash-Wednesday* Eliot had written ‘place is always and only place’, a dismissal of the local that jarred with Williams and which his long poem *Paterson* seems, in retrospect, designed to contradict.

In his ‘Author’s Note’ introducing *Paterson*, Williams wrote of how consideration of the local was the poem’s starting point. His first idea for it was ‘to find an image large enough to embody the whole knowable world around me’. He continues: ‘John Dewey had said (I discovered it quite by chance), “The local is the only universal, upon that all art builds”.’ He chose the town of Paterson, New Jersey, a few miles up the Passaic river from his home in Rutherford. If a trajectory were to be imposed on Williams’s poetry then *Paterson* may be seen as a culmination, a contradiction, and a starting point. It is a culmination in that it gathers up aspects of his work evident since the 1920s: the mixture of poetry and prose evident in *Spring and All*, the working out of the ‘no ideas but in things’ manifesto – first stated in his 1926 poem ‘Paterson’ – and, as always, the intense concern with the local. It is also characteristic in its own changes, reflecting his multifaceted ever-developing sense of poetry and of what this poem should accomplish and contain. In the 1940s Williams planned a book in four parts, but he was never one for programmed composition, and his entire conception of the poem changed over the years. Four parts turn into six, the poem becomes *Cantos*-like in
its incorporation of undigested materials (correspondence, work by others quoted so extensively that acknowledgement had to be made on the copyright page), like Dos Passos in its inclusive collage, like Cummings in its broken typography and, for so many readers, problematic in its representation of the male city and the submissive female river, and in its overall representation of the female. Paterson contradicts Williams’s earlier work in its very mythography: exactly the sort of human myth-making that he saw as arrogance and which he wanted to replace with accurate, precise rendering of our reality. Yet contradiction may be another term for change and development. One striking feature of Paterson is the gradual emergence of a new poetic within it, not planned in advance by Williams, but developed because of the demand for expression at a particular point. This is what he comes to call ‘the variable foot’, and which he saw as his legacy to American poetry’s idiomatic development. Williams seems to have meant a measure that had the flexibility of free verse with something of the discipline of the set form. In Paterson it is most evident in his developing what he will call the triadic line. Here it is in the third part of Book II:

The descent beckons
   as the ascent beckoned.
Memory is a kind
of accomplishment,
   a sort of renewal
   even
an initiation, since the spaces it opens are new places
   inhabited by hordes
   heretofore unrealized\(^\text{33}\)

The triadic line, its phrasing visually stepped, its effect of arresting fluency and weighting each word or phrase, is a dominant feature of the last phase of Williams’s poetry, especially evident in The Desert Music (1954) and Journey to Love (1955). It was very much an enabling form, developed during a period in which, after two strokes and severe depression, he feared he would be unable to write again.\(^\text{34}\)

The measure is also an indication of how far Paterson has permeable
borders. Reminiscent of his practice in the 1920s, Williams takes sections from *Paterson* and publishes them as autonomous poems (the lines quoted above become part of ‘The Descent’), or he uses sections as starting points for other poems, notably ‘Asphodel, That Greeny Flower’. Lines and phrases in *Paterson* are repeated from earlier work, or will be included in other poems.

Formally, *Paterson* was not particularly avant-garde for Williams, and it can certainly be seen as echoing the experimentation of *Spring and All*. But Book I was hailed as groundbreaking on its publication in 1946, and in retrospect we can see that for younger poets it was an enabling book, opening up paths out of the dominant academic New Critical lyric. The subsequent books were received somewhat less enthusiastically and were seen to decline sharply from Book I (to the embarrassment of Jarrell, whose enthusiasm for the first book had led to an invitation to write blurb for the others), but the originality and nerve of I remained, a genuine renewal of poetry’s possibilities: as Lowell wrote, ‘*Paterson* is our *Leaves of Grass*.’ As with *Leaves of Grass*, there were many varied pathways out of *Paterson*. Lowell’s own modification of form in the 1950s owes a lot to Williams, although the ‘descent’ into the self that he made with *Life Studies* was very much his own. Rich (eventually) broke away from the impersonal and made space for other voices in her poems. Allen Ginsberg, who had a walk-on part in *Paterson* (where he had grown up) took the idiomatic in his own direction and found fusion with many other voices.

Modernism’s transformative renewal by poets who emerged in the 1950s is evident most of all in the figure of Olson. Although ‘The Kingfishers’ started the ‘new American poetry’, Olson’s own immediate engagement was with Pound and Williams. The poem develops the technique of *The Cantos*, invoking various cultures and sustaining motifs. His Maximus poems, set in Gloucester, Massachusetts, recall both *The Cantos* and *Paterson*, a bold stand against what Olson felt was the increasing dominance of lyric subjectivity in American poetry. Through Black Mountain College Olson was one of the figures developing poetic and artist talent that would reach right up until the present. The college, in North
Carolina, had been founded during the Depression as an experiment in open-community education. Olson taught there from 1951 and was its rector until it closed in 1956. Its hallmarks were freedom from a set academic curriculum, the encouragement of interaction between the arts, and an association with many avant-garde artists. It was driven by two principles in particular: that ‘ideas are only such as they exist in things and in actions’, and that what matters is ‘what happens between things’. Along with Olson the poets most associated with the college were Edward Dorn, Robert Duncan, and Robert Creeley, who edited Black Mountain Review. In some ways the college and its journal was for the avant-garde what Kenyon College and the Kenyon Review had been for the New Criticism in the 1930s and 1940s. Among the poets published in Black Mountain Review were Williams, Ginsberg, Dorn, Louis Zukofsky, Gary Snyder, Denise Levertov, Jonathan Williams, and Paul Blackburn.

Such a list indicates a commitment to the new and to the principle of interaction. That these poets develop in very different directions after Black Mountain is an affirmation of the college’s principles. But, in larger terms, it is also an affirmation of modernism itself, as a continual renewal of poetry, and of renewal as continuity.

Notes
5. The Collected Poems of Charles Olson, ed. George F. Butterick (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 86. Although a line-break is
indicated, this is a single line; it provided the title for Adrienne Rich’s 1971 collection *The Will to Change*.


20. This was printed at the end of *Parts of a World* (1942) without a title, but Stevens chose to omit it from his *Collected Poems*: repr. (with this title) in Stevens, *Palm at the End of the Mind*, 206, and (untitled) in Stevens, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, 251.


22. ‘Long and Sluggish Lines’, *ibid.*, 442.

23. ‘The Plain Sense of Things’, *ibid.*, 428.

24. ‘As You Leave the Room’, *ibid.*, 598. A similar phrase appears in ‘First Warmth’, likely an earlier version: see *ibid.*, 597.

25. ‘The Planet on the Table’, *ibid.*, 450.


28. The story is not entirely clear, and the Library cited health reasons; Williams had suffered a series of strokes in the early 1950s, leaving him partially paralysed.


35. Lowell, ‘Dr. Williams’, 44.

36. There is an allusion in the poem to Pound as ‘next of kin’, although Olson had become estranged from Pound in the late 1940s; see Ralph Maud, *What Does Not Change: The Significance of Charles Olson’s ‘The Kingfishers’* (Madison and Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1998), 99–102.

‘White folks is white,’ says uncle Jim;
‘A platitude,’ I sneer;
And then I tell him so is milk,
And the froth upon his beer. . . .

I have a friend who eats his heart
Always with grief of mine,
Who drinks my joy as tipplers drain
Deep goblets filled with wine.

I wonder why here at his side
Face-in-the-grass with him,
My mind should stray the Grecian urn
To muse on uncle Jim.¹

Countee Cullen’s ‘Uncle Jim’ (1927) considers several of the dilemmas and innovations that characterised African American modernisms. It stages the ambivalent intimacy of interracial friendships within the modernist period in the US – as African American writers such as Jean Toomer, Claude McKay, and Langston Hughes forged influential (and often fraught) relationships with white mentors such as Waldo Frank, Max Eastman, and Carl Van Vechten, respectively. It worries that white interest in African American art was grounded less in a commitment to aesthetic or political equality than it was in voyeurism and vicariousness, a charge that has often bedevilled the after-the-fact reception of the Harlem Renaissance in particular.² On the optimistic side, Cullen’s poem hopes that aesthetics offered the rarified opportunity for white and black to join together as what W. E. B. Du Bois called ‘co-worker[s] in the kingdom of culture’ to
mutually forge a new American cultural terrain. Yet Cullen’s punning and concluding use of ‘muse’ demonstrates how Keats’s Urn and his Uncle Jim’s platitudes compete for his inspiration: the pull of racially transcendent ideals of beauty balanced against an avuncular racial suspicion hard-learned in the day-to-day experience of life as an African American in the early part of the century. Crucially, this tug-of-war is staged as a conflict of voice, with the poetic speaker’s erudite, ironic, baroque, and playful diction competing with Uncle Jim’s dialect folk wisdom over the question of what whiteness – and poetry – is.

The poem’s tortured oscillation between dualistic oppositions is a pattern which James Smethurst has taken to be central to African American aesthetics, politics, and philosophy in the early twentieth century. Most famously articulated by W. E. B. Du Bois as double consciousness, the political and social realities of segregation and disfranchisement worked through African American writing in repeated stagings of psychological division, conflicted affinities, and formal alternatives articulated in binaristic racial terms. That dualism informed the defining questions confronted by the era’s African American poets. What would be the relation between African American culture and the national culture? And, consequently, what was the appropriate form for African American poetry? What were the key features of African American modernity? On what cultural grounds – if any – could African American racial solidarity be established? And what role did culture play in addressing, or even redressing, the experience of social, political, and economic marginality? Such questions were debated in the era’s magazines and manifestos; they divided some of the era’s main writers; they electrified its poetry and defined artistic careers.

That such questions were asked at all suggests the importance that African American intellectuals attached to poetry in these years. They had witnessed the recent and rapid installation of Jim Crow and segregation, overlapping legal and cultural systems which simultaneously insisted on the racial homogeneity of public and private space, and the exclusion of African Americans from positions of political, civic, professional, and intellectual leadership. This
severely limited the avenues for black political expression and representation: in 1925, the year of *The New Negro* anthology, for example, there were no black representatives in the US congress, and a bill to make lynching a federal crime had just been filibustered for the third time in the US Senate. Particularly demoralising had been the failure to win improvements to US racial policy in the post-First World War social settlement, despite mass African American service in the armed forces in 1917–19. In these circumstances literature served as one of the few forms of public and political participation available for African Americans, a fact informing the cultural politics of the Harlem Renaissance, typified by historian David Levering Lewis as ‘civil rights by copyright’. As the poet, diplomat, and NAACP secretary James Weldon Johnson put it in his *Book of American Negro Poetry* (1922), America’s racial inequalities were largely ‘a question of national mental attitude toward [African Americans rather] than of actual conditions. And nothing will do more to change that mental attitude and raise his status than a demonstration of intellectual parity by the Negro through the production of literature and art’. In these circumstances, as Kenneth Warren observes, no black writer could ignore ‘the expectations that African American literature ought to contribute demonstrably to some social end or to the belief that novels, poems or plays constituted proxies for the status or the nature of the race as a whole’. Moreover, poetry’s status as the elite form for occasional literary statement and national representativeness gave it unique responsibilities; as Cullen put it, ‘the place of poetry in the cultural development of a race or people has always been one of importance; indeed, poets are prone, with many good reasons for their conceit, to hold their art the most important’.

Poets’ keenness to engage with the novelties of modernity and modernism overlapped with these burdens of representation, and newness became a watchword for the writers of the Harlem (or ‘New Negro’) Renaissance. Alain Locke characterised the cultural ‘New Negro’ as possessing an iconoclastic spirit which had ‘idols of the tribe to smash’, particularly the highly codified stereotypes of African Americans which had begun on the minstrel stage but had
spread into newspaper cartoons, advertising, cinema, corporate branding, and even radio by the 1920s. Being ‘branded in this country’s pageantry’, in Georgia Douglas Johnson’s words, existed ubiquitously – from Uncle Remus to Aunt Jemima pancake mix, Florian Slappey to Gus in The Birth of a Nation, Amos ‘n’ Andy to Bert Williams playing the Jonah Man in the Ziegfeld Follies. Writers also attended to new social forms in African American life, particularly the newly black urban districts that emerged in Northern cities as millions of African Americans departed the south in the first wave of the Great Migration – bringing their religious, musical, and culinary traditions with them. Locke was not alone in seeing this as a migration in time as well as space, a move ‘from medieval America to modern’. The migration also focused African American capital and intellectual resources in ways that facilitated unprecedented cultural institutions. The two magazines that promoted and published most of the poetry of the Harlem Renaissance (and ran the most important literary prizes) were run by civil rights organisations with their headquarters in New York – the NAACP’s The Crisis, and the National Urban League’s Opportunity.

African American writers also helped shape American modernism. They published in its key forums; Fenton Johnson’s poetry appeared in Poetry and Others in the 1910s, and by the 1930s Hughes and Toomer had published in Poetry, the Little Review, Broom, and Vanity Fair, while Claude McKay had served as co-editor of The Liberator. A new generation of publishers, foremost among them Alfred Knopf and Horace Liveright, supported both the emergent authors of Anglo-American modernism and the Harlem Renaissance poets and novelists. Some of the most important debates in African American aesthetics took place outside the African American press, in forums such as The Nation. And in 1926 the younger generation of African American writers and artists collaborated on a short-lived little magazine, Fire!!, which borrowed extensively from iconic modernist magazines like Blast and the Little Review. Such relationships had attendant suspicions and aggravations: the 1920s saw what Hughes later called the ‘vogue’ of the Negro, when primitivistic praise of African American culture by white audiences and critics for
its naive obliviousness to the problems of modern civilisation, or its neurosis-free relationship to embodiment and sexuality, was endemic, especially in Anglo-American modernist circles. These various interracial dynamics were often ignored by earlier, formalist-driven canons of modernism, which had little space for African American writing. But as two decades of ‘new modernist’ scholarship indicates, if American modernism is broader than it looked in the 1960s and 1970s – encompassing the salon and the cabaret as well as the little magazine, middlebrow aesthetics as well as so-called ‘high’ modernism, and magazines like the Seven Arts, The Liberator, and even The Crisis as well as Poetry and the Little Review – then it becomes clear that African American writers and publications were not on the sidelines but were thoroughly engaged in this cultural movement.

Nonetheless, formal differences between the Harlem poets remain significant in differentiating careers and priorities, as was recognised at the time. Cullen took a definite position in that spectrum: in 1926’s Crisis symposium, ‘The Negro in Art: How Shall he Be Portrayed?’, but also in a review of Langston Hughes’s The Weary Blues (1926), Cullen was forthright in claiming that racial responsibility overrode absolutist claims to artistic freedom. Considering The Weary Blues, he wondered whether ‘jazz poems really belong to that dignified company, that select and austere circle of high literary expression which we call poetry’. Such comments have often led to Cullen being pigeonholed as the Harlem Renaissance’s straw man, the stuffy traditionalist and bourgeois apologist who accentuates the dynamism of vernacular experiment pursued by writers such as Hughes and Sterling Brown. Even at the time Cullen’s traditional poetic forms, and a diction laden with archaisms and inversions, was criticised as offering tame fare to bourgeois audiences, attacks which only became fiercer in the 1960s as the Black Arts movement stridently rejected Euro-American forms. Yet such ‘assimilationism’ can easily be read rather as a bold claim for full cultural citizenship, one that ‘contest[ed] pseudo-biological racist notions of artistic propriety and property’. It was this that led to Cullen’s first collection, Color (1925), being arguably the most rhapsodically received collection of the Harlem Renaissance. On the one hand,
Cullen’s style participated in widely shared understandings of poetry as the principal moral and edificatory genre of public writing, whose ‘select and austere’ discourse carried unparalleled ethical authority. On the other, the historical richness of such forms offered a vantage point of comparativist leverage, which facilitated considerations of African Americans’ place in traditions of Western aesthetics and offered a mode of detachment for surveying contemporary US democracy. Moreover, Cullen was not alone in the Harlem Renaissance in pursuing these advantages and torquing traditional form to modern demands. Primary among those forms was the sonnet; Cullen had admired Edna St Vincent Millay’s feminist rehabilitation of the sonnet’s courtly erotic tradition, for example, writing his bachelor’s dissertation on her poetry. Most Harlem Renaissance poets wrote sonnets, and they were particularly favoured by the movement’s women poets such as Helene Johnson, Anne Spencer, and Georgia Douglas Johnson; they remained important for later writers such as Gwendolyn Brooks and Rita Dove.

Recent critical interest in Cullen has sought to look past his reputation as bourgeois exemplary to explore the sexual subtleties underlying his formal polish. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr, notes, the Harlem Renaissance was ‘surely as gay as it was black’, and several of its poets deployed the flexible representational strategies of racial duality associated with Du Boisian double consciousness or Paul Lawrence Dunbar’s formulation of the racial mask to consider the competing demands of racial duty and sexual identity. This is evident in Cullen’s ‘Heritage’, where the speaker’s insistent question of ‘what is Africa to me?’ becomes a multivalent meditation on an embodied identity which is both racial and sexual. Africa becomes a ‘book one thumbs / Listlessly, till slumber comes’, a discourse rather than an actual place, but a discourse capacious enough to accommodate multiple political and sexual desires. Dedicated to Harold Jackman, who was widely known to be Cullen’s lover, the poem configures primitivist and homosexual sexualities as a fantastical and forbidden geography which tempts and torments a Westernised, continent poetic voice (‘So I lie, who find no peace / Night or
day, no slight release / From the unremittant beat / Made by cruel padded feet / Walking through my body’s street\textsuperscript{17}). The rending dualities of African and American, desire and respectability, Christian and pagan, and text and body play out in these tight couplets, and demonstrate that Cullen’s conventional form was often far more than simply a vehicle for Talented Tenth superciliousness.

‘Heritage’ also gestures towards the geographical complexities of the Harlem Renaissance. The black diaspora, and especially Africa, anchored its political and aesthetic consciousness. African American intellectuals felt they had a diasporic leadership role; Alain Locke called Harlem the ‘home of the Negro’s “Zionism”’, and Du Bois organised the influential 1919 Pan African Congress that ran alongside the peace negotiations at Paris\textsuperscript{18}. Poets considered what connected the diaspora, how Africa operated as both fantasy and political reality, and how poetry could negotiate diasporic differences in geography, culture, and language. Among the most sophisticated of such considerations came from the Harlem Renaissance’s Caribbean-born authors, including the most influential sonneteer of the Harlem Renaissance, the Jamaican Claude McKay. A spirit of Leninist internationalism and a fascination with black working-class culture in global cities were longstanding commitments for him; both ran through \textit{Harlem Shadows} (1922). Most of the so-called ‘violent sonnets’ in this collection first appeared in radical magazines, many in the ‘red’ year of 1919, when a combination of labour disputes, strikes, and deadly race riots were defining the ‘New Negro’ as male, combative, and radical in his socialist and/or nationalist politics. McKay had helped found the radical underground paramilitary association the African Blood Brotherhood, and later edited socialist newspapers in New York and London before travelling to Moscow in 1923, where he addressed the Fourth Congress of the Comintern on the question of the Negro. Such peripatetic commitments also registered in his choice of form and poetic language. As William Maxwell notes, McKay travelled in the opposite direction to other Harlem poets by moving \textit{away} from the dialect verse of his first collections, \textit{Songs of Jamaica} and \textit{Constab Ballads} (both 1912), which were based in his experiences as a policeman in his native Jamaica,
and *towards* standard English – which better met ‘the need for a medium of expanded radical communication’. McKay selected the sonnet as the perfect form for a spirit of restless, itinerant inclusion, one that suited his own self-declared identity as a ‘bad nationalist’; it ‘provided an exceptionally transnational design, born in Medieval Italy but more widely dispersed throughout the modern world than any other type of Western lyric’.¹⁹

The majority of McKay’s most famous sonnets also engage a generative sense of being both within and outside the traditions he deployed. As well as movement across national cultures, the sonnet also facilitated the exciting collisions between temporalities concurrently structuring other forms of modernist experiment. McKay often aligned himself with the ‘primitive’ in these poems; rather than an accommodation to racist stereotype, this paradoxically became ‘a signifier for modern change, for insurgency – a revolutionary who naturally cannot adapt to supremacist law [or] modern capitalist and nationalist domination’.²⁰ This insurgent energy was inherent in what McKay called being a ‘chafing savage’ walking down the ‘decent street’ of the sonnet, when his twentieth-century queer black Marxist transnationalism met the sonnet’s storied history of Renaissance eroticism and the romantic critique of industrialism.²¹

This dynamic is evident in Claude McKay’s ‘America’ (1921) which is worth quoting in full:

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Although she feeds me bread of bitterness,
And sinks into my throat her tiger’s tooth,
Stealing my breath of life, I will confess
I love this cultured hell that tests my youth!
Her vigor flows like tides into my blood,
Giving me strength erect against her hate.
Her bigness sweeps my being like a flood.
Yet as a rebel fronts a king in state,
I stand within her walls with not a shred
Of terror, malice, not a word of jeer.
Darkly I gaze into the days ahead,
And see her might and granite wonders there,
Beneath the touch of Time’s unerring hand,
Like priceless treasures sinking in the sand.²²
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Here McKay uses the sonnet convention of the address to the beloved to imagine a nationalised erotics, the simultaneously antagonistic and energising relationship between the US nation-state and a non-white labouring class that is both national and global. America’s predatory systems of racial and class stratification steal the speaker’s ‘breath of life’, but it also feeds him and transfuses strengthening blood back into his system — a medical technique which had itself taken huge strides in the First World War, making this scene both primal and absolutely modern. Yet the ‘test’ America sets the youthful poetic speaker is triumphantly met; America’s strength and vigour is at least matched by the extraordinary pace and virtuosity of metaphoric transformation the poet accomplishes (which formulates America as woman, tiger, tide, vampire, doctor, flood, King, castle, and broken statue within fourteen lines). These changing metaphors establish the shifts in power between the poem’s two central figures: if the speaker begins as a victim, he ends as a revolutionary, a sage, and finally a seer ‘darkly’ looking into the days ahead — whilst America’s tiger-like, predatory mobility has ossified into the broken and sinking statue of Shelley’s Ozymandias. McKay fully utilises the sonnet’s resources — its propensity for dyadic erotic ambivalence, its ability to mobilise rapid metaphorical transformation, and the volta’s ability to signal progress or resolution (not to mention its nod to another radical mocking the vanity of imperial arrogance in an age of revolutions, which acknowledges the political radicalism embedded into the sonnet tradition by the romantics). Yet McKay is also a ‘rebel’ within the confines of the sonnet form itself, breaching the walls of its canonical prestige and appropriating the cultural capital hardwired into Western claims to global superiority. It is hard to imagine this possibility in any other form. No stranger to modernist experiment through his work at *The Liberator*, he nonetheless ‘adhered to such of the older traditions as I find adequate for my most lawless and revolutionary passions and moods’, as he said in the preface to *Harlem Shadows*, and deployed old words ‘in some circles considered poetically overworked and dead, when I thought I could make them glow alive by new manipulation’.23 That glow of new manipulation animates his best
sonnets and would be a powerful example to later African American writers’ adoption of the form.

Other writers, however, looked to high modernist strategies for considering the jagged temporal disjunctions of American racial modernity, and the violence that modernity was staked in. Lynching in particular preoccupied the African American cultural imagination; as Amy Louise Wood has discussed, by the 1920s lynching was an extraordinarily powerful form of representational terror that echoed far beyond its physical victims. Lynchings often operated as spectacular rituals, and were widely re-mediated through lynching photos or lynching films like Birth of a Nation. Such a monstrously powerful representational system, which terrified far beyond the direct personal experience of racial violence, called out for representational challenge – which few Harlem Renaissance poets failed to meet. James Weldon Johnson’s ‘The White Witch’, McKay’s ‘The Lynching’, Anne Spencer’s ‘White Things’, Helene Johnson’s ‘A Southern Road’, Langston Hughes’s ‘Christ in Alabama’, Sterling Brown’s ‘Sam Smiley’, and, later, Gwendolyn Brooks’s ‘A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile, a Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon’ are all powerful considerations of lynching. Yet the most sustained and innovative poetic engagement with racist violence appeared in Cane, a collection of short fiction, poems, and drama published by Jean Toomer in 1923 and formally the single most modernist text of the Harlem Renaissance.

Toomer was not a native southerner, but in 1921 he worked briefly as the stand-in principal at the Sparta Agricultural and Industrial School in Georgia, an experience which inspired parts one and three of Cane, which are set in rural Georgia (part two occurs in Washington, DC and Chicago). As his autobiographical character Kabnis observes, ‘things are so immediate in Georgia’, and that immediacy lies in an immanent racial violence which both dominates the history and conditions the future of this landscape. The tonal power and uniqueness of Cane resides in the aesthetic transformation of violence – from wounds or murder into folksong, from burned bodies into the heavy smoke which dominates the literal and imaginative atmosphere of the town, or from a history of sexual
exploitation into the richly erotic figurations that Toomer uses to describe the female characters of *Cane*’s initial section. This reflects an ambivalent, typically modernist apprehension of violence, an oscillation between what Sarah Cole has called enchanted and disenchanted modes: a fascination with the cultural fecundity of violence balanced against a horror at its embodied effects. Toomer maps this oscillation onto a host of poetic forms – the sonnet, octet, Imagist lyric, work song, prose poetry, and Futurist-inspired verse. Moreover, his poetry echoes and foreshadows his short narratives, bookended around the opening and closing stories of *Cane*’s part one – ‘Karintha’, which describes a girl whose ‘soul . . . was a growing thing ripened too soon’ into a life of prostitution; and ‘Blood Burning Moon’, Toomer’s terrifying story of the lynching of a black man.

Violence is usually eroticised in *Cane*, and Toomer’s use of the blazon is perhaps where the oscillation between enchanted and disenchanted reaches its greatest amplitude, both in ‘Portrait in Georgia’ and also in ‘Face’. ‘Face’ deploys the blazon and also the *carpe diem* motif (particularly Marvell’s ‘To His Coy Mistress’), but twists these traditions from their usual subject of a youthful woman to a woman on the point of death, producing a morbid, gothic erotics of a woman so relentlessly objectified (including by the poet) that she has no name. The final item on the blazon is muscles – ‘her channeled muscles / are cluster grapes of sorrow / purple in the evening sun / nearly ripe for worms’ – which forcefully reminds that the source of the poem’s pain and sorrow is the black labouring body, the determining fact of this region’s history and culture. Yet the embodied sorrow of that history is also fuel for gorgeous metaphoric extrapolation, as muscles become ‘cluster grapes’; it is flesh that through processes of physical and verbal transformation will go forward to fertilise Georgia soil (through the worms) and this poetry. Elsewhere in *Cane* a poetic speaker talks of ‘Negro slaves’ as ‘purple ripened plums’, the seed of which will produce an ‘everlasting song, a singing tree, / Caroling softly souls of slavery’; and Toomer’s frequent recourse to purple as the colour of African American skin suggests both bruising but also ripeness. This ambivalently indicates both
the pain of violence and its paradoxical cultural fruitfulness, which he, as the organically imagined descendent of this culture, will gratefully inherit. Yet there is always a tension in these poems over reproduction, a worry that the cyclical transmission of cultural material from generation to generation will also reproduce horrific violence – and how complicit our poetic speaker will be in this action.

This ambivalence marked much of Toomer’s reaction to this rural folk culture; he famously lamented that ‘The folk-spirit was walking in to die on the modern desert. That spirit was so beautiful. Its death was so tragic. . . . And this was the feeling I put into Cane.’ And yet his writing about the city in Cane – while cautious of urbanism’s tendency to harden class divisions and impose a soulless, standardised mass culture – also sometimes carries the exhilaration of how technological, city modernity might transform the lived experience of race. This is evident in ‘Her Lips are Copper Wire’, his most Futurist lyric, which Norman Fitts – who published it in the modernist little magazine _S.4N_ in 1923 – translated into Italian for F. T. Marinetti. In the poem the speaker addresses his beloved, asking her to ‘telephone the power-house / that the main wires are insulate’; the poem concludes with him asking ‘with your tongue remove the tape / and press your lips to mine / till they are incandescent’.

Here light marks a joyous moment of sexual communion, rather than the ‘Blood Burning Moon’ of section one, where the light of sexual congress is secretive, shameful, and steeped in a cyclical violence that is as haunting as it is predictive. In contrast, the (electrical) circuit in ‘Her Lips Are Copper Wire’ is literally empowering. And it is worth remembering Stephen Kern’s point that the telephone was the most transformative modern invention regarding perceptions of space – since it both disembodied presence and enabled being in multiple locations simultaneously.

Technology, then, potentially offers an escape from racially segregated organisations of space and the oppressive territorialisation that dominates the Georgia sections of Cane – and does so through the Futurist/Imagist lyric’s poetics of ‘the machine’.
Toomer experimented with blues and worksong in *Cane*, but other poets placed the vernacular more centrally in their development of a modern African American poetics. Langston Hughes first heard the blues not in the rural south but in Kansas City, and his most famous blues and jazz poems site them in Harlem: although several explicitly thematise the move to the city, even at the level of form he understood blues as an itinerant, migrant, and urbanising mode uniquely able to capture the ambivalences and emotional swings of the Great Migration. His letters of the 1920s exemplify a man engrossed in both collecting blues and transforming them into poetry, usually through the six-line blues stanza he pioneered in his 1925 poem ‘The Weary Blues’. The blues also gave Hughes a compelling option for one of his lifelong poetic preoccupations – how to represent a collectivity. He had initially admired the capaciousness of Carl Sandburg’s socialist updating of Whitman’s free-verse catalogues, and deployed the collective ‘I’ characteristic of both poets in several early poems such as ‘Proem’ and ‘The Negro Speaks of Rivers’. Yet by *Fine Clothes to the Jew* in 1927 he was deploying a collection of blues voices and blues poems to do this, each with their own stories and individuality, yet each also implying the presence of an audience who understood their problems and listened to their complaints. The volume tweaked the invocation of the muse to invoke instead the blues at its beginning and close, imploring ‘I feels de blues a comin’, / Wonder what de blues’ll bring?’; but the question also becomes *who* the blues will bring, as Hughes crafts a series of first-person blues personae of both genders, a technique which became one of his trademarks. Hughes loved the melodramatic performativity of the blues, its cathartic function (where one sang the blues to get rid of the blues), and the rich indeterminacy of blue notes, which were literally untranscribable in standard Western musical notation but were central to the sonic and emotional uniqueness of blues. His poetic exploration of these characteristics was decisive in changing the critical consensus about the place of the vernacular in African American poetry; whereas many in the early 1920s saw a poetry staked in African American dialect or secular (and sexual) music as offering little but
the re-circulation of damaging racial stereotypes, by the 1930s the vernacular was indisputably a central resource for African American modernism.

Hughes’s poetic formulation of African American music — most famously blues, but also jazz, gospel, minstrel song, ragtime, and the folk ballad — is therefore arguably his most significant legacy, and made him ‘[appear] for much of the twentieth century as the literary paragon and evangelist of authentic blackness’. Yet he was committed to a poetics of what we now term social justice in a broader sense, particularly in the 1930s, when as a communist fellow-traveller he wrote his most politically radical verse and often linked the US anti-racist struggle to a global politics of proletarian revolution. Hughes’s protest verse strives to avoid reducing the subjectivity of the protester to the fact of their protest alone; Hughes revelled in the humour, the inventiveness, the love and charisma that coexists with and always strengthens acts of political resistance. He also explored how a poetics of social justice involved specific formal challenges. This is illustrated in his 1926 poem ‘Johannesburg Mines’:

In the Johannesburg mines
There are 240,000
Native Africans working,
What kind of poem
Would you
Make out of that?
240,000 natives
Working in the
Johannesburg mines.

Hughes knew that the sheer scale of global racial exploitation made it daunting to represent and therefore to contest. Moreover, the poem is equally worried by poetry’s limitations in communicating the facts of mass oppression, is concerned not merely that such scale is unrepresentable but that poetry as it then stood was a poor medium for doing so. Yet that this poem itself answers the question it poses at least offers some hope. Its very simplicity registers less as aesthetic failure than as a principled refusal to smooth the brutal statistics of the racial order of imperial capital into the euphonious or
metaphorical registers of beauty or complexity. And, as made
obvious by the middle, enjambed line, the poem’s readers are
challenged to answer its central question for themselves, to engage
in acts of ‘making’ that might just become commitment.

Such ‘simplicity’ was the other continuity in Hughes’s career, and
it has proven problematic for his critical legacy. Jeff Westover’s
judgement that he is ‘easily the most critically neglected of all major
modern American poets’ has been somewhat redressed in the past
fifteen years, but dismissals of Hughes from major status have
usually deployed his ‘simplicity’ as a central charge. Among such
detractors was Melvin Tolson, a poet actually four years older than
Hughes, but whose career (beginning in 1939 with the publication of
‘Dark Symphony’) was defined by considering the legacy and pos-
sibilities of both the Harlem Renaissance and high modernism.
Tolson wrote his MA dissertation at Columbia on the Harlem
writers, but he felt that high modernism defined the era; as he
remarked in 1948, ‘this is the age of T. S. Eliot . . . Negro poets
and professors must master T. S. Eliot!’ Tolson’s poetry grew
increasingly complex and ambitious, from his initial collection (con-
sisting mainly of short lyric poems and short ballads) Rendezvous with
America (1944) through the highly experimental 770-line Libretto for
The Republic of Liberia (1953), composed to commemorate the
hundredth anniversary of the founding of Liberia, and culminating
in Book I of Harlem Gallery in 1965. This was initially projected to be
a five-part epic; but Tolson only completed part one, ‘The Curator’,
before his death in 1966. Nonetheless part one was epic in itself,
consisting of 24 sections and 154 pages in the University Press of
Virginia edition, each section corresponding to a letter in the Greek
alphabet.

For the subsequent four books Tolson had planned a narrative of
African American history from slavery to reconstruction; but part
one was concerned primarily with the African American artist-
figure. Densely allusive and highly abstract, it is the mid-century’s
most ambitious importation of high modernist strategies into African
American poetics, and a sophisticated meditation on the range of
aesthetic and pecuniary options available for African American
writers. The beginning of the poem announces its style and preoccupations:

The Harlem Gallery, an Afric pepper bird,  
awakes me at a people’s dusk of dawn.  
The age altars its image, a dog’s hind leg,  
and hazards the moment of truth in pawn. . . .

As a Hambletonian gathers his legs for a leap,  
dead wool and fleece wool  
I have mustered up from hands  
now warm or cold; a full  
rich Indies’ cargo;  
But often I hear a dry-husk-of-locust blues,  
descend the tone ladder of a laughing goose,  
syncopating between  
the faggot and the noose:  
‘Black Boy, O Black Boy,  
is the port worth the cruise?’

This introduces the voice of the Curator of the Harlem Gallery, a gallery aligned with an African ‘pepper bird’. That bird provokes both questions and the senses: it is noisome and spicy, heralding a new, confident age (the dusk of dawn of Du Bois’s autobiography) of modernist and postcolonial politics and images for the black diaspora. The curator stands ready to fashion those images, having assembled the raw material for weaving from across the diaspora, revelling in the ambiguity of whether the ‘Indies’ rich cargo’ comes from East or West. And, like the leaping Hambletonian (a horse not bred for jumping), he cocks a snook at the racist pseudoscience which claimed that African Americans could not produce highly intellectual art. Yet qualifying and perhaps inhibiting this bravura moment of historical opportunity for black art are the lodestones – and possibly millstones – of African American aesthetics. These are its inseparable relationships to trauma and racist violence, figured as a restriction to a limited oscillation between noose and lynching pyre rather than the open seas of the earlier stanzas, and its formal iteration in pentatonic scale and syncopated rhythm – forms which here feel imprisoning rather than expansive. And although, as Rita
Dove observes, the poem contains a ‘virtuoso use of folktale and street jive’, it is centrally concerned with finding alternatives.\(^{40}\)

Those alternatives – and many of the curator’s questions and dilemmas – are explored and answered through the poem’s consideration of three Harlemites’ artistic careers: John Laugert, Hideho Heights, and Mister Starks. All three aspire to produce complex modernist works; through a combination of unappreciative black bourgeois audiences and the lure of greater rewards in the mass culture industry, all are failures. Hideho Heights is clearly a version of Langston Hughes, the man Starks calls the ‘poet laureate of Lenox Avenue’. Full of vernacular wit and enthusiasm for blues and jazz, which inform his poetic style, Heights has a voice like ‘a ferry horn in a river of fog’ – powerful and reassuring, but unsubtle and monotonous. Towards the close of *Harlem Gallery* the curator discovers that Heights has concealed a double career – writing ‘the racial ballad in the public domain / and the private poem in the modern vein’.\(^{41}\) He finds, on taking a drunken Heights home one evening, a modernistic poem hidden in his apartment entitled ‘E & O. E.’ – which was the title of a prizewinning poem Tolson had himself written. For Tolson, Laugert, Heights, and Starks had been let down by their audiences, who had foreclosed the full global and historical cultural citizenship that an Eliotically allusive aesthetics could offer. Moreover, that all three harbour frustrated modernist ambitions suggests Tolson’s view that high modernist style was the inevitable acme of intellectual and artistic aspiration, and that this trumped the burdens of racial representation.

As most of Tolson’s critics have observed, the timing of this argument poisoned his critical reception, as the nationalist and vernacular-inclined criticism of the Black Arts in the mid-1960s began to shape the canon for the first generation of African American studies programmes. In Addison Gayle, Jr’s influential collection *Black Expression* (1969), Sarah Webster Fabio consolidated a critical consensus that Tolson’s career was tragic, ‘victimized by the cultural lag that is common between the white and Negro worlds. . . . While Tolson busied himself out-pounding Pound, his fellow poets forgot to send him the message that Pound was out’.\(^{42}\)
In that same volume, Gwendolyn Brooks was praised for ‘the raw power that overwhelms’ of her long poem *In the Mecca*, the first fruit of her famous conversion at the Fisk University Black Writers’ Conference in 1967 to a new poetics of black militancy and separatism – when, as she recounted, ‘my own blackness... confronted me with a shrill spelling of itself’. The first African American recipient of a Pulitzer Prize, Brooks was also perhaps the most successful negotiator of the representational dilemmas that worried the period: between classical, modernist, and vernacular form; over how to mediate the distance between poetic speaker and the poetic subjects of an African American working class; and how a poetics of protest could avoid being a poetics of limitation.

Brooks had a knack for the compression of the short lyric (particularly in using it to evoke the atmosphere of the domestic interiors of her beloved South Side Chicago), for tonal mastery and variety, for finely torqued and often unsettling diction, for storytelling through ballads, and for characterisation. Her formal and generic range was considerable; she wrote in the mock epic (‘The Sundays of Satin Legs Smith’), the sonnet sequence (‘Gay Chaps at the Bar’), the long narrative poem (‘In the Mecca’), the dramatic monologue (‘The Chicago Defender Sends a Man to Little Rock’), the ekphrastic poem (‘The Chicago Picasso’ and ‘The Wall’), and the elegy (‘Malcolm X’). Langston Hughes had been highly supportive of Brooks early in her career, and she drew extensively on his sensitivity to the quotidian – but allied that with a more classical approach to form, a more complex and challenging syntax, a propensity to cutting irony, and a delight in extravagant imagery. She also produced several extraordinary works about motherhood, from ‘the mother’’s exploration of the trauma of abortion, to the quietly moving poetics of the ordinary in her poetic novel *Maud Martha*, to poetry which explored the interconnections between patriarchy and racism that devastated the lives of both black and white American mothers. Although Black Arts-era critics faulted her favouring of European–American form and her supposed lack of engagement with politics in her early work, she produced some of the most compelling poetry of the Civil Rights era of the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s – covering the school
integration crisis at Little Rock Central High, the lynching of Emmett Till, and the way African American military service in the Second World War had laid the grounds for postwar anti-racist activism. Yet even the moments of greatest political urgency in her work never overrode her sense of the formal and transformative uniqueness — and therefore obligations — of poetic discourse. As she said in ‘The Chicago Picasso’, ‘we must cook ourselves and style ourselves for Art, who / is a requiring courtesan’.44

As Karen J. Ford has observed, despite Brooks’s turn away from ‘white’ poetic forms in favour of what she called ‘fight-fact’ poetics after 1967, she could never abandon these forms in her teaching of poetry, or in her thinking about it. Partly, this was because it was ‘the question of the politics of form, so crucial to the new black poetry, that animated Brooks’s career, rather than any particular answer she proposed to it’.45 But it was also because by the late 1960s African American writers had consistently demonstrated how politically radical and poetically innovative they could be in their deployments and transformations of such forms, particularly the sonnet. On the other hand, when Amiri Baraka called Harlem ‘vicious modernism . . . so violent and transforming’, he identified a social reality so shocking that it seemed to render meditation superfluous or even falsifying, and begged to be treated as an aesthetic force in and of itself.46 Yet four decades after the either/or polemics of Black Arts criticism — its form/content, white/black, standard/vernacular divisions, which cemented the distance of African American twentieth-century poetry from modernism as effectively as the formalist approach of New Criticism — the centrality of all these elements to a more broadly conceived modernism seems clearer. The writers discussed here were invariably concerned with the politics of form, with the burdens of representation, and with the urgency of responding to a racist social reality. Yet they were also frequently aware, as Toni Morrison would later observe, that ‘certain kinds of dissolution, the loss of and the need to reconstruct certain kinds of stability’ so often taken as central to subjectivities in modernity and to modernist aesthetics were experienced by black people in the West ‘a long time ago’.47
African American modernism was born of these irresolvable dilemmas, and by the sense that African Americans had initiated this modern ontology.

Notes

17. Cullen, My Soul’s High Song, 106.
22. Ibid., 153. See also William Maxwell’s reading of ‘America’ in this volume, which has helped shape my reading here.
25. Jean Toomer, Cane (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1913), 84.
27. Toomer, Cane, 2.
28. Ibid., 8, 12.
30. Toomer, Cane, 54.
34. Ibid., 4.


_Harlem Gallery_, 303, 258, 335.


While manifestos appeared in the early 1930s trumpeting something called Objectivist poetry, and while several writers saw their works published by The Objectivist Press, the poets now discussed as ‘Objectivists’ never formed anything like a coherent movement. The very name ‘Objectivist’ was adopted as a banner of convenience, and if the Objectivists poets emulated Ezra Pound’s Imagism of 1912–13 as a branding strategy for getting their work before the reading public, they never aspired to a more formal or close-knit group formation. The relationship of Charles Reznikoff, Carl Rakosi, Louis Zukofsky, and George Oppen – a circle often extended to include Lorine Niedecker and the Northumbrian Basil Bunting – is perhaps best captured by the term ‘nexus’, a temporally shifting network of personal, poetic, and ideological conjunctures. The Objectivists – most of them Jewish, most of them political leftists, and all of them intransigent modernists – largely disappeared from public view by the mid-1930s. They re-emerged, however, with a spate of publications some three decades later, and became the focus of renewed public and critical attention. Their work, it has become abundantly clear, represents a crucial development of modernist poetics, and their writings have become increasingly influential over the past four decades.

T. S. Eliot, reflecting on his own coming-of-age as a poet, recalled an absence of immediate living influence: ‘I cannot think of a single living poet’, he writes of the first decade of the twentieth century, ‘whose works were capable of pointing the way to a young poet conscious of the desire for a new idiom.’ It fell to Eliot’s generation, born in the late 1870s and 1880s, to forge new idioms in the face of an exhausted late-Victorian anglophone poetry, often looking overseas for inspiration or
leap-frogging over their immediate precursors to find models in early eras. The Objectivists, however, born for the most part in the first decade of the new century, came of age with the achievements of Pound, Eliot, Gertrude Stein, William Carlos Williams, Marianne Moore, and other ‘high’ modernists as an unavoidable atmosphere, and an immediate example upon which to build.

It was Pound’s longstanding relationship with Harriet Monroe’s *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse* that initially crystallised the Objectivists in 1930. Living in Rapallo, Italy, and less in touch with literary scenes in the metropoles than he had been a decade before, Pound had since 1927 been in correspondence with Louis Zukofsky, a young New York poet and the son of Lithuanian Jewish immigrants. Pound had published Zukofsky’s ‘Poem beginning “The”’ in his journal *The Exile* in 1928, and he thought highly of the young man’s critical abilities. In late 1930, he persuaded Monroe to let his young protégé guest-edit an issue of *Poetry* in order to showcase the new poets with whom Zukofsky was in touch. Monroe agreed, with one stipulation: having assumed from Pound’s letters that the poets Zukofsky knew were in some way affiliated with one another, she insisted that he present his selections as a ‘new group’ — a movement, in short. Zukofsky was initially non-plussed: ‘Naturally, I haven’t a “group” or know of one’, he wrote to Pound. But he set to work retrofitting an essay he had written earlier that year on the work of his friend Reznikoff; in its revised form, ‘Sincerity and Objectification: With Special Reference to the Work of Charles Reznikoff’ would serve as the most clear-cut ‘manifesto’ that the Objectivist nexus produced.³

‘Sincerity and Objectification’ appeared in the February 1931 issue of *Poetry*, which was titled ‘“Objectivists” 1931’, the raised eyebrows of the scare quotes signalling Zukofsky’s unease with subsuming his selections under a group identity. The essay itself, he was careful to emphasise, should not be read as the manifesto of a movement — he would never use the substantive ‘Objectivism’ — but rather explored certain timeless principles of poetics exemplified in the poems he had chosen for the issue. ‘Sincerity’, Zukofsky’s first principle, involves a ‘preoccupation with the accuracy of detail in writing’; it is a kind of compositional ethics, which produces writing which is ‘the detail, not
mirage, of seeing, of thinking with the things as they exist, and of directing them along a line of melody’. Sincerity involves the poet’s writing with the utmost fidelity to her or his perceptions and thought, and, as importantly, with the utmost attention to the sounds and relative weights of the words deployed. ‘Objectification’ is a larger compositional principle of ‘rested totality’, ‘the arrangement, into one apprehended unit, of minor units of sincerity – in other words, the resolving of words and their ideation into structure’. The poet, then, sets down lines with the utmost moment-by-moment attention to both material and medium (sincerity), and with the aim of achieving a verbal structure that will have a tangible, object-like wholeness in the reader’s mind (objectification).

While these principles, especially that of ‘sincerity’, bear a good deal of resemblance to Pound’s 1913 prescriptions for Imagist poetry (Pound had even written that ‘I believe in technique as the test of a man’s sincerity’), Zukofsky presents them not as the differentiae of a new tendency in poetry but as abiding principles of worthwhile writing. ‘At any time’, Zukofsky concedes, ‘objectification in writing is rare.’ Reznikoff’s poems (to which the essays makes ‘special reference’) may be ‘almost constant examples of sincerity’, but their ‘degree of objectification . . . is small’. No doubt Zukofsky would have said the same of most of the rest of the almost twenty poets he included in “Objectivists” 1931’, among them Rakosi, Oppen, Bunting, Kenneth Rexroth, Zukofsky’s college buddy Whittaker Chambers, and his and Pound’s mutual friend Williams.

Zukofsky trimmed his roster of Objectivists somewhat for the anthology he edited in 1932, An ‘Objectivists’ Anthology – this one collected only fifteen poets, among them Williams, Pound, and Eliot – and while the anthology itself signalled his willingness to pursue the ‘Objectivists’ moniker if only as a marketing device, his preface re-emphasised that his interest lay ‘in the few recent lines of poetry which could be found, and in the craft of poetry, NOT in a movement’. Of these various poets, the Objectivist title would eventually ‘stick’ to a quartet: Zukofsky, Reznikoff, Oppen, and Rakosi. Bunting and Niedecker, two ‘outriders’ to this foursome, would prove to be figures of equal talent and importance.
Zukofsky had been born into a garment-industry family on Manhattan’s Lower East Side, but entered Columbia University at sixteen and earned his MA in English by the age of twenty. By far the most notable of his early writings is ‘Poem beginning “The”’, a 330-line parody and extension of Eliot’s _The Waste Land_. Where Eliot lamented the ‘ruins’ and ‘fragments’ into which it seemed Western culture was falling, Zukofsky foregrounds the vitality of contemporary Yiddish-American poetry, asserts a stubborn pride in his own Jewish, non-Western heritage, and casts a hopeful eye on the great experiment of the Bolshevik revolution in Russia. In 1928 he began a twenty-four-section long poem, “A”, much on the model of Pound’s _Cantos_. The early movements of “A” juxtapose materials from the present, the past, and the general cultural record, aiming to trace the dialectics of history, the relationship between a capitalist system in crisis and the artist’s perennial striving for timeless beauty, a utopian moment undermined by capitalist inequity. By 1930, when he composed “A”-7—a sequence of seven sonnets that wound in phrases and themes from the previous six movements, and indeed which aimed to summarise them—it had become clear to Zukofsky that “A” was a far larger project than he had originally conceived it, and that the poem’s modular structure would allow him almost endless scope for experimentation in both traditional and invented forms.

Charles Reznikoff, whom Zukofsky had known for some time, was ten years older. He had studied journalism and trained for the bar, but worked for his family’s hat business and wrote articles for the _Corpus Juris_ legal encyclopedia; he had been printing books of his own verse since 1918, to scant public attention. Reznikoff drew on the rhythms of the King James Bible, the pointed lyrics and epigrams of the _Greek Anthology_, and the concise precision of the Imagists and Williams to forge a poetics of minutely detailed observation. His own keen eye for detail was exercised in his inveterate, almost obsessive walks, where he would observe, for instance, an intact bit of metal in a demolition site: ‘Among the heaps of brick and plaster lies / a girder, still itself among the rubbish’.

Reznikoff’s vivid pictures of urban life are inflected by his own sense of isolation within the _polis_, both as a Jew within a classical and
Christian culture, and as a Jew who felt himself estranged from his familial tradition: ‘How difficult for me is Hebrew / . . . / How far have I been exiled, Zion.’ Reznikoff wrote many short lyrics, but he also spent a great deal of energy recasting Biblical stories and retelling Jewish tales from the intertestamental period. His work has a singular narrative energy, most evident in his long poem Testimony: The United States (1885–1915), Recitative, a long work which recasts excerpts from thirty years of courtroom testimony, laying out a panorama of violence, injustice, and inequality. Reznikoff, the legal scholar, understood ‘objectivist’ to refer to objectivity, that quality most necessary to the judge or the courtroom reporter.

George Oppen was the son of a wealthy San Francisco businessman. He had dropped out of college and hitchhiked across the continent with his new wife Mary, and soon after arriving in New York in 1928 had met Zukofsky. The two men were for a time very close friends, engaging in intense and formative discussions of poetry. The early work of Oppen’s Discrete Series (1934) is perhaps the most challenging of all ‘first-wave’ Objectivist writing. In a series of jagged, stammering short poems, Oppen presents an oblique but searing critique of the social structures of Depression-era America, ‘the world, weather-swept, with which / one shares the century’. Oppen observes the objects of the made world around him, but all of his observations are mediated by a keen awareness of phenomena’s position within a social order. One can barely know the ‘obscured / origin’ of an automobile, ‘that dark instrument / A car’, but can see how one’s manipulation of its machinery – ‘the hand on the sword-hilt’ – make it near kin to the archetypal emblem of masculinity, the sword. The occlusion of the inner machinery of a refrigerator (‘the prudery / Of Frigidaire’) is analogous to how ‘big-Business’ hides itself ‘Above the / / Plane of lunch, of wives’. Oppen’s intensely cerebral poems search for certainties in a society in what seems terminal crisis.

By contrast to his friendship with Oppen, Zukofsky’s relationship with Carl Rakosi, who had been born in Germany to Hungarian Jewish parents and had come to the United States at the age of six, was purely epistolary: he had seen Rakosi’s wry, colourful poems in the Little Review and other venues, and solicited him for work
for ‘“Objectivists” 1931’. The correspondence that ensued proved
intense and fruitful; among other things, it confirmed Rakosi in
his own flagging literary ambitions. Rakosi’s early work shows
an intense attention to enjambment and stanza break that evokes
Williams, and alternately an ornate, vivid diction that reminds a reader
of Wallace Stevens. Rakosi is at heart a lyric poet; his poems are
seldom longer than a couple of pages, and his occasional attempts at
narrative, satire, or philosophical rumination are far less convincing
than when he represents the seen world in fresh and colourful detail.

Basil Bunting, whose work appeared both in the Poetry issue and
An ‘Objectivists’ Anthology, was a young Northumbrian poet very
much out of step with the emerging English poets of his own
generation – W. H. Auden, Stephen Spender, and so forth. He had
worked for Ford Madox Ford on the Transatlantic Review, and
served as Pound’s amanuensis. Bunting, whose decades-long corre-
spondence with Zukofsky is one of the unpublished treasures of
twentieth-century literature, was more amused than irritated by what
he saw as the needless abstractions of Zukofsky’s prose on behalf
of the Objectivists. Bunting’s own prose, early and late, is a model of
Swiftian clarity and force. His early poetry, which took the form of
both short lyrics and the medium-length poems he would call
‘Sonatas’, presents striking, sometimes lush patterns of sound-play,
for Bunting always conceived of poetry as first and foremost an oral
art. The sonorities of these poems, however, never obscure the
poet’s sharp observations, or the workings of his critical and some-
times satirical intelligence. His verse is, in the words of ‘Villon’
(1924), ‘precision clarifying vagueness; / boundary to a wilderness /
of detail; chisel voice / smoothing the flanks of noise’.

Lorine Niedecker, reading the ‘“Objectivists” 1931’ issue in
remote Wisconsin, was inspired to begin her own correspondence
with Zukofsky. She would visit him in New York several times over
the 1930s, and the two would exchange poems, criticism, and ideas
for decades to come. Like the other Objectivists, Niedecker seems
to have been born modern, with no romantic or Victorian baggage to
discard. (In this, all the Objectivists stand in sharp contrast to Pound,
Eliot, and Williams.) She found the precisions of the poems in the
February 1931 Poetry compelling, but she was also attracted by the potential surrealist techniques offered for exploring not only the immediate objects of one’s perception but also the various ‘planes of consciousness’ that included the darkened subconscious and the ideologies imposed by capitalism. Over the 1930s, Niedecker would explore a surrealist mode, but increasingly turn to a sparer, more stripped-down idiom which sometimes took the form of free verse but which could also draw on traditional vernacular verse forms – folks songs, nursery rhymes.

The February 1931 Poetry issue attracted a good deal of attention (some of it distinctly unflattering), and Zukofsky and his friends did their best to sustain the momentum the name ‘Objectivists’ had accrued. To Publishers, founded in late 1931, was edited by Zukofsky and underwritten by George and Mary Oppen, who oversaw the printing of books in France, where they had moved. This publishing project was by no means a resounding success. To published only three books: prose works by Williams and Pound, and An ‘Objectivists’ Anthology. In 1933, there was another attempt: The Objectivist Press, the brainchild of Oppen, Zukofsky, Reznikoff, and Williams, was conceived from the start as an outlet for self-financed books. Its only (modest) success was Williams’s 1934 Collected Poems 1921–1931, though Oppen’s Discrete Series (1934) and four books by Reznikoff also appeared under its imprint.

By the middle of the 1930s, the Objectivists were only a fading memory on the literary scene. The mounting economic pressures of the Great Depression and the increasing political polarisation of the United States forced some of them to declare their allegiances in ways that sidelined poetry. Oppen joined the Communist Party in 1935 and immediately shelved his own writing; he preferred to work as a labour organiser than to bend his art to the Party’s orders. Rakosi, who also joined the Party, found the demands of his job as a social worker, his familial responsibilities, and his social conscience driving him away from poetry as well. Zukofsky and Niedecker, both employed by the Works Progress Administration, continued writing, as did Reznikoff, but the altered publishing environment of the Depression – most of the ‘little’ magazines and small presses of
the 1920s had gone under—practically ensured that they would do so in obscurity.

Far more remarkable than the Objectivists’ brief moment of collective activity in the early 1930s was their return to public prominence thirty years later. Having seen combat in the army during the Second World War, Oppen had spent much of the 1950s in Mexico, where he and Mary had fled increasing harassment by an FBI all too interested in his pre-war leftist activities. After a twenty-five-year hiatus, he began writing poetry again in 1958, and moved back to Brooklyn a couple of years later. In collaboration with the San Francisco Review (edited by Oppen’s sister, June Oppen Degnan), James Laughlin’s New Directions Publishers published Oppen’s new poems, beginning with The Materials (1962). Oppen would win the Pulitzer Prize for Of Being Numerous, his 1968 collection. In 1965, Carl Rakosi was contacted by the English poet Andrew Crozier, who had been reading his early work, and this contact set Rakosi to writing again; soon he too was back in print with a new book from New Directions. New Directions/San Francisco Review would also publish new books by Reznikoff, and the promotional materials for all of these volumes drew attention to the Objectivist ‘movement’ of thirty years before.

Bunting’s life had been almost too crowded with incident for poetry. He had served with the RAF during the war, and had worked for The Times (and for British intelligence) in Teheran for some years, until he was expelled by the Mossadeq regime in 1952. In 1964 he was living near Newcastle, in near poverty and almost entire obscurity, when he was sought out by the teenaged Tyneside poet Tom Pickard. Pickard’s interest, along with that of several other young British poets and publishers, spurred Bunting to a new round of creative activity that culminated in his masterwork, the long poem Briggflatts (1966).

Niedecker’s and Zukofsky’s decades of unrecognised toil were finally beginning to pay off, thanks in large part to the interest of a younger generation of poets: Robert Creeley (editor of Black Mountain Review), Cid Corman (editor of Origin), Jonathan Williams (publisher of the Jargon Society), Robert Duncan, Denise Levertov, and others. In late 1959 Corman published the first twelve movements of Zukofsky’s “A” as a single volume, and
Zukofsky’s shorter poems were collected (as ALL, in two volumes) by W. W. Norton in 1965 and 1966. The Jargon Society published T&G, a career-spanning collection of Niedecker’s poems, in 1969.

In early 1968, the scholar L. S. Dembo invited Oppen, Rakosi, Reznikoff, and Zukofsky to a symposium on the Objectivists at the University of Wisconsin; the symposium proved unworkable, but each of the four visited Madison that spring, and Dembo published his conversations with them in Contemporary Literature as ‘The “Objectivist” Poet: Four Interviews’. The emergence of the Objectivist ‘group’ as the object of critical and scholarly attention can be dated to this moment. But in one of history’s ironies, the four poets by this point no longer had much in common, either personally or poetically. When Dembo asked each of the three what Zukofsky had meant back in 1931 by ‘objectification’, only Oppen identified it as a formal principle. Clearly, as he had repeatedly admitted in correspondence, he had learned much in his youth from those long conversations with Zukofsky; but by 1968 he and Zukofsky were no longer on speaking terms. The Objectivists were no longer a ‘movement’, or even a ‘group’, but this second wave of Objectivist writing, especially that of Oppen, Zukofsky, Niedecker, and Bunting, is among the most impressive achievements of postwar poetry.

When Oppen returned to poetry in 1958, his work was quite unlike the early, impacted lyrics collected in Discrete Series. The same eye for detail is there, and the halting, angular lyricism, but Oppen’s mature work is shot through with profound social and philosophical questioning, a kind of depth not essayed by the early poems. The Materials (1962), his first post-hiatus collection, opens with an epigraph from Jacques Maritain: ‘We awake in the same moment to ourselves and things’. Throughout his volumes from The Materials to Primitive (1978), Oppen broods on the human state of being in the world, how we perceive and represent that world, and how we make a life among others. In ‘Leviathan’, he muses both on the objects of the world and our propensity for solipsism, for turning away from our fellows: ‘We must talk now. I am no longer sure of the words / . . . What is inexplicable / / Is the “preponderance
of objects”. . . We must talk now. Fear / Is fear. But we abandon one another’. 17

The poet’s task, as it unfolds in Oppen’s later work, is to come to terms with our being in a world of objects and animals, and to learn to live with other human beings. Perhaps his most celebrated meditation is the long title sequence of Of Being Numerous, written at the height of the Vietnam War, which moves and circles back in numbered sections from the objects among which we live, to Oppen’s experiences in wartime Europe, to the present state of America. ‘Obsessed, bewildered / / By the shipwreck / Of the singular’, he writes, ‘We have chosen the meaning / Of being numerous’. The poet must be able, through the passion of his thought, to rise above and diagnose the crises of his time; at the same time he must retain his vital connection to others, must avoid that most American Crusoe-state of individualism and solipsism – ‘the bright light of shipwreck’. 18

In the best modernist tradition, Oppen considers it the poet’s primary responsibility to confront the world as openly and keenly as possible, and then to speak the truth of what he has seen with the utmost possible clarity: ‘Clarity / / In the sense of transparency, / I don’t mean that much can be explained. / / Clarity in the sense of silence.’ 19

The issues and ideas that the poet confronts are as often as not at the very edge of our understanding and intuition, as often as not utterly intractable; but the poet’s duty is to speak them as plainly as possible. Oppen’s later work, then, is a poetry in which questions of staggering philosophical weight are posed and revolved in fragments of sometimes inarticulate questioning and flashes of great lyric beauty. One muses that if Heidegger wrote poetry – not the Heidegger of the Rectoral Address, but a Heidegger purged of his arrogance and Olympian sureness – that verse might resemble Oppen’s later work.

Where Oppen’s mature work strives for a kind of clarity (a clarity that is often occluded by the density of the issues with which it grapples), Zukofsky’s poetry, from the 1930s onwards, becomes more and more obscure. That obscurity is in large part due to Zukofsky’s increasing interest in formal experimentation. The two halves of “A”-9 (composed 1938–40 and 1948–50, respectively) are emblematic. Each half is an adaptation of the Renaissance Italian poet Guido Cavalcanti’s
canzone ‘Donna mi priegha’, adopting the original’s complex metre and rhyme scheme to present a restatement of a previous text: in the first half, Zukofsky reworks the passage from Das Kapital in which Marx defines ‘value’ from the point of view of the commodity; in the second, he reworks Baruch Spinoza’s definition of ‘love’ from the Ethics. Pound, who had translated Cavalcanti’s canzone repeatedly, claimed that it was impossible fully to reproduce its metre and rhymes in English. It is an index of Zukofsky’s formal obsessiveness that he is able to do so not merely once but twice, at the same time regulating the distribution of ‘n’ and ‘r’ sounds by a recondite mathematical formula – and repeating the same rhyme words in the second version of the canzone as in the first.

The later movements of “A” can be read as a series of increasingly inventive formal challenges issued by the poet to himself. A long passage of “A”-14 consists of words excavated from Milton’s Paradise Lost, in their original order but distributed into two-word lines. “A”-15, a poem on the death of John F. Kennedy, opens with a passage from the book of Job homophonically translated into barely grammatical, but very strange, English. In writing his elegy for his friend Williams (“A”-17), Zukofsky confines himself to quoting only the words he has previously written on Williams. “A”-21 consists of a translation of Plautus’ Rudens (The Rope) into a slangy vernacular, in which every line of Latin hexameter verse corresponds to a single five-word English line, and in which the poet tries to preserve as much of the sound of the Latin as possible. Each of the last-composed movements of “A” – “A”-22 and “A”-23 – consists of a thousand five-word lines, plotting a geological, linguistic, and cultural history of the world; the vast majority of those 10,000 words are quoted, translated, transliterated, or otherwise adapted from previous texts.

Zukofsky was increasingly inclined to see human literature not as a series of masterworks by individual geniuses, but as a constant reworking of a limited number of motifs; nothing is new under the sun, really, and the notion of poetic originality is no more than a myth. Instead of striving for an illusory ‘newness’, Zukofsky’s mature work seeks to make fresh and surprising structures through the canny reworking and ‘remixing’ of previous texts. This aesthetic presses the very limit of the intelligible in Zukofsky’s final collection,
Flowers, published shortly after his death in 1978. Each of these strictly formal poems – eight five-word lines – addresses a given plant or flower, and is a collage of quoted, translated, or transliterated words related somehow to that plant or flower’s botanical or literary history, or its personal fortunes in the Zukofskys’ garden. The opening lines of ‘Bearded Iris’ –

Gay ore geek con candlelows
driveway west fanswordleaves equitant stride –

condense passages from Virgil’s Georgics (the first words transliterate the Greek title Georgikon), and Gray’s Manual of Botany, combining them with direct description (‘fanswordleaves’, ‘driveway west’) and allusions to one of Zukofsky’s recurrent images, the poet as labouring ‘horse’ (‘equitant stride’). These condensed references do not function as allusion, as a single word in late Pound might signal Justinian or Confucius; rather, these forty-word lyrics are nodes of alluring indeterminacy, challenging readers to test their alternatives of syntax and semantics, to wonder at their half-perceived depths of resonance.

Niedecker eventually abandoned the surrealist mode she had explored in the early 1930s in favour of more compact, folk-like idioms; many of these poems were collected in her 1946 volume New Goose, its title alluding to the Mother Goose rhymes. Niedecker wrote poems of personal experience, meditations on her own rural background and her family; in one of them, ‘Pioneers’, her mother speaks: ‘I’ve wasted my whole life in water. / My man’s got nothing but leaky boats. / My daughter, writer, sits and floats’. Other pieces touch on historical figures (John James Audobon, Vincent Van Gogh, the Sauk chief Black Hawk) and focus, more often than not, on the hardship suffered by those on the wrong side of a system of private property and capitalist competition. As Black Hawk holds,

In reason
land cannot be sold,
only things to be carried away,
and I am old.

But the Sauks are disappropriated by the expanding States, ‘and to this day, Black Hawk, / reason has small room’. Niedecker’s political
commitments are quite as leftist as those of the early Oppen and Zukofsky, but her political and social commentary tends to be embedded in wry Mother Goose-like quatrains. Niedecker’s down-to-earth vocabulary and ear for the patterns of rural conversation (often quoted seemingly verbatim) sometimes disguise the extent to which her minutely calibrated line breaks and occasional syntactic obliquities reward close and repeated attention.

In the postwar years, Niedecker’s work comes to dwell more insistently on her relationship to her midwestern setting, to explore the natural, even geological, histories of her surroundings. While she continued to compose in tight, compact forms, she gradually abandoned nursery rhyme and folk song models, developing a wonderfully spare and evocative vernacular free verse idiom. In the 1968 collection *North Central*, she combines mostly self-sufficient shorter units into several striking longer poems or sequences. ‘Lake Superior’, a poem based on a car trip she took around that lake in 1966, is at once travelogue, geological exploration, and history lesson, evoking the original Indian inhabitants of the region, the French explorers who opened the area to European settlement, the importance of iron deposits and shipping routes, the rock formations around the lake, and the succession of names given to places in the lake’s environs. The lake itself becomes a palimpsest of history, reaching back beyond its human settlement.

Zukofsky was given to comparing Niedecker to Emily Dickinson (he himself sometimes aspired to be a Whitman, chronicling his times). The grounds of the analogy are clear, if unfortunately sexist: the solitary female poet, isolated from the world of literary commerce, piecing out her ‘letter to the world’ in mostly unread lyrics. Niedecker was neither an autodidact hermit nor a self-obsessed spinster, but an immensely subtle and sophisticated poet who brings a great mastery of sound, lineation, and diction and a deep knowledge of poetic tradition to bear on her chosen subject matter. Her lyrical gift is well captured in a moment of self-description in her long poem, ‘Paean to Place’:

I was the solitary plover  
a pencil  
for a wing-bone
From the secret notes
I must tilt
upon the pressure
execute and adjust
    In us sea-air rhythm
‘We live by the urgent wave
of the verse’

Bunting’s first pamphlet of poems, *Rediculum Matellarum* (‘A Necklace of Chamberpots’), was published in Milan in 1930, and he was not to see another book published until a second pamphlet appeared in 1950. But Bunting was never a prolific poet; his posthumous complete works, including poems whose publication he had never authorised, comprise little more than 200 pages of verse. He himself divided his writings into three categories: the ‘Sonatas’, or longer poems; the ‘Odes’, or shorter verses; and the ‘Overdrafts’, or translations. More than anyone else, Pound had stressed the importance of translation to the renovation of literary tradition: ‘A great age of literature’, Pound wrote in 1917, ‘is perhaps always a great age of translations; or follows it’. Like Pound and James Joyce, Bunting had the gift of tongues. At Pound’s suggestion, he learned classical Persian in order to translate Firdosi’s epic *Shahnameh*; he never tackled the whole of that enormous poem, but various passages of Firdosi, as well as of such Persian poets as Sa’di, Rudaki, and Manuchehri, made their way into his collected Overdrafts, as well as deft translations of Horace, Lucretius, and Catullus.

Bunting’s was always a fine musical ear, but by the 1960s – after Tom Pickard and the other youngsters roused him from his obscurity – his verses manifest a daunting lyric compression, the fruit of a lifetime’s study of poetry in half a dozen languages. The opening of ‘At Briggflatts meetinghouse’ (1975) is a model of densely packed sound effects:

Boasts time mocks cumber Rome. Wren
sets up his own monument.
Others watch fells dwindle, think
the sun’s fires sink.
The first line alone is a magnificent weave of repeated and contrasted sounds, from the ‘m’s of time mocks cumber Rome’, the ‘r’s of cumber Rome. *Wren’, and the long vowels of ‘Boasts’, ‘time’, and ‘Rome’ counterpointing the short vowels of ‘mocks cumber’ and ‘wren’.

Such sound-weaving can perhaps be related to medieval Welsh *cynghanedd* (‘harmony’), intricate schemes of sound correspondence (with which Bunting was familiar); or it can be related to the intricate knotwork of Celtic illumination, the ‘Lindisfarne plaited lines’ Bunting celebrates in *Briggflatts*, his masterpiece. Bunting began *Briggflatts* – at some twenty pages the longest of his Sonatas – in 1965. It is a look back over the entire course of the poet’s life and career – as poet, lover, soldier, sailor, spy – and at the same time it is a meditation on the brevity of human life, the vicissitudes of history, and the perdurability of place: Bunting’s native north of England, in particular the hamlet Brigflatts (as it is more usually spelled) and its Quaker meeting house.

Through a complex woven texture of historical memory (the adventures and downfall of Eric Bloodaxe, a tenth-century king of Northumbria), immediate observation (the advent of spring upon the fells), mythical fantasy (Alexander the Great’s confrontation with the Angel Israfel, as narrated in the *Shahnameh*), and personal memory, Bunting presents an enormously moving meditation on the passage of time and the bitterness of regret – in this case, the poet’s own regret over an abortive childhood love affair.

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.25

The publication of *Briggflatts* in 1966 brought Bunting some measure of long-deferred fame. Indeed, it is safe to say that the Objectivists were able to see their works collected and commented upon, and to hear younger poets’ testimony to their influence, before they died. (The only exception was Niedecker, who died in 1970, still in relative obscurity. Happily, her poems are today perhaps the most widely read and celebrated of any of theirs.) It is only with the perspective of the
half-century since these poets returned to public prominence, after their brief emergence in the 1930s, that one is able to assess their influence on contemporary writing. It is considerable. Many of the poets of the New American Poetry of the 1950s and 1960s were deeply influenced by the Objectivists; the Language poetry movement of the 1970s and 1980s took Zukofsky’s work as one of its foundational texts; poets ranging from the ‘mainstream’ to the most intransigent avant-garde have paid homage to Oppen; feminist poets and poets interested in issues of ecology and place have found inspiration in Niedecker’s work; and any number of younger poets have come to regard the Objectivists’ work as a crucial part of the landscape of twentieth-century poetry. Aside from the issue of influence, however (which is always a problematic matter: do we value the unreadable ‘Ossian’ because he influenced William Blake?), the Objectivists remain of compelling interest for the multifarious – and individual – innovations they made in the modernist practice of poetry. As Zukofsky wrote, their interest resides ‘in the craft of poetry, NOT in a movement’.

Notes

8. The particulars of Zukofsky’s life can be found in Scroggins, Poem of a Life; Oppen’s biographical details are available in Peter Nicholls, George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) and Eric Hoffman, Oppen: A Narrative (Bristol: Shearsman, 2013); Rakosi’s and Reznikoff’s biographies have yet to be written, though much information can


10. Ibid., 72.


17. Oppen, New Collected Poems, 38, 89.

18. Ibid., 166, 173.

19. Ibid., 175.


22. Ibid., 265.


25. Ibid., 66, 78.
When T. S. Eliot returned to England in the summer of 1933, following a nine-month absence in the United States, he faced an uncertain future. This was a period of great personal upheavals, following separation from his wife Vivienne and residence in a series of temporary lodgings. Eliot feared that his best poetry was behind him. Out of this anxious solitude emerged the ‘Landscapes’ sequence. These brief lyric sketches are grouped in the ‘minor’ poems section of Collected Poems (1936), leading to an undeserved critical neglect. They record the first experimental ventures of Eliot’s late style. The principal themes of Four Quartets are rehearsed: meditations on time and memory, visionary scenery, beginnings and ends. The virtuoso rhythmical variations of ‘Landscapes’ perform grave adagios as well as the brisk notes of playful scherzos, anticipating the musical transitions of Four Quartets.

Eliot chose to begin the sequence with the two American landscapes first published together as ‘Words for Music’. The lilting rhythms of ‘New Hampshire’ reflect the uplift of children at play (“Swing up into the apple-tree’), here shadowed by the nostalgia of the older man (“Twenty years and the spring is over’). The obduracy of the sluggish ‘red river’ in ‘Virginia’ mirrors the poet’s state of mind at the time he delivered his notoriously intolerant Page-Barbour lectures at Virginia in May 1933: ‘Iron thoughts came with me / And go with me’. The succeeding British landscapes are plangent. The internal rhymes of ‘Usk’ thread undulating country lanes, past the enchantment of a Monmouthshire pub, towards the spiritual sanctuary of ‘The hermit’s chapel, the pilgrim’s prayer’. The sombre assonances of ‘Rannoch, by Glencoe’ (“the soft moor / And
the soft sky’) bring to mind ancient historical wrong, a clan massacre of 1692, depicting a barren symbolic wasteland of dry bones. ‘Cape Ann’, the final poem of the sequence, returns us to Eliot’s American past. The ornithologist’s spirited taxonomy of birdcalls (‘O quick quick quick, quick hear the song-sparrow, / Swamp-sparrow, fox-sparrow, vespersparrow’) engenders a youthful excitement. It is only a short flight to the opening of ‘Burnt Norton’: ‘Quick, said the bird / . . . / Through the first gate, / Into our first world’.

‘Burnt Norton’ took shape from passages discarded from Eliot’s verse drama Murder in the Cathedral produced at the Canterbury Festival in June 1935. Aspects of Thomas Becket’s temptation and martyrdom reappear, albeit transfigured by the new ‘landscape’ of Burnt Norton, then a deserted Gloucestershire manor house that Eliot visited with Emily Hale in September 1934. Eliot’s intimate friendship with Hale has been the subject of much biographical speculation, yet this poem cannot be explained as a romantic roman-à-clef since it traces a purgatorial journey. The poet dispossesses himself of worldly things in an inward struggle to apprehend ‘the still point of the turning world’. This is not to mistake ‘Burnt Norton’ for devotional verse, a genre that Eliot slighted in his Virginia lectures.

The first fourteen lines of ‘Burnt Norton’ use a speech written for the Second Priest in Murder in the Cathedral: these lines are an abstract philosophical or, better, metaphysical enquiry into the destructive nature of time and death. Two epigraphs from Heraclitus – fragments of ancient Greek gesturing towards the reconciliation of opposites and an underlying oneness – indicate that this poetry will not yield its riches to purely logical analysis. In the poem’s opening movement present, past, and future exchange places in an intricate geometrical dance, unravelling theological paradoxes in the manner of St Augustine’s search within his memory for the eternal present of God:

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past.
If all time is eternally present
All time is unredeemable.
What might have been is an abstraction
Remaining a perpetual possibility
Only in a world of speculation.
What might have been and what has been
Point to one end, which is always present.
Footfalls echo in the memory
Down the passage which we did not take
Towards the door we never opened
Into the rose-garden.

Explorations of the garden of memory in ‘Burnt Norton’ are peopled by the ghosts of childhood possibilities and actual experiences, including an ecstatic vision in the rose garden of the ‘heart of light’ which may be an illusion. Later, the fallen earthly world is described as a ‘place of disaffection’. The speaker of the poem bids us ‘Descend lower’ (travel on the London Underground becomes a descent into the underworld) in order to embrace the divine darkness of the ‘Dark Night of the Soul’ as recounted by the sixteenth-century Spanish mystic St John of the Cross – this ascetic via negativa entails the mortification of the flesh, dying to the world, in preparation for the soul’s union with God.6

Reviewers in 1936 regarded ‘Burnt Norton’ as a new development in Eliot’s oeuvre. A perceptive article by D. W. Harding credited the poem with the ‘creation of concepts’: a ‘linguistic achievement’ inflecting abstract counters with personal feeling.7 The symbolist word music of ‘Burnt Norton’ can often be of a spell-binding Mallarméan opacity. The poem communicates through the articulation of significant pattern: ‘Only by the form, the pattern, / Can words or music reach / The stillness’.8 The word ‘pattern’ and the idea of pattern deepen into a complex keyword over the course of the Quartets.9 In an essay on the symbolist poet and theorist Paul Valéry, Eliot wrote of ‘a recognition of the truth that not our feelings, but the pattern which we may make of our feelings, is the centre of value’.10 Pattern, then, is a principle of organisation, objectifying emotion in a work of art, reconciling opposites by synthesis of the temporal and eternal, change and permanence, movement and stillness, light and
dark, speech and silence, past and future, the actual and the imagined. Pattern for Eliot is concomitant with belief in metaphysical order. In music, pattern emerges from the elaboration of recurring motifs. In a letter to John Hayward of 1942, Eliot was explicit about the analogy between music and the Quartets: ‘the notion of making a poem by weaving in together three or four superficially unrelated themes: the “poem” being the degree of success in making a new whole out of them’. In the five-part structure established by ‘Burnt Norton’, the final section of each quartet examines the task of writing poetry within the context of the poem’s larger design. This is a highly self-conscious sequence that proceeds not through linear progression but by expansive spiralling movements from the personal to the historical, yearning for the mystic’s intersection with the timeless.

It wasn’t until the outbreak of the Second World War, disrupting the London theatres, that Eliot conceived of ‘Burnt Norton’ as the first in a series of quartets. ‘East Coker’ was drafted in February 1940, a further voyage into the past prompted by Eliot’s visits, during the summers of 1936 and 1937, to the Somerset village of his ancestors. The archaic Tudor spelling copied from Sir Thomas Elyot’s Boke Named the Governour is the American-born poet’s quaint act of piety. ‘In my beginning is my end. . . In my end is my beginning’ plays upon Mary Stuart’s motto En ma fin est mon commencement. An allusive melange in ‘East Coker’ – placing the ‘grimen’ mire in The Hound of the Baskervilles alongside the Divine Comedy’s dark wood – is curious given the emphasis in the poem on ‘the wisdom of humility’. It is clear from the lines adapted from St John of the Cross (‘In order to possess what you do not possess / You must go by the way of dispossession’) that Christian humility is at stake. Wishful thinking propels materialist bankers, businessmen, and politicians ‘into the dark’ of an abyss of non-being rather than the purifying ‘darkness of God’ dear to St John.

In a letter to Anne Ridler, Eliot referred to a ‘Jansenist’ streak in ‘East Coker’. In Part IV Christ’s sacrificial atonement (‘bleeding hands’) for Original Sin is figured as the ‘wounded surgeon’ who
redeems the estate bequeathed by Adam, the ‘ruined millionaire’.\textsuperscript{15} In its solemn allegorical treatment of orthodox Christian doctrine, this section of ‘East Coker’ risks preaching only to the penitential and lacks the sensuous beauty of the flash of the kingfisher’s wing in the corresponding lyric fourth part of ‘Burnt Norton’. The closing section, again picking up the neo-symbolist discourse on the ‘intolerable wrestle’ to master language, is more satisfying as poetry: ‘one has only learnt to get the better of words / For the thing one no longer has to say’ recasts a Nietzschean aphorism, although its gloomy note struck some observers as a defeatist thing to say in the midst of a war terminally threatening the English rural traditions dramatised in ‘East Coker’.\textsuperscript{16} Nevertheless, the communal language of wartime does permeate this passage, from the ‘raid on the inarticulate / With shabby equipment’ to ‘Undisciplined squads of emotion’, not least the martial determination ‘to conquer / By strength and submission’ in ‘the fight to recover what has been lost’. No doubt, the ‘folly’ of ‘old men’ was seen by a large number of readers in 1940 as applicable to Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain and the statesmen who had failed to avert another global conflict.\textsuperscript{17}

Donald Davie described ‘The Dry Salvages’ as a war poem. Thoughts of the ‘distress of nations and perplexity / Whether on the shores of Asia, or in the Edgware Road’ came naturally to those who read about the catastrophic fall of Singapore in the London press. ‘Pray for all those who are in ships’ resonated at the height of a heavy toll on the Atlantic convoys. Davie, however, was unforgiving about the unevenness of this particular quartet: lines such as ‘I do not know much about gods; but …’ or ‘I sometimes wonder if that is what Krishna meant’ were scolded as the gaucherie of an ‘uncomfortable poseur’ and he winced at the progressive degeneration of Eliot’s rhymes in the modified sestina – ‘motionless … emotionless … devotionless … oceanless … erosionless’ (a weak echo of the grandeur of Coleridge’s caverns ‘measureless to man’).\textsuperscript{18} The flat prosaic pulse of utterance in stretches of ‘The Dry Salvages’ lends itself easily to parody – although Davie was not alone in wondering whether the ponderous plod of this colloquial idiom wasn’t Possum’s self-parody.\textsuperscript{19}
Elsewhere, the intensity of Eliot’s auditory imagination is quickened and salted by the surge of boyhood memories of the Massachusetts coast; sea sounds and sea imagery shroud the American topography of ‘The Dry Salvages’ in a symbolic aura:

And the ragged rock in the restless waters,
Waves wash over it, fogs conceal it;
On a halcyon day it is merely a monument,
In navigable weather it is always a seamark
To lay a course by; but in the sombre season
Or the sudden fury, is what it always was.

Held in a choppy rhythmic swell, affording glimpses of the beacon of faith, ‘The Dry Salvages’ contains wonderful evocations of the sea. In Part IV, the tenderness of the prayer to the Virgin Mary for safe passage is a gesture of hope in a poem troubled by religious scepticism. ‘For most of us’, unlike the saint, ‘hints and guesses’ buttressed by a patient ritual of ‘prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action’ must sustain the faithful against doubt. According to Eliot, ‘scepticism and disillusion are a useful equipment for religious understanding’; they are constant companions in the perilous theological and psychological voyage undertaken by the ‘Quartets’.

The culminating poem of the sequence, ‘Little Gidding’, challenged the poet to orchestrate the interrelated themes in a purgatorial finale. When Eliot sent the first full draft to John Hayward in the summer of 1941, they agreed that it was ‘unfinished and unpolished’. Due to chronic ill health and war work, Eliot was unable to finish revising the poem for a year. When he did, the exacting Hayward (whom Eliot later publicly credited with ‘improvements of phrase and construction’) collaborated in a painstaking search for le mot juste. The polished poem displays stylistic assurance: ‘The formal word precise but not pedantic, / The complete consort dancing together.’

‘Little Gidding’ opens in ‘Sempiternal’ season of ‘Midwinter spring’: winter sun sparkles on ice, painting the hedges in snow-blossom, warming a spirit lit by the ‘pentecostal fire’ of the Holy
Ghost. Eliot visited the remote Huntingdonshire church at Little Gidding, the centre of an Anglican monastic community, on 25 May 1936. He knew George Every’s play depicting Charles I’s arrival here as ‘a broken king’. For the royalist Anglo-Catholic, Little Gidding was a place ‘Where prayer has been valid’: a refuge in time of national crisis, whether Civil or World War. In the closing movement, thoughts of Little Gidding permit the verse to swell with a patriotic pride: ‘while the light fails / On a winter’s afternoon, in a secluded chapel / History is now and England.’

For millions, history now in England meant existing amid the destruction of German bombing: ‘This is the death of water and fire’. Helen Gardner observed that ‘Anyone who lived through the London raids must link water and fire as equally destructive, remembering the charred and sodden ruins and their smell the morning after as the great hoses played on the flaming and smoking ruins.’ The scene in the London Blitz after an air raid, in which the fire-warden receives wisdom from a ‘dead master’, caused Eliot greater labour than any other passage of comparable length. It is modelled on Dante’s encounter with Brunetto Latini in Inferno XV, composed in an imitation of terza rima alternating unrhymed trochaic and iambic endings. Hayward sharpened successive drafts of this passage. He prompted Eliot to locate the time of day from the limp ‘at dawn’, the antique ‘after lantern-end’, the ornate ‘antelucan hour’, to an eerie ‘waning dusk’. This strange meeting is Yeatsian phantasmagoria, summoning the ghost of the poet whom Eliot belatedly recognised as the ‘master’ of the preceding generation. Once scolded for his pursuit of strange gods, Eliot honours Yeats for refining the English language and marvels at the wild old poet’s passionate lust and rage. The familiar ghost’s astringent narrative of ‘the gifts reserved for age’ constructs a pastiche of late Yeats’s austere diction, driving rhythms, and occult mythology:

First, the cold friction of expiring sense
Without enchantment, offering no promise
But bitter tastelessness of shadow fruit
As body and soul begin to fall asunder.
Second, the conscious impotence of rage
At human folly, and the laceration
Of laughter at what ceases to amuse.
And last, the rending pain of re-enactment
Of all that you have done, and been; the shame
Of motives late revealed, and the awareness
Of things ill done and done to others’ harm
Which once you took for exercise of virtue.
Then fools’ approval stings, and honour stains.\(^{39}\)

It was Hayward who introduced the Swiftian ‘laceration’.\(^{30}\) The shame of ‘things ill done’ involves contemplating the lament in ‘The Dry Salvages’ for ‘Years of living among the breakage / Of what was believed in as the most reliable’. The ghost’s lines are spoken with Yeats’s life-affirming pride not Eliot’s accent of Christian humility, thus complicating interpretations that read an accusation that Eliot abandoned Vivienne in an asylum into this confession.\(^{31}\) A crucial moment of Eliot’s ‘dead patrol’ with his Yeatsian alter ego is the admission ‘Too strange to each other for misunderstanding.’ Eliot was concerned readers would identify Yeats and imagine him in hell, whereas the allusion to the ghost of Hamlet’s father (who ‘faded on the crowing of the cock’ at daybreak, just as Eliot’s revenant ‘faded on the blowing of the horn’ sounding the All Clear) identifies this scene as purgatorial.\(^{32}\)

In the apocalyptic fourth section, ‘The dove descending breaks the air / With flame of incandescent terror’ (later set to music by Igor Stravinsky), a warplane unleashes Pentecostal fire incinerating sensual desires. ‘Little Gidding’ boldly interweaves the medieval mystic’s intuition of Divine Love – ‘With the drawing of this Love and the voice of this Calling’ from The Cloud of Unknowing is allied to Julian of Norwich’s ‘All shall be well and / All manner of thing shall be well’ – into the deadly darkness of wartime London, preparing for the climactic Dantesque vision of the mystic rose.\(^{33}\) The circuitous pilgrimage of ‘Little Gidding’ reprises elements from each quartet. It closes by revisiting the rose garden of ‘Burnt Norton’ with deepened spiritual insight:
Eliot was a poet and not a mystic. *Four Quartets* presents a partial revelation of grace, one clinched artistically by Hayward’s improvement of the halting rhythm of the draft ‘the fire and the rose are the same’ to the decisive ‘And the fire and the rose are one.’

In his 1933 Virginia lectures, Eliot described Ezra Pound as ‘probably the most important living poet in our language’. In particular, he admired Pound’s mastery of free verse rhythms, the ‘continuous identification of form and feeling’ he had earlier singled out for praise. Eliot, however, was more complimentary about the technique of *The Cantos* than their contents. His Virginia lectures wondered whether Pound’s ignorance of Chinese language and society undermined an advocacy of Confucian values. Eliot also offered a critique of the hostility displayed in *The Cantos* towards ‘politicians, profiteers, financiers, newspaper proprietors and their hired men’ as a hell for ‘other people’ and therefore ‘a perfectly comfortable one for the modern mind to contemplate’.

In spite of his reservations, Eliot remained a loyal publisher of *The Cantos* during a period when a select readership struggled through polemical sections attacking the capitalist banking system, recounting in a bizarrely abbreviated form swathes of Chinese dynastic history or the putative ideals of America’s founding fathers. Eliot recommended to Faber’s book committee Pound’s eccentric, assertive, prose guidebook to his obsessions – Confucianism, monetary reform, medievalism, Italian Fascism – published as *Guide to Kulchur* (1938): ‘for the judicious who know how to trim the boat with their own intelligence there is a good deal of wisdom’; but even Eliot’s patience wore thin when Pound complained bitterly at not being allowed to libel the Rothschild family in *The Cantos* as one of the
Jewish banking dynasties to blame for the corruption of Western civilisation.\(^{39}\)

Pound was in the habit of saying that his modernist epic was modelled on the examples of Homer’s *Odyssey* and Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. *The Cantos* opens with the wanderings of Odysseus and contains a Hell group (Cantos XIV–XV) sketching a Dantesque inferno, and yet these structural parallels are misleading. As this highly experimental sequence appeared, it became clear that there could be no continuous narrative to such cryptic, elliptical, allusive poetics. Pound’s disciples asked readers to wait for a full complement of one hundred cantos to resolve into order the scattered threads of this ‘poem of some length’. Unlike Dante’s, Pound’s paradise emerged only as fleeting and fugitive glimpses. It is customary to point towards Pound’s conception of the ‘ideogrammic method’ as the rationale for the wilful syncretism of *The Cantos* which juxtaposes in an Imagist paratactic syntax a wide variety of materials – a mixture of languages and literatures, archival documents, letters, private anecdotes, economics, anthropology, mythology, politics – without discursive narrative connections.\(^{40}\) Many contemporaries experienced the open form of *The Cantos* as arbitrary and incoherent. Pound declared that an epic is a ‘poem including history’ and it has been suggested that living through the apocalyptic ruins of the Second World War wrecked his epic programme for *The Cantos*.\(^{41}\)

Massimo Bacigalupo characterises *The Cantos* as ‘among other things, the sacred poem of the Nazi-Fascist millennium which mercifully never eventuated’.\(^{42}\) There is little doubt that after Pound settled in Italy in the mid-1920s he idealised Benito Mussolini as a man of action. *The Cantos* recalls Pound’s audience with ‘the Boss’ in January 1933, in which Mussolini apparently said that he found *A Draft of XXX Cantos* ‘divertente’ (XLI), fuelling the fantasy that Pound might educate this authoritarian leader in matters of statecraft. In 1936, once the League of Nations had condemned Italy (imposing economic sanctions), Pound grew further estranged from the Western democracies, which he believed were puppets of powerful Jewish financiers. He said as much in his Rome Radio broadcasts to America on the outbreak of war, leading to his indictment for treason in the US in
July 1943. Following Allied bombing which damaged Pound’s beloved Italian monuments, he fled north to join Mussolini’s supporters in the Salò Republic. In 1944, he composed two remarkable propagandist pro-fascist cantos in Italian (LXII–LXXXIII). They dramatise the ghosts of the recently deceased Futurist F. T. Marinetti and Dante’s furious Ezzelino da Romano echoing Cavalcanti in a cry of defiant resistance (‘ricossa’). Arrested and interrogated by the FBI, Pound was transferred to the US Army Disciplinary Training Center outside Pisa in May 1945, where he was caged in an open-air, reinforced steel cell measuring six feet by six and a half, exposed to hot dusty winds, drenching rain, and cold nights. After three weeks, Pound, in his sixtieth year, suffered a breakdown and was moved to a tent within the medical compound. Allowed writing materials, he began drafting *The Pisan Cantos*. They open with a lament for Mussolini’s downfall: ‘The enormous tragedy of the dream in the peasant’s bent shoulders’ (LXXIV).43

Eliot’s blurb for the 1949 Faber edition of *The Pisan Cantos* spoke of them with quiet authority as ‘more lucid and more moving than some of their predecessors, with the same technical mastery but a new poignancy of human speech’44 – poignancy that derives from the extremity of the circumstances in which Pound was placed: ‘the loneliness of death came upon me / (at 3 P. M., for an instant)’ (LXXXII); ‘There is a fatigue deep as the grave’ (LXXXIII). Pound’s mythopoetic imagination dwells on a sacred landscape of sunrises and sunsets, clouds over the surrounding mountains, Pisa couched in the distance, even the activities of GIs in the camp. Microscopic attention is lavished on the industry of ants and wasps, the flights of birds and butterflies. *The Pisan Cantos* is lyrical elegy concentrated on a solipsistic universe of arresting power: fragmentation mirrors the free associations of a self in crisis. Here creative memory – fructifying, but at times also falsifying – is an index of the strength of passion for lost persons and places:

nothing matters but the quality

of the affection –

in the end – that has carved the trace in the mind

(LXXVI)
In the Pisan prison camp resurgent images of Venice come flooding back; nostalgia suffused with painful yearning (‘free then, therein the difference’). Pound recalls the day in 1908 when he considered dumping the proofs (‘le bozze’) of his first volume of poetry, *A Lume Spento*, into the Grand Canal:

> by the soap-smooth stone posts where San Vio
> meets with il Canal Grande
> between Salviati and the house that was of Don Carlos
> shd / I chuck the lot into the tide-water?
> le bozze ‘A Lume Spento’/

In Canto LXXXIII, remembrance of a Venetian servant’s remark (‘“Non combaattere” said Giovanna’ to the combative Pound), triggers a cascade of Venetian churches, palazzo, and people he may never see again:

> Will I ever see the Giudecca again?
> or the lights against it, Ca’Foscari, Ca’Giustinian
> or the Ca’, as they say, Desdemona
> or the two towers where are the cypress no more
> or the boats moored off le Zattere
> or the north quai of the Sensaria ΔΑΚΡΥΩΝ ΝΔΑΚΡΥΩΝ

The passage ends with the Greek for weeping. *The Pisan Cantos* observes movingly: ‘I don’t know how humanity stands it / with a painted paradise at the end of it / without a painted paradise at the end of it’ (LXXIV). Marble carvings on a balustrade in the ‘jewel box’ of Venice’s Santa Maria dei Miracoli, small church ‘of the Miracles’ in a miraculous city of water, offered Pound an image of paradise in his solitary hell.\(^{45}\)

Canto LXXXI, arguably the finest of them all, rises to visionary intensity when the goddess of love (Aphrodite/Venus), a sensuous intercessor, invokes (in the words of Hugh Kenner) ‘sonorous lines on Love, a Poundian decasyllabic moving unresisted, line after line after line’:\(^{46}\)

> What thou lovest well remains,
> the rest is dross
> What thou lov’st well shall not be reft from thee
> What thou lov’st well is thy true heritage\(^{47}\)
Anthony Woodward praises Cantos LXXI, LXXII, and LXXXIII as the elegiac climax of *The Pisan Cantos* (‘the very heart of loss’): an elixir of ‘neo-Platonised Confucianism, where Eleusis also figured as valid myth’. Only initiates into the secret world of *The Cantos* would uncover this mystic truth; others must doubt whether such an eclectic essence could be extracted from a brittle and disorientating flux of language. This is not to deny that ‘beauty is difficult’ (LXXIV) in *The Pisan Cantos*, in Aristotle’s sense of intelligible complexity: the scope of the range of combinations of simplicity and multiplicity is determined by the cognitive capacity of the perceiver, discerning (or perhaps positing, inventing) patterns of order within apparent chaos.

The committee of writers, including Eliot, who controversially awarded Pound the inaugural Library of Congress Bollingen Prize for *The Pisan Cantos* in 1949 were anxious to place the emphasis on literary genius. Vocal public opponents thought that awarding a prize to a traitor and fascist sympathiser was monstrous, not least because Pound refused to disavow, in the aftermath of the Holocaust, a foolish anti-Semitism: ‘the yidd is a stimulant, and the goyim are cattle / in gt/ proportion and go to saleable slaughter / with the maximum of docility’ (LXXIV). Nevertheless, *The Pisan Cantos* are widely regarded as Pound’s masterpiece, in which a sacramental reverence before nature taught him cathartic humility and the error of hatreds ‘Fostered in falsity’:

Pull down thy vanity, I say pull down.  
Learn of the green world what can be thy place  
In scaled invention or true artistry (LXXXI)

Pound’s reckless opinions resurface in Canto LXXXIV in querulous, albeit coded, references to the war’s winners and losers. Peter Makin contends that *The Pisan Cantos* ‘do not recant, though this fact was somewhat obscured at the time of publication by certain obscurities of reference and by publishers’ deletions’. Donald Davie, who said the ideology of *The Pisan Cantos* was abhorrent, honoured them in a poem: ‘Excellence is what / A man who treads a path / In a prison-yard might string / Together,
Politics and economics return with a vengeance in Section: Rock-Drill de los Cantares (1955). Titled after Jacob Epstein’s strikingly angular sculpture, Pound told an interviewer: ‘Rock Drill was intended to imply the necessary resistance in getting a certain main thesis across – hammering.’

Understanding what Rock-Drill hammers away at requires knowledge of the source-texts Pound used during his confinement at St Elizabeths Hospital, Washington, DC. These works were quarried for their lessons on good government and the evils of usury. Yet scholars have laboured hard to sieve poetic gold in Rock-Drill from pages of dross. Canto LXXXV transcribes over one hundred Chinese characters (their incorporation highlights Pound’s claim to intuit etymologies unknown to Sinologists from ‘ideograms’); Egyptian hieroglyphics and an imperfect grasp of ancient Greek join the deconstructive free-play of the signer in Rock-Drill. Following a turgid digest of stretches of Senator Benton’s first-hand account of early nineteenth-century American politics, a series of visionary ‘paradisal’ cantos bring a much-needed lyric fluency. Contemporary reviewers, however, regretted the alarming decline represented by Rock-Drill. Donald Davie concluded: ‘Either this is the waste of a prodigious talent, or else it is the poetry of the future.’

Thrones de los Cantares (1959) was the next didactic instalment of synchronic source material with an emphasis on political and economic heroism. After his release from St Elizabeths, Pound informed Donald Hall: ‘The thrones in Dante’s Paradiso are for the spirits of the people who have been responsible for good government.’ He explained that his own Thrones ‘concerns the states of mind of people responsible for something more than their personal conduct.’ Estimation of the success of this block of cantos depends on assiduous enquiry into Pound’s appropriation of historical, legal, philosophical, ethnographical, and economic texts in this sprawling section: exegetes have wrestled with the metaphysical and philological implications of a welter of legal reforms in Byzantium, ancient ritual practices in China, the history of coinage, and the defence of
the Magna Carta in seventeenth-century England with small delight. Davie pronounced *Thrones* inert and tiresome: ‘my quite assiduous labours on those many pages yielded me only Dead Sea fruit’. The black shawls worn by Venetian women in mourning (CVI) attract the greatest attention, since they are linked to Pound’s fascination with occult Eleusianian rites shrouding the mystery of life after death.

Pound’s final limpid cantos, written before a silence of paralysed depression, represent the fulfilment of his Dantean aspiration ‘to write Paradise’ (‘Notes for CXVII et seq.’). His *Drafts and Fragments* revisit the sacred places. In Canto CXVI, the last complete canto, the poet, radiant with joy, lifts his eyes towards stark Byzantine mosaics in the ruined basilica on the deserted island of Torcello:

> again is all ‘paradiso’
>        a nice quiet paradise
>        over the shambles,
> and some climbing
>        before the take-off

There is a bleak, exquisite pathos in Pound’s vacillations between a former dogmatic confidence (‘i.e. it coheres all right / even if my notes do not cohere’) buffeted by his post-Pisan doubts (‘Many errors, / a little rightness’). A soaring Dantesque invocation of ‘the gold thread in the pattern / (Torcello)’ offers a mystical vision of his religion of art as an act of faith. These palpitations of affirmation, confession, and despair muster sufficient self-knowledge, hard-won through a lifetime of experience, not to permit any easeful repose in an art free of the fury and mire of human veins:

> To confess wrong without losing rightness:

> Charity I have had sometimes,
>        I cannot make it flow thru.
> A little light, like a rushlight
>        to lead back to splendour.

Pound’s assertions that he botched *The Cantos* – ‘my errors and wrecks lie about me / and I am not a demigod, / I cannot make it
cohere’ – should be treated with caution. The textual instability of successive editions of *Drafts and Fragments* makes it unwise to extrapolate any final authorial judgement on this poem of some length. Eliot was more confident that *Four Quartets* set a crown upon his lifetime’s achievement.

Notes

3. ‘To be a “devotional poet” is a limitation: a saint limits himself by writing poetry, and a poet who confines himself to even this subject matter is limiting himself too’: T. S. Eliot, *After Strange Gods: A Primer of Modern Heresy* (London: Faber and Faber, 1934), 48.
4. Eliot translated these two epigraphs as follows: ‘Although the Logos is common, the majority of men live as if they had an individual understanding’ and ‘the way up and the way down are the same.’
5. In the *Confessions* 11.20, Augustine meditates on the problem of time, drawing a tripartite distinction between ‘a present of things past, a present of things present, a present of things future’.
9. The word ‘pattern’ appears ten times in the *Quartets*.
12. Eliot’s direct ancestor Andrew Eliot emigrated from East Coker to America in the 1660s.
16. *Ibid.*, 179, 182; cf. ‘What we have words for, we have already got beyond’ (‘Wofür wir Worte haben, darüber sind wir auch schon hinaus’): Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, VIII.


25. Ibid., 191, 192, 197.

26. Ibid., 193.

27. Gardner, Composition, 169.


30. See Gardner, Composition, 193. Hayward had in mind ‘Ubi saeva indignatio ulcerius cor lacerare nequit’ from Swift’s tomb, translated memorably by Yeats in ‘Swift’s Epitaph’.

31. Eliot, Complete Poems and Plays, 185. The ghost’s words suggest lines from Yeats’s ‘Vacillation’, quoted by Eliot in his Virginia lectures: ‘Things said or done long years ago, / Or things I did not do or say / But thought that I might say or do, / Weigh me down, and not a day / But something is recalled, / My conscience or my vanity appalled’: Eliot, After Strange Gods, 46.


35. See Gardner, *Composition*, 224.


40. Pound defends his ‘ideogrammic method’ in his *ABC of Reading* (London: Faber and Faber, 1934), 17–27.

41. For Pound’s comments on epic, see *ABC of Reading*, 46.


47. Pound, *Cantos*, 540–1


54. The key source-texts for Cantos LXXXV–LXXXVII are the editions of the Confucian *Shu jing* (Book of History) by Séraphin Couvreur and
James Legge; Thomas Hart Benton’s *Thirty Years’ View* (1856) provides the background and colour for Cantos LXXXVIII and LXXXIX.


The interwar years began as postwar, with the Great War haunting the parties, politics, and pipedreams of all citizens as they underwent the extraordinary shifts and changes of the 1920s and 1930s, from boom to bust. With the rise of extremist politics — itself a creature of disaffected or revolutionary ex-combatants in Italy, Germany, Russia, and Ireland — the world then turned to fears of a Second World War, and anxiety drew minds towards apocalyptic futures. Between these two world wars, minds were pulled two ways: back to evaded, repressed trench dreams coded as internal wasteland (as the rubble of all history), or forward to a bombed-out, totalitarian war zone called the end of the world. At the same time, the social energies, revolutionary creeds, paramilitary visions, international-corporate military-industrial complexes, and state of emergency mass politics that had been boosted by the First World War (the vortex, in other words), threw everything into radical doubt, tempting populations to violent means, extreme desires, and revolutions of thought and class that were consolidated in the stand-off between the forces of progress and conservatism, Soviet Communism and German Fascism, as poles dividing the liberal mind. This chapter will be looking at the writing of the interwar years as an exploration of modernity as a vortex splitting minds in two, between repressed war experience and fear of the future, between violent war-mongering Id and scientific reason, between communist or nationalist revolution and fascist militarism. Images of lethal technology haunt the texts, and ideas of nation are troped through sinister haunted warscapes, space-time transformed by war dreams into zones of elegy, myth, and fantasy crossing
psychoanalytic dreaming and collective memory. The writers considered will include Robert Graves, Wyndham Lewis, David Jones, David Gascoyne, W. H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood, Spanish Civil War writing, Charles Madge, Irish writing from Civil War stories to W. B. Yeats, Samuel Beckett, and Denis Devlin. The chapter will then move on to consideration of Second World War texts, looking at the poetry of the neo-romantics (the work of Lynette Roberts and J. F. Hendry in particular) to register the war endgame of those interwar concerns.

The modernism of the 1920s is often dismissed as apolitical, inward, obsessed with order, and yet its vanguard text, T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, presents its fragments as symptomatic debris speaking of the effects of the war on the sexual unconscious and pan-European politics. At the heart of the poem is a shell-shocked, transgendered intelligence, Tiresias, who cannot speak of his war experience except through mad routines of estranging impersonation, who cannot recognise his lover or his world without projecting onto them the desolation of the trench-system’s wasteland. Shell-shock haunts all postwar culture in other key modernist texts: Virginia Woolf’s *Septimus Smith* in *Mrs Dalloway*, Tietjens in Ford Madox Ford’s *Parade’s End*, Chris Baldry in Rebecca West’s *The Return of the Soldier* – all display the divided psyches of the ex-combatant, the amnesia, uncontrollable physical symptoms, and feminising emotionalism of PTSD. The texts present their shell-shock sufferers as victims of the war and as representatives of the psychological division of mind of the postwar’s collective unconscious. For psychologists at the time, shell-shock was a war neurosis that acted like a wound, preserving the abject fear generated by war experience: they write in 1919 of ‘the enormous importance of contemplative fear in the perseveration of hysterical paralysis, contractures, and speech defects’. It is this disabling fear – living on as psychic wound speaking of trauma through dream and hysteria, despite social taboo and control – that triggers class- and gender-transformation at the level of the political unconscious.

That wound can be heard in Graves’s poetry. The god called poetry ‘shouts and screams when he is hot / Riding on the shell and shot’ and is radically divided by this inner conflict: ‘he has two heads / Like
Graves had settled on poetry as a form of therapy for war-neurasthenia following his experience of shell-shock treatment by W. H. R. Rivers at Craiglockhart. Poets learn to induce trancelike states ‘in self-protection’ whenever they feel ‘unable to resolve an emotional conflict by simple logic’; the poem is a secondary elaboration of the dream, and will have ‘a therapeutic effect on the minds of readers similarly disturbed by conflicting emotions’. The emotional conflict, as poem, acknowledges the persistence of war experience as irresolvable wound within all minds: ‘Lucifer, Lucifer, am I, millstone-crushed / Between conflicting powers of doubleness’. In the 1925 ‘A Letter from Wales’, Graves imagines two ghosts of soldiers who fell in the war, living on as ‘substitutions’ in postwar Wales, incapable of even formulating questions about identity due to the repressions of the conflict within: ‘Something we guessed / Arising from the War, and yet the War / Was a forbidden ground of conversation.’ Those two soldiers are two sides of the same mind, fissured by the forbidden ground, the no-man’s-land, lying between them.

Graves’s sense of the doubleness symptomatic of war experience builds on the homo duplex theme developed by Ford and Joseph Conrad with modernist impressionism, and on the master–slave dialectic figured in Wyndham Lewis’s Vorticist model of the creative imagination. Ford revised the homo duplex theme as war-induced with No More Parades (1925), staged as objective correlative in the form of O Nine Morgan split in two by shrapnel: ‘In the bright light it was as if a whole pail of scarlet paint had been dashed across the man’s face on the left and his chest.’ Lewis also revised the master-slave struggle of The Enemy of the Stars in 1932, giving it a First World War spin. Hanp rises in resentment against master Arghol by thinking about his heavy body in wartime sexual-lethal ecstasy, captured in the newsreel of the mind: ‘the heavy body, so long quiet, flinging itself destructively about – face strained with the intimate expression of the act of love – what a repulsive picture was that, as it shot up in retrospect, reel after reel.’ He accompanied the rewrite with an essay on duality, ‘Physics of the Not-Self’, which argued that established normative culture represses any reference to the ‘not-self’
established in the centre of the intellect’, and marginalises the artists who represent that duality.\(^8\) The repression is equated with the ways culture redefined the destruction of the First World War as quasi-natural and Darwinian, rather than the product of science. In 1933, Lewis reflected on the need for a more militant aesthetic, advocating a writing of irrepressible energy, allowing the not-self to distort and militarise the text, a burly, doubling compositional field full of martial command, yet anarchic too: ‘Let words forsake their syntax and ambit’. Writing becomes a surfacing of the not-self as militarising recreation of trench warfare:

Do not expect a work of the classic canon.  
Take binoculars to these nests of camouflage –  
Spy out what is half-there – never completion –  
Always what is fragmentary – . . .  
Reading between the lines – surprising things half-made\(^9\)

The doubleness of the struggle between the creative intelligence and the parasite within is shadowed by this other form of duality, the binocular vision of the cultural present as doubled by camouflaged secret wartime with its inchoate ‘lines’ of trenches. The result is a fragmentary writing, a half-made textuality hinting at secretly militant halves within.

Chiming with Lewis in 1932–33, but inhabiting the left field, Auden had developed the creepy premonitory style of his extraordinary *Poems* (1930) with *The Orators* (three editions between 1930 and 1934) which meditated on the wound in culture, on the fascist war-mongering double within each individual and nation, and on nightmare already-‘invaded’ states of being. England is transformed into a war zone of occult civil war in a prose poetry characterised by quietly feverish Anglo-Saxon rhetoric and sinister folk-fanatical myth-making:

Interrogation of villagers before a folding table, a verbal trap. Execution of a spy in the nettled patch at the back of the byre. A tale of sexual prowess told at a brazier and followed by a maternal song. The fatty smell of drying clothes, smell of cordite in a wood, and the new moon seen along the barrel of a gun.
The imagination is war-ridden here, as if locked into a militarised family romance become national, communal-neurotic. Christian culture is replaced by a semi-pagan cult with warlord Leader as focus of the Oedipal cathexes and affects: ‘a league of two or three waiting for low water to execute His will. The tripod shadow falls on the dunes. World of the Spider, not Him.’ Authority figures take on uncanny psychoanalytic as well as political auras, as Auden captures the shift of the lustful, self-infantilising imagination towards the right and deep fascism: ‘Rook shadows cross to the right. A Schoolmaster cleanses himself at half-term with a vegetable offering; on the north side of the hill, one writes with his penis in a patch of snow “Resurgam”.’ What will rise is the return of the repressed, the war spirit of 1916, a return to the speaking wound. In the nightmarish ‘Letter to a Wound’ (section IV), Auden’s persona writes: ‘Thanks to you, I have come to see a profound significance in relations I never dreamt of considering before. . . . Even the close-ups on the films no longer disgust nor amuse me. On the contrary they sometimes make me cry; knowing you has made me understand.’

The wound speaks through the new technologies, especially film, the art of the technounconscious, the ‘close-up’ idea of Englishness always shadowed by its militarised enemy, the fascist not-self.

Auden moves into radical exploration of the English inner fascist with the ‘Journal of an Airman’, which tracks a Tiresias-intelligence maddened by cultural shell-shock into paranoid apprehension of the enemy within: ‘The effect of the enemy is to introduce inert velocities into the system (called by him laws or habits) interfering with organisation. These can only be removed by friction (war). Hence the enemy’s interest in peace societies.’ The technology of warfare and the systems and organisation of a military culture are allowed to structure the ways the mind apperceives and believes it is perceived, as we see with the ‘Observer’ entry to the airman’s alphabet: ‘Peeper through periscope / and peerer at pasture / and eye in the air’. Glimpsing sexual secrets, romantic visions of nature, sighting the sublime: all three are given military counterparts (submarine vision, sniper-sight, RAF-surveillance) in registers which seem irreparably to have transmuted the very language itself. The illogic of all this is, first, to submit
to the fascist leader as ‘Uncle’-bogeyman, and then to turn war’s destructive energy upon the self, to accept invasion by the enemy: ‘Conquest can only proceed by absorption of, i.e. infection by, the conquered. The true significance of my hands.’ Auden sensed the paranoia in Lewis’s fiction of himself as the Enemy; and constructed _The Orators_ fiction as a display of the psychic war-mechanism generating the split in English postwar culture, conqueror-conquered within the same servomechanical paranoid body, like spectral hands.

The analysis of fascist war-paranoia continued with Auden’s collaborations with Christopher Isherwood in the Group Theatre projects. In the 1936 _The Dog Beneath the Skin_, the political split between progressive and conservative classes is written into the body, this time as right and left feet:

RIGHT FOOT. Why are you pushing me, Left?
LEFT F. Cos yer tiking up all the room, that’s why.

The Vicar of Pressan Ambo describes the holy war between God and Satan (‘conflict on an astronomical scale’) in Great War terms: ‘no depth-charges or detectors, no camouflage, no poison-gas . . . can have been unknown to them’. This vision is given communist spin once Francis reveals himself as the dog-spy on the fascist seccries of village life; the revolution is war around the corner: ‘You are units in an immense army . . . I am going to be a unit in the army of the other side: but the battlefield is so huge that it’s practically certain you will never see me again.’ Auden and Isherwood introduce complexity into the picture by the unavoidable comparison of Francis’s militarism and the war-propaganda of the Leader of Westland, who summons totalitarian energy from the image of an absolute fascist enemy: ‘a Nation: trained to arms from infancy, schooled in military obedience and precision, saluting even in the cradle . . . My mind’s eye saw the long silent grey ranks. . . . And a voice said: Woe, woe to the unprepared.’

The vision of the ‘grey ranks’ issues from the trenches, and feeds into a Vansittartian jingoist-apocalyptic alarmism. Implicit in the recall of the Leader in Francis’s vision of a huge battlefield is the eerie looking-glass resemblances between right and left extremes in the paranoid body politic. As the two leaders of the semi-choruses sing:
We are the guardians of the gate in the rock.
The Two.
On your left and on your right
In the day and in the night,
We are watching you.

Internalised within the war culture still operative as a secret state of emergency in the postwar, and working away in the citizen-unconscious as a militarised translation of Oedipal subjection to the parental gaze, the Two signify the left and right wing versions of war ideology, revolutionary and totalitarian, set up as uncanny control systems within the mind. The war paranoia that was such a feature of the years 1916–18 beats on now as prophetic voice, both at the level of the Leader and resistance fighter, and as the choric voice of inward anxiety about the impending Second World War: ‘The sky is darkening like a stain, / Something is going to fall like rain / And it won’t be flowers.’

The split-self war anxiety analysed by Graves, Lewis, and Auden coloured not only retrospective accounts of the war, but also the manner in which military conflict was represented in the interwar. The retrospective narratives summoned the ghosts of the war years in order to speak of the unacknowledged power of the technological vortex internalised within the mind as political Id. McKechnie goes mad under barrage in *No More Parades* and ‘argued with himself, taking both sides in an extraordinarily rapid gabble’, and that deranged inward argument is played out in Tietjens’ self-wounding shell-shocked monologues. Here he is split into brain and panic, with panic taking over cognitive experience with its frightening surrealist film turning into a cartoon nightmare of the whole world, blurred by the blood of trauma:

Panic came over Tietjens. He knew it would be his last panic of that interview. No brain could stand more. Fragments of scenes of fighting, voices, names, went before his eyes and ears. Elaborate problems ... The whole map of the embattled world ran out in front of him – as large as a field ... with the blood of O Nine Morgan blurring luminously over it.
Septimus in *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) is drawn to the wound by uncanny detail, as if the panic within were a crazy artist at melodramatically obscene work: ‘And there the motor car stood, with drawn blinds, and upon them a curious pattern like a tree, Septimus thought, and this gradual drawing together of everything to one centre before his eyes, as if some horror had come almost to the surface and was about to burst into flames, terrified him.’

That near surfacing of the war’s vortex runs through David Jones’s *In Parenthesis* (1937), as the narrative retrospect recreates the vulnerability of human flesh to the lethal war machine. Private John Ball senses, with minute anxiety, the oncoming shell: ‘an on-rushing pervasion, saturating all existence; with exactitude, logarithmic, dial-timed, millesimal’. Here Jones not only narrates wartime expectation of death, but the pervasiveness of war technology in the postwar imaginary, ‘a stillness charged through with some approaching violence’, another fierce vortex, targeting each and every one: ‘He stood alone on the stones, his mess-tin spilled at his feet. Out of the vortex, rifling the air it came – bright, brass-shod, Pandoran; with all-filling screaming howling crescendo’s up-piling snapt.’ The Pandoran release of evil knowledge accompanies the rifling shell, and creates an epic and world-shattering event: ‘the pent violence released a consummation of all burstings out . . . the dissolving and splitting of solid things’. Underscoring the aftershock in the postwar, Jones names it an ‘unearthing aftermath’. The earth itself as solid ground of reality is decreated, as the vortex rifles through the postwar aftermath to the now of reading, sundering the mind, leaving the body bereft: ‘[he] stood fixed and alone in the little yard – his senses highly alert, his body incapable of movement of response’.

When writers turned to the violence of the wars of the interwar, the vortex could be registered again at its ego-splitting work. In Ireland, wracked by the War of Independence and the Civil War, war within the emergent nation created a strange literature of witness split by contending claims. In the short stories of Frank O’Connor and Seán Ó Faoláin, the split in identity is figured in the trope of two men on the run in the countryside. In O’Connor’s ‘September
Dawn’, two republicans on the run from the British, Keown and Hickey, act out the division, and in Ó Faoláin’s ‘Fugue’, two men, again on the run, are reduced to one when Rory is shot by the Black and Tans; but the split persists, between the solitary imagination hunted by enemy and the unreadable landscape of the nation at war with itself. The memory of this psychic ‘civil war’, turning Irish landscape into war zone, both hostile enemy’s country and loving patriotic refuge, ripples through to Beckett’s tales of tramp pseudo-selves. The civil war split occupies Beckett’s writing in obscurer ways too. Reviewing Denis Devlin’s poetry collection, Intercessions, in 1937, Beckett notes the lines from ‘Est Prodest’:

Frightened antinomies!
I have wiped examples from mirrors
My mirror’s face and I
Are like no god and me
My death is my life’s plumed gnomon.

He remarks: ‘This is the type, the identity made up of catexes not only multivalent but interchangeable, the “multiplicate netting / Of lives distinct and wrangling / Each knot all other’s potential”’. Devlin’s religious poem about the mirroring of God and human subject also explores the ways bodies are intricately interlinked with all others as fish in a net, as in a claustrophobic psychic civil war.

Disguised within all post-Civil War writing in Ireland is the self-destructive urge Yeats saw running through all history: the gyre spiralling in and out from acts of blood-letting, a sequence of interfamilial murders of like selves. His play Purgatory (1938) stages patricidal father killing his own son within sight of the destroyed Big House haunted by the aisling ghost of mother Ireland (who also inhabits the symbolic tree at the back of the stage). It was a play that was to inspire Eliot’s encounter with the ghost of Yeats in ‘Little Gidding’, just as it was to inspire Beckett after the Second World War, with the barren tree and the two suicidal men of Waiting for Godot. The cycle of destruction speaks in Yeats’s play of the emptily purgatorial sequence of wars, from 1916 through the War of Independence to the Civil War, that put an end to the Ascendancy
dream of Anglo-Irish nationalism. For Eliot and Beckett, the play foretold the need (necessary for Eliot, impossible for Beckett) to redeem the purgatorial sacrifice of lives in the Second World War.

The frightened antinomies generated by the looking-glass war in the mind haunt the poetry of the Spanish Civil War too. Jack Lyndsay’s call to arms, ‘On Guard for Spain!’ (Left Review, March 1937), tries to break through the screen created by atomising class exploitation:

    Men and women, come out of the numbered cells
    Of harsh privation, mockingly called your homes,
    Break through the deadening screen with your clenched fists,
    ... and you will hear the guns in Spain

The walls of the bourgeois home imprison the workers within zones of poverty which separate and divide the people from themselves and from their fellow workers at war abroad. But calling the house wall a ‘screen’ suggests a surface that both conceals, as in ‘screens off’, and which falsely communicates, as in cinema screen. The screen disguises resemblances at the same time as it posits the fake potential of those resemblances: only by mimicking war’s violences (bringing down the walls of the houses as through bombardment) and only by destroying the news media that control all representations of international politics can the working class identify with its shadow souls at war in Spain.

Juxtaposed in Valentine Cunningham’s Penguin Book of Spanish Civil War Verse are Stephen Spender’s review of Picasso’s Guernica and an ekphrastic poem by J. F. Hendry, both responding to the painting when seen in Whitechapel in 1938 – Roland Penrose had brought the painting to Britain to raise funds for the Republicans. For Spender, Picasso has painted not the event but the newspaper report of bombing (‘a picture of horror reported in the newspapers’). It is, therefore, an activist painting based on second-hand experience. For Spender, this distance from the event is not necessarily disabling: ‘the many people who are not in direct contact with the disasters falling on civilization live in a waking nightmare of second-hand experiences which in a way are more terrible than real experiences because the
person overtaken by a disaster has at least a more limited vision than the camera’s wide, cold, recording eye.¹⁸ For Hendry, however, Picasso has painted a still photograph transformed by the affect it must release in humanitarian hearts. The dead and screaming victims of the fascist air raid are radically fixed by war’s killing moment: ‘Frozen in the fright of light chilled skull and spine / Droop bone-shriek-splinters sharper than the Bren’, Hendry writes.¹⁹ The photographer’s flash of light is identical to the flash of the bomb blast as it annihilates. What is frozen in time are war’s chilling effects: the lethal cold brutality of the murderous act of violence. Light has ‘chilled’ skull and spine (as in ‘light chilled’), as though the blast of light were both lethal X-ray and flash-freezing refrigerant. The camera’s cold, recording eye chillingly embalms what it witnesses. At the same time the rhythm and passion of the line speaks to anti-fascist outrage at war as murder of civilians that is ‘sharper than the Bren’.

Experience of the war in Spain sharpened Popular Front reactions to war as an agent of revolutionary, anti-fascist struggle; this is what motivated Auden and Isherwood when they travelled to China to report on the Sino-Japanese war, and to register the chances of a communist revolution triggered by that war (as the First World War triggered the revolution in Russia). Isherwood’s account of the trip is nevertheless characterised by a sleepy Englishness unable quite to wake up to the reality of the war as blasting event. In Canton, taking tea with a missionary host and hostess, Isherwood uneasily listens to an air raid across the river and tries to integrate the contradictions of the experience:

It was all very well for Auden to sit there so calmly, arguing about the Group Movement. He had been in Spain. My eyes moved over this charming room, taking in the tea-cups, the dish of scones, the bookcase with Chesterton’s essays and Kipling’s poems, the framed photograph of an Oxford college. My brain tried to relate these images to the sounds outside: the whine of the power-diving bomber, the distant thump of the explosions. Understand, I told myself, that those noises, these objects are part of a single, integrated scene. Wake up. It’s real. And, at that moment, I really did wake up. And that moment, suddenly, I arrived in China.²⁰
In the aftermath of the failure of the Republican cause in Spain, writers began to record the spiritual drift into neurotic waiting-game consonant with the uneasy and complicit years of appeasement. Mass Observation, set up in 1937 by Charles Madge and Tom Harrisson as a left-wing sociological experiment to record popular opinion, especially in the working-class northern towns, registered the ambiguous, self-destructive, and blinkered fear of a future war that characterised the Munich crisis. The fear was a resuscitation of the war experience of the First World War, the past war leading to a ‘collapse of belief in any future’ under the present crisis, according to Madge and Harrisson. They quote a wife and mother, 42: ‘I have been collecting poisons for some time with guile and cunning. I have sufficient to give self, husband and children a lethal dose. I can remember the last war. I don’t want to live through another, or the children either. I shan’t tell them, I shall just do it.’

This suicidal impulse is simultaneously a blanketing off of the impending war, as we can see in a comparable move in the Paris journal of the young and naive David Gascoyne. As a surrealist, war was always already a psychoanalytic category, symptom writ large of mental conflict following the illogic of Salvador Dali’s paranoiac critical method. As he walks the streets of Paris in August and September 1939, Gascoyne ponders ‘the mental and spiritual war that had been going on inside me for weeks and months – perhaps years?’, and relates this to a general schizophrenia across Europe: ‘“schizophrenia” is one of the fundamental hallmarks of everything important that is happening in the modern exterior world’. The rhyme between the inner split and the European crisis leads to two contradictory impulses: believing in himself as a prophet, leading war-torn populations towards spiritual renascence, and a death-wish drift towards immobility: ‘Altogether, what with all this inward turmoil, and the “nerve-war” crisis that the newspapers are full of, and the thundery weather, I shall probably be left quite prostate soon.’

With the war underway, modernist writers felt the rival sleep-walking and prophetic impulses sway under the influence of the rising tide of propaganda, the communal and communitarian
hopes generated by war socialism. I will concentrate on the New Romanticism of the war years because it was wartime surrealism which most clearly demarcated the split drives of the imagination in wartime. In his 1941 collection, *The Father Found*, Charles Madge ponders the ‘metaphoric double’ generated by war’s mediatised dreamwork. The double appears as a mermaid, creature of the watery unconscious, curiously ambivalent: ‘The glass entanglement of flowery hair / Deceives a plane.’ The ‘plane’ could be a surface, or it could be an aircraft: the entanglement of meanings is about the ways technology in wartime will always be coloured by deception operations, camouflage effects, fears that the natural might be a cover for war’s *techne*. The mermaid is deceptively televisual, both in the sense that her image carries across space into the mind, and as an object of desire screened on TV: ‘Not less perfect was, / They say, a face once found in television’. Something about wartime, for Madge, is televisually matching mass marketing of desire and the news of the war on its way, creating for the first time a global audience out of the World War’s spectators: ‘our new ray / Hits heaven’s ceiling and reduplicates / / On screens in New York Paris the same day / Bright-eyed, and dressed in new clothes, while war news / Sharpens the orchestral irony of play’. The new ray is the mermaid screen goddess at the same time as it is television itself: feeding off the allure of war news to create a ‘glass entanglement’ of minds split between mediatised consumer desire and propagandised citizenship in wartime.

War visuality, for Madge, entangles the deep dreaming mind and public war operations. In ‘Binocular Vision’, he reprises Lewis’s sense of the militarised imagination, discovering the ‘glimmering duplicate’ not in the imagination’s replica of objects in the world, but in the war’s doubling of the body of flesh with the war machine; the erotic body is ghosted by the armoured body within:

The robe falls down, stained with some flower,
Turns to powder, cannot hide
The tremendous body inside
Of steel, machine, the ruling power.
The wartime mind is, for Madge, asleep in two realms: ‘our suspension in this deep’ signals both the deep unconscious of the trancelike state that Graves saw as poetry’s origin, and the deep wartime of steel, machine, and ruling power.24

Lynette Roberts worked on an extraordinary homefront document, the long poem Gods with Stainless Ears: A Heroic Poem, written between 1941 and 1943. In the preface she speaks of the mediatised imagination as compositional fact: ‘the scenes and visions ran before me like a newsreel . . . the poem was written for filming’. The thick textures of her style speak to the ways language is both a medium for the projection of images and a disruptive screen, publically/privately self-referential. The compositional framing of experience, however, is not so much hers as a function of the shaping rationality of war culture:

In Euclidian cubes grid air is planed.
Propellers scudding up grit and kerosene, braid
Hulls waled 5 miles hollow, spidering each man stark
On steelweb, hammering in rivets ambuscade
Interrupted by sirens screaming tirade (Part I)

The war industries and technologies parcel out time and space and bodies within a total ‘steelweb’ of relations that pollutes, victimises, and enslaves all, including the ‘air’ of the poem. The war is turning Wales into another nation, as a function of the war machine (‘Hulls waled . . . ’), and as dragon raised by British propaganda – a woodpecker-machine-gun hybrid:

O the cut of it, woe sharp on the day
Scaled in blood, the ten-toed woodpecker,
A dragon of wings 1 6 2 o B 6
4 punctuates machine-gun from the quarry-pits25 (Part I)

The cut and woe of it lies in the fabrication of the new Wales as war creature, scaled in blood, rationalised into source of war matériel: and this death-machine infects the poeisis too, the ‘ten-toed’ punctuating rhythm hidden within the loose lines.

The anarchic first four parts of the poem track the years 1939–41, and then, with the entry of the Soviet Union into the war, and the growing knowledge that the war could be won, the narrator and her
gunner lover rise in apotheosis above the war machine into ecstatic communal vision and love. They fall to earth, though, under war’s compulsions, and the airy fantasy is replaced by the grimmer vision of a crashed war machine: the gunner goes mad, and she is left alone. As they fall, they cease to become birds and become subject to the technological gaze again: ‘Earthwards like arctic terns the spangled / Mirrors still on our wings. Colder. Continuous as newsreel, / Quadrillion cells spotting the air, stinging / The face like a swarm of bees’ (Part V).Something of the mirroring split between progressive and dystopian visions of war culture is intimated here with the mirrors on the wings – there is resemblance between the fallen hopes of the war-socialist dreamers and the ways the war machine targets and brings down its enemy. There is a sensing of the ways bodies are ‘planed’ within the war’s ‘Euclidian cubes’: Roberts feels those gridlines rushing by on the skin, and intuits the relations as a material newsreel, representational steelweb of the war.

J. F. Hendry in 1945 reflected on war in his time, and saw ‘two camps in the present war’, conservative and progressive, with social myth replacing reality in both cases. War and revolution are both, he argues, ‘the expression in violence of the individual or social “subconscious”’. Yet neither view takes into account this real war, the ‘inner war’ based on the ‘primary division’ within the mind. For Hendry, it would be a mistake to see a straight distinction between ‘a divided and fissured psyche’ and war as ‘mass hypnosis’. Instead, war invites us to identify ourselves with our weapons and turn ourselves into ‘object-mechanisms’, and it is this which divides. To resist the ‘kind of poisoning . . . set up in us by these same object-mechanisms’ is to see the sacrificial logic running relations between object-mechanisms and minds during wartime. Christ at the Last Supper offered wine as blood and bread as flesh because he knew his disciples would ‘gape like a crowd in a circus’ at his sacrifice, and that they would carry out the communion ceremony like pathetic puppets in a kind of compulsion neurosis which would not cease until they understood the horror of it; still killing others, daily shedding blood and breaking bread and bones and bodies directly and indirectly, only to be recalled
annually to the flesh that is eternally murdered, a recall to pity, an emotion, a terrible satire: the eternal crucifixion: WAR. Our own Last Supper.27

Modernism was continually haunted by war from the time it had to deal with the First World War as aftermath shadow in the political unconscious, through to the years minds prepared themselves for the sacrificial war machine of the Second World War. That war revealed the sacrificial logic to the surrealist wing most keenly of all, for they felt the recall to pity, emotion, terrible satire deep in the steelweb of the war-imagination, and registered the ways the mind (split between the compulsion neurosis scripted by the war machine and the need to transcend the object-mechanism) suffered at the crossing point between the two. At best, the writers, seeking some therapeutic vision for art beyond object-mechanical acts of witness, slipped the steel net, by way of emotion and satire, self-watchful guile, and cunning.

Notes

5. Graves, ‘A Letter from Wales (Richard Rolls to his friend, Captain Abel Wright)’ (from *Welchman’s Hose* (1925)), *Common Asphodel*, 236.
7. Wyndham Lewis, *Collected Poems and Plays*, ed. Alan Munton (Manchester: Carcanet, 1979), 185; the earlier version of the play was published in *Blast*, 1 (June 1914).
11. Ibid., 39, 50, 75.
24. Ibid., 67, 69.
26. Ibid., 68.
Chapter 21

Stony Limits: Modernist Peripheries

Eric Falci

One of Hugh MacDiarmid’s more unworkable fantasies, and one that caught the eye of the British security services, was the creation of a Celtic communist bloc in the British Isles. Matthew Hart calls it MacDiarmid’s ‘dream of a Union of Celtic Socialist Republics that would link Scotland, Ireland, Wales, and Cornwall in revolutionary opposition to London’.1 Unfeasible as a political possibility, MacDiarmid’s yoking of the Celtic periphery into a configuration that simultaneously leveraged his internationally minded Marxist-Leninism and a Scottish nationalism fed by his core-deep anglophobia remains a tantalising speculative thought. Of course, it disregards the discrete political realities in these countries: the conservative Catholicism of the post-independence Irish Free State and Republic; the less politicised forms that Welsh nationalism took and the lack of a strong independence movement there throughout much of the twentieth century; the internal asymmetries between the anglicised lowlands in Scotland and the Gaelic Highlands; and the regional distinctions within England itself. However little impact MacDiarmid’s dream of Celtic socialism had in Britain, it can perhaps provide a figure (an admittedly overly loaded one) for the range of poetry to be covered in this chapter. Without arguing for a unified body of Celtic modernist poetry, I will suggest that a rich cache of late modernist British and Irish poems in English catalyse themselves by incorporating Celtic or Gaelic materials (however strangely) into their reinventions of high modernist forms, and that providing a much thicker description of this work is crucial for the larger story of modernist anglophone poetry.
I describe this as late modernist poetry for several reasons. The period at hand is bookended by MacDiarmid’s *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* (1926) and Basil Bunting’s *Briggflatts* (1966), and much of it quite consciously depends upon (if often as foil) the high modernist work of W. B. Yeats, T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, and Ezra Pound. In addition, this work occurs in the wake of – both afterwards and as a counterformation to – the central Gaelic cultural movement in the twentieth century, the Irish Literary Revival. Its lateness is multiply embedded. In *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Fredric Jameson adapts Charles Jencks’s concept of ‘late modernism’ and differentiates Jenck’s architecturally driven account from how such a concept would look in a ‘literary frame of reference’. Such a transference, according to Jameson, ‘throws up names like Borges and Nabokov, Beckett, poets like Olson or Zukovsky’, who ‘had the misfortune to span two eras and the luck to find a time capsule of isolation or exile in which to spin out unseasonable forms’. Tyrus Miller, picking up on Jameson’s riveting phrase, describes late modernist texts as ‘unlikely phenomena’ that ‘represent breaking points, points of nonsynchronism, in the broad narrative of twentieth-century cultural history’. Unseasonable poems are almost by their nature ‘unlikely phenomena’, and the late modernist texts in which I’m most interested are unseasonable both contextually and intrinsically. They arrive in the world out of time or in the wrong place, some material or stylistic factor marking their unfitnessingness. They are also unseasonable in that they take up some of the central methods of modernist poetics a bit late. We might say that Eliot’s poetry of the 1910s and ’20s – and *The Waste Land* especially – is unseasonal. It pulls radically away from a romantic notion of any sort of symbiosis between poet and place or between the individual and the culture. Its disassociated sensibility offers a series of alienated fragments, of unshored ruins. We might also say that Yeats’s poetry is seasoned: the ‘filthy modern tide’ is kept at bay by being preserved in form. As he famously writes in ‘A General Introduction for my Work’, ‘Ancient salt is best packing.’ If the work of the two great high
modernist poets in English can be said to be unseasonal or seasoned, then perhaps we get a better sense about how to activate the Jamesonian notion of unseasonableness.

Unseasonable poems are out of sync with themselves, carrying themes or ideological materials that belie their formal innovations, or manifesting a constitutive discrepancy between their form and their content, as in the case of David Jones’s *The Anathemata*. They might be generically unstable: too short to be talked about as long poems, too long to be read as lyrics, they resemble the mixed forms that C. D. Blanton and Nigel Alderman have designated ‘pocket epics’. They can be poems that are anomalous compared to those around them – the one-off gem that remains oddly unassimilable, or the poem that encloses a line or phrase that stays unaccountable and upsets the form in which it sits, as in the poems by MacDiarmid and Thomas MacGreevy examined below. They are poems vexed by themselves, and I will show that their different styles of self-vexing are quite often spurred by the introduction of what we might call a Gaelic figure or a Celtic turn. In this way, a poem’s unseasonability emerges most decisively in moments when it takes up a Celtic-peripheral perspective.

For MacDiarmid, the ‘Gaelic Idea’ triangulates his Scottish nationalism and his socialism. Although not the primary ideological commitment for this writer of intense commitments, MacDiarmid’s ‘Gaelic Idea’ does play a key role in his writings, especially in the 1930s. The works for which Christopher Murray Grieve is most famous – the synthetic Scots poetry that he wrote in the 1920s once he had adopted the poetic pseudonym Hugh MacDiarmid – are the central literary monuments of the Scottish Renaissance, and MacDiarmid’s primary allegiance in them is to Scotland. After two volumes of mainly short lyrics in Scots – *Sangschaw* (1925) and *Penny Wheep* (1926) – MacDiarmid published what is universally thought to be his masterpiece, *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* (1926), an almost 2,700-line riotous monologue that occurs after a long night at the pub as the speaker finds himself sprawled out somewhere under the moon and beside a thistle. As though to mimic the speaker’s ‘dreidfu’ state’, who nonetheless begins by
explaining that he’s more sleepy than loaded – ‘I amna’ fou’ sae muckle as tired – deid dune’ – the poem is an omnibus that lurches from mode to mode. It shifts registers ceaselessly, encompassing the demotic, the satiric, the topical, the philosophical, the visionary, the baldly nationalistic, and the fiercely individualistic. It contains a handful of translations of poems done into Scots and absorbed into the enveloping soliloquy of the drunk man, who variously adopts Dante, Nietzsche, and Dostoyevsky as guides and interlocutors. It has in its sights not only the Scottish literary tradition of Burns and Dunbar, but also recent modernist works, especially Eliot’s *The Waste Land*:

T.S. Eliot – it’s a Scottish name –
Afore he wrote ‘The Waste Land’ s’ud ha’e come
To Scotland here. He wad ha’e written
A better poem syne – like this, by gum!

Despite its sybaritic zigzagging, the poem’s central features – the speaker’s focalising address, the constant and constantly metamorphosing symbolic presence of the thistle, and the consistency of the synthetic Scots texture – give it a formal unity that MacDiarmid never again achieved in a long poem. This is bolstered by the speaker’s single-minded focus on Scotland, as the spiky symbol of the nation remains always in view, even when it stands for loss or stagnation: ‘The Earth’s my mastless samyn, / The thistle my ruined sail’.9

His move from Montrose, where he lived throughout much of the 1920s, to a small cottage in Whalsey in the Shetlands, where he lived from the early 1930s to the early 1940s, coincided with his move away from an exclusively Scots poetry, and also with an increased interest in his ‘Gaelic Idea’ as an adjunct to his nationalism. His follow up to *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* – an even longer poem in Scots titled *To Circumjack Cencrastus* (1930) – includes a central speaker still driven primarily by Scottish nationalism, but throughout there is a much wider consideration of Gaelic culture – mainly, for now, Irish and Scottish – as a necessary foil not only to ‘English ascendancy’ but also to what he calls the ‘Russian Idea’:
If we turn to Europe and see
Hoo the emergence o’ the Russian Idea’s
Broken the balance o’ the North and Sooth
And needs a coounter that can only be
The Gaelic Idea
To mak’ a parallelogram o’ forces,
    Complete the Defence o’ the West,
And the end of the English betrayal o’ Europe.
    (Time eneuch then to seek the Omnisific Word
    In Jamieson yet.
Or the new Dictionary in the makin’ noo,
    Or coin it oorsels!)\(^{10}\)

This description of the ‘Gaelic Idea’ suddenly gives way to a sketch of the sort of dictionary raiding that sources MacDiarmid’s synthetic Scots lexis, and this quick shift typifies the poem’s modus operandi. Its central symbol – the ‘cencrastus’ or ‘curly snake’ – doesn’t have the thistle’s centripetal symbolic force (although the speaker of *Drunk Man* does at one point compare the thistle’s ‘widdifow ramel’ – its twisted branches – to a snake (see ll. 2347–52)), and the poem’s long series of chaotic turns models the notion of the ‘Caledonian Antisyzygy’ that is central to MacDiarmid’s vision of Scottish literature.

In ‘The Caledonian Antisyzygy and the Gaelic Idea’ (1931–32), MacDiarmid links Gaelic culture to the concept of the Caledonian antisyzygy, which he borrows from G. Gregory Smith, who in his 1919 volume, *Scottish Literature: Character and Influence*, describes it as a ‘zigzag of contradictions’, ‘a sudden jostling of contraries’ typical of Scottish literature. The ‘Gaelic Idea’ extends the principle of Scottish antisyzygy into the Celtic world more generally, positioning it as a necessary foil not only to English ascendency, but also to the ‘Russian Idea’, which, unlike the ‘Gaelic Idea’, denies ‘that relationship between freedom and genius, between freedom and thought’.\(^{11}\) But linking the ‘Gaelic Idea’ to the ‘Caledonian Antisyzygy’ also has significant consequences, mainly for his construal of actually existing ‘Gaelic’ places, and for his ability to harness his notion of Gaelic unity to mediate between his Scottish nationalism and his socialism.
In the essay, he detaches the ‘Gaelic Idea’ from anything to do with politics or culture in Celtic countries and regions: it is merely ‘an intellectual conception’. MacDiarmid writes: ‘It would not matter so far as positing it is concerned whether there had never been any Gaelic language or literature, not to mention clans and tartans, at all. . . . [F]rom the point of view of the Gaelic Idea, knowledge of, or indeed even the existence of, Gaelic is immaterial.’\textsuperscript{12} The ‘Gaelic Idea’ becomes an unmoored abstraction used to extend his Scottish nationalism and to reframe his anti-Englishness. This becomes even clearer in another key essay of the period, ‘English Ascendancy in British Literature’:

\begin{quote}
Few literatures offer within themselves so rich a range of alternative values, of material for comparative criticism, as does, not English, but British . . . which includes not only English (and English dialect) literature, but the Gaelic and Scots Vernacular literatures as well. This can be seen at a glance. To institute certain comparisons in English literature one has to compare the present with the past. But if one takes in Gaelic literature, the ancient technique, even the tone, is practically unchanged; the comparison is with the changed English present and the unchanged Gaelic present. The point need not be pursued.\textsuperscript{13}
\end{quote}

Although MacDiarmid generally distinguishes his ‘Gaelic Idea’ from the Celtic Twilight, which he sees as an initially necessary but ultimately ‘phoney’ method of getting ‘even a modicum of Gaelic culture across in an overwhelmingly hostile environment’, here he repeats a feature of Celtic Twilight discourse.\textsuperscript{14} Even as he argues for a broader sense of ‘British literature’, he places the Gaelic literature that he privileges as a repository of ‘alternative values’ in a retrograde position compared to the English literature that is the object of his critique. Gaelic literature is unchanging and ancient, while English literature is implicitly the dynamic half of the binary. MacDiarmid means this to be a criticism of English literature – its changeability is not good. But in doing so he forces Gaelic literature to exist almost entirely as a form of the past. Even the ‘Gaelic present’ is past, unchanged from what it had always been. The potential force of the ‘Gaelic Idea’ is cut off, relegated to a space of static antiquity. This reiterates a central tendency of colonialist
discourse, banishing the cultural particularity of the colonised space into the past, where it can be neutralised and safely ignored by the imperial hegemon. MacDiarmid clearly doesn’t mean to repeat this pattern, and the bald force of his anti-English polemics would never be mistaken for crypto-imperialism, but the slippage indicates just how difficult it was for MacDiarmid to articulate a Gaelic vision without slipping into stereotypical grooves that return to the problematic terms of the Celtic Twilight.

Such ideas appear differently in MacDiarmid’s poetry, as in this moment of deep essentialism in his lengthy ‘vision of world language’, *In Memoriam James Joyce* (1955):

> Ah, in the Gaelic countries still – in Ireland
> And Scotland and Wales – the poor man
> Is seldom poor in spirit or address. 

More often, a celebration of ‘Gaeldom’ becomes the basis for a critique of capitalism and a censure of England:

> Cornwall – Gaeldom – must stand for the ending
> Of the essential immorality of any many controlling
> Any other – for the ending of all Government
> Since all Government is a monopoly of violence;
> For the striking of this water out of the rock of Capitalism

Forcing Cornwall to stand as (‘to stand for’) a metonym of Gaeldom is precisely the kind of conflation that MacDiarmid so often rails against when the operative units are Scotland, England, and Britain. Of course, this might all be over-reading, or foolishly demanding a conceptual consistency that the antisyzygous MacDiarmid has told us we won’t get. In addition, making claims about isolated moments in the mass of poetry he produced in the 1930s in the Shetlands is perilous. The great bulk of this poetry (which was published in various shapes and sizes over the next several decades of his life) was meant to be a part of a never completed long poem, one that makes even his long Scots poems look reasonably scaled. *In Memoriam James Joyce*, itself over 5,000 lines, was imagined to be part of a much larger work, *A Mature Art*, projected to be a 20,000-line poem. This 20,000-line
poem was meant to stand as the first section of the much, much longer *Cornish Heroic Song for Valda Trevlyn*. Reading individual poems or passages that have been culled from this material becomes even more tenuous when one considers that much of it evinces MacDiarmid’s aim for what he called ‘a poetry of fact’ whose central compositional method is the arranging of unmarked quotations of others’ prose into lines of unmetered poetry. Whether one describes these excessive centos as acts of plagiarism or, as Robert Crawford does, as proto-conceptual writing that predicts the kind of poetic data mining emblematic of our own moment, it becomes exceedingly tricky to use this work as the basis for a claim about MacDiarmid.\(^{17}\)

And the simpler truth of these discursive slips might be that any investment MacDiarmid makes in notions of Gaelic unity is always secondary to his investment in Scottish nationalism. Even so, considering his ongoing interest in what he calls in the title of a 1953 essay a ‘Celtic Front’, it seems crucial to register the kinds of slips that do occur.\(^{18}\) In the brief postwar text ‘*A Vision of Scotland*’, MacDiarmid’s nationalist vision replays the nation-as-woman trope by envisioning a ‘girl like you’ ‘in the streets of Glasgow or Dundee’ who uncovers her head to reveal ‘authentic flaxen hair’ that is

\[
\text{Fine spun as newly-retted fibres}  \\
\text{On a sunlit Irish bleaching field.}\(^{19}\)
\]

That MacDiarmid’s ‘Vision of Scotland’ here – however tired its central trope – ends in an Irish field seems worth noting. This slip across the Irish Sea signals both MacDiarmid’s attempt to yoke his nationalism to a wider Celtic field, and the kinds of snags and displacements inherent in such an attempt.

MacDiarmid both drew on and disavowed the Irish Literary Revival in his formulation of the Scottish Renaissance. He read Yeats closely and Yeats included MacDiarmid’s work in his idiosyncratic anthology, *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse* (1936).\(^{20}\) At the same time, he found it useful to downplay the connection between features of the Irish Revival and his own attempts to spur Scottish culture into life: ‘This Gaelic Idea has nothing in common with the
activities of An Comunn Gaidhealach, no relationship whatsoever with the Celtic Twilight. In the 1930s, ’40s, and into the ’50s, Irish poets too sought to distance themselves from the myths and mists of the Celtic Twilight, which were also attempts to get out from under the shadow of Yeats. For Austin Clarke, this distancing took the form of an eschewal of the Irish themes and myths that dominated his early work. For Patrick Kavanagh, this meant ignoring such Yeatsian-inflected materials so as to focus on local realities and so actively demythologise the myths of the Irish rural peasantry, as in The Great Hunger (1942). Both poets were based in Dublin for much of their lives, and their attentions – by turns bitingly satiric and stunningly lyric – were usually trained on Ireland’s own ‘local row[s]’. That they spent much of their careers in an Ireland in which it was a bad time to be a poet suggests unseasonability of a different kind, and Irish poetry in the middle decades of the century consists largely of poetic careers that were gapped or curtailed.

Often the result of unpropitious economic conditions or biographical circumstances, the erratic careers of many mid-century Irish poets were not simply due to an inability to get around the imposing edifice of Yeats’s Collected Poems. Denis Devlin, for instance, spent much of his career overseas as a diplomat in the Irish Department of External Affairs, and he devoted much more of his writing time translating French poetry and drawing on continental and American models than he did learning or repelling the Yeatsian trade. Admired by the New Critics, Devlin’s ornately rhetorical, densely wrought poems are much more likely to take place in Europe or the United States, or to be set in some abstract syntactical space, than to be concerned with matters in the Gaelic regions of the British Isles, even as his most well-known poem, ‘Lough Derg’ (1942), sets itself in the far north-west corner of Ireland in order to cast a sceptical eye on the pilgrims doing the stations at the supposed site of Saint Patrick’s descent to Purgatory, and so to launch a complex theological critique of Catholicism and of Ireland’s passivity during the Second World War.

Along with Samuel Beckett, Brian Coffey, and Thomas MacGreevy, Devlin is one of a very small group of Irish modernist
poets who began publishing in the 1930s. MacGreevy, in particular, is almost a prototype of the kind of unseasonable figure that I’ve been tracking. Part of the circle around Joyce in Paris in the late 1920s and early 1930s, an early and long friend of Beckett (he introduced Beckett to Joyce), the author of the first monograph on Eliot (in 1931), which praises Eliot as a Christian poet even as it criticises his most Christian work up to that point (*Ash-Wednesday*), a soldier who fought at the Somme, an Irish nationalist whose book on Jack Yeats praised him as the first great national painter in Ireland (which annoyed Beckett immensely), and a poet whose only volume, the 1934 *Poems*, was published in both London and New York – MacGreevy is an interesting case in nearly every way. J. C. C. Mays summarises McGreevy’s complex position: ‘This ex-British officer was a republican, this devout Catholic attended Trinity College and was the trusted friend of the agnostic Jack Yeats. This modernist was consciously a nationalist.’

He spent much of the 1930s in London, working as an art critic, lecturer, and translator, and after the Blitz he returned to Dublin where he began writing for Catholic journals and rose to prominence in the Irish art world, serving as the art critic for the *Irish Times* from 1941 to 1944 and the Director of the National Gallery of Ireland from 1950 to 1963. After his 1934 volume, he essentially stopped writing poetry, publishing only four poems for the rest of his life.

Two of the four poems that MacGreevy did publish after 1934 appear together in the November 1961 issue of *Poetry*: ‘Moments Musicaux’ and ‘Breton Oracles’. Both reference the poet’s long silence, and ‘Moments Musicaux’ in particular indicates a return of the muse, even if it doesn’t move much past its initial refrain, ‘You thought she had left you alone’. ‘Breton Oracles’ is more intriguing. The first section confirms MacGreevy’s faith, and somewhat strangely ties his Christianity to the slight return of his poetic gift: the invoked female figure (‘She of the Second Gift’) is both Christian (Mary) and pagan (‘Pythia’), and Brittany becomes a Celtic-Christian substitute for Delphi. The next three sections detail a tourist’s route through Brittany. The speaker, who declares, ‘I am of Ireland’ – alluding to a Middle English lyric that was adapted by
Yeats in ‘Words for Music Perhaps’ – first finds ‘Brittany of the tender legends’ and experiences something like a Celtic epiphany. He then travels along the northern coast, thinking about the recent war’s many dead. This produces a moment of spiritual darkness that is relieved by the speaker’s arrival at Guimiliau, a parish cemetery that contains a large granite Calvary, which turns the speaker’s thoughts back to Christ and the resurrection. The final section begins again with spiritual doubt, which is again relieved by the presence of the other – the ‘you’ who is muse and oracle, Christ, Mary, and Pythia together.  

For the most part, the poem is quite straightforward: a tour through Brittany becomes a journey of the spirit, and MacGreevy’s speaker balances several different kinds of commitment – to Ireland, to a broader Celtic cultural sphere, to Greek myth and religion, and to Christ – without unmooring the poem. These attachments become embedded within the ‘you’ who is addressed with increasing frequency as the poem nears its conclusion, and it seems to be headed for a moment of spiritual plentitude. The final stanza begins to thicken this moment, colouring in the scene:

You were there;  
And, in the half-light,  
The dark green, touched with gold,  
Of dream leaves;  
The light green, touched with gold,  
Of clusters of grapes.

Just as the poem begins to still itself and find solace, the final image wrenches it away:

And, crouching at the foot of a renaissance wall,  
A little cupid, in whitening stone,  
Weeping over a lost poetry.  

This is poignant and certainly indicative of MacGreevy’s own ‘loss’ of poetry, but it is also somewhat strange. Throughout, the poem is very careful to station its images so that they correspond to moments in the speaker’s spiritual progress, but here the image comes loose from its context. Why does this moment of repletion break down?
The figure weeps for a ‘lost poetry’ at the precise instant when poetic fullness has been achieved. Additionally, the figure itself is ambiguously rendered. Has it always been placed ‘at the foot’ of the wall, or has it been removed to that spot? Are we meant to imagine that the cupid is made of ‘whitening stone?’ Or, does being ‘in whitening stone’ suggest a different sort of artifacture? What kind of stone would be ‘whitening’? The coast is famous for its pink granite: are we meant to bring this knowledge into the poem’s palette of dark green, light green, gold, and white? Do we also, then, take into account the presumed purple of the grapes in order to construct a Catholic colour scheme – the Lenten purple leading to the Paschal gold, white, and green? Are the hues of the Irish tricolor being dispersed among the lines’ images? The disparate symbolic strata cannot cohere, and the image of the well-seasoned stone figure spurs an unseasonable lyric moment. Instead of coalescing into a complex unity, the Catholic, Pagan, Irish, and Celtic strands unravel, and the attempt to posit an instance of cultural and aesthetic affiliation between a speaker who is ‘of Ireland’ (both a Catholic and a nationalist) and a stretch of coast in Northern France rich with Celtic connections founders. To be sure, this foundering is carefully prepared, a staged lyric breakdown rather than a collapse of the lyric stage, but its vexed figuration aligns it with broader trends in late modernist British and Irish poetry.

MacGreevy’s ambivalent straddling of two different regions in order to convey a broader Celtic sphere is, as we saw in MacDiarmid’s ‘A Vision of Scotland’, a common tactic, and it is an aspect of the regionalist bent of many British and Irish writers in the decades after the Second World War. This trend is partly concomitant with decolonisation. As the British Empire attenuates, England can no longer be imagined as the unquestioned imperial and metropolitan centre. This loosens the centre–periphery binary that structured the logic of the empire, and allows regions and spaces made into objects by this imperial logic to reassert their importance, by becoming a subject of the periphery rather than a peripheral object of an imperial, metropolitan subject. Kavanagh gives a memorable expression of this new dispensation in his
distinction between parochialism and provincialism. In one issue of his short-lived periodical, *Kavanagh’s Weekly*, he writes:

The provincial has no mind of his own; he does not trust what his eyes see until he has heard what the metropolis – towards which his eyes are turned – has to say on the subject. . . . The parochial mentality on the other hand is never in any doubt about the social and artistic validity of his parish. All great civilizations are based on parochialism – Greek, Israeliite, English.\(^{27}\)

Without depending too much on the cranky Kavanagh, it is the case that one of the projects of late modernist poetry in Britain was to become parochial: to assert the validity of its particular places, to revalue the peripheral. Much of the intense focus on region and locale in poetry from the 1940s to the 1970s can be thought about in these terms, and, for all of the problems involved with what Seamus Heaney calls ‘bedding the locale / in the utterance’, such attempts were widespread.\(^{28}\)

As Heaney’s quotation suggests, such a revaluation of peripherality is linguistic as well as geographical. One obvious way to approach this aspect of the question – although one that is out of the scope of this essay – would be to consider the upsurge of poetry in Irish, Welsh, and Scottish Gaelic in the 1950s and 1960s. Another way would be to consider the role of Irish, Welsh, or Scottish Gaelic linguistic materials in the work of anglophone poets who mobilise terms like *Celtic* and *Gaelic* for cultural, literary, and political purposes but who also have a much less than straightforward relationship to those languages. Yeats and MacDiarmid certainly fit into this category, but I will turn to David Jones, an Anglo-Welsh poet and artist who spent most of his life in London but whose deeply innovative writings are underwritten by – and torn between – his Catholic faith and his commitment to Welsh cultural ‘deposits’ and the ‘essential Celticity’ of what he repeatedly refers to as ‘this island’.\(^{29}\)

A prominent visual artist throughout his life, Jones took up poetry in his late twenties, after a stint at art school, time at the Western Front as a member of the Royal Welsh Fusiliers, and a conversion to
Catholicism in 1921. While MacDiarmid produced pages seemingly without pause in the 1920s and ’30s, Jones wrote much more slowly — taking ten years to finish *In Parenthesis* (1937), an experimental poem/novel about his experiences in the First World War. His other major book, *The Anathemata* (1952), is a very long poem in eight sections, and draws heavily on Eliotic and Poundian modes. It has a densely allusive texture and symbolic architecture, relies on its own version of the ‘mythical method’, includes copious footnotes that often take up more of a page than the poetry, and incorporates passages from numerous languages, primarily Latin and Welsh. As with all of the poetry he published after *In Parenthesis*, Jones forcefully indicated its unfinished or provisional nature, subtitling it ‘Fragments of an Attempted Writing’.

On many levels, however, it is remarkably unified. It eschews an overarching narrative, but in the preface Jones suggests that ‘the fragments that compose this book are about, or around and about, matters of all sorts which, by a kind of quasi-free association, are apt to stir in my mind at any time and often as not “in the time of the Mass”’. The entire poem ‘takes place’ in the liturgical moment of the Eucharist — an impossibly Aleph-like temporal aperture in which all of the variegated material of the poem appears. Early in the preface he explains, ‘part of my task has been to allow myself to be directed by motifs gathered together from such sources as have by accident been available to me and to make a work out of those mixed data’. The work that he makes is driven by the wish to arrange the deposits that constitute the ‘mixed data’ into a multiform pattern at the centre of which is the Last Supper and the Crucifixion. The deposits that Jones lifts up and makes into signs are the *anathemata*, the ‘devoted things’ from which human culture is made, and the poem is made of these ‘Things set up, lifted up, or in whatever manner made over to the gods’, such that its overall motion resembles a litany of transformative figures or a series of syncretic annals. While continually returning to the touchstones of Christ’s crucifixion and the establishment of the Christian church, Jones moves from the prehistorical world when the earth was shaped by ‘pre-Cambrian oreos-heavers’, through the Mediterranean world of ancient Greece and Rome.
before voyaging to early Britain. The ‘he’ throughout the text is the ‘cult-man’, ‘so late in time, and curiously surviving’, who begins the poem in ‘Pellam’s Land’ and is, at various points, a stand-in for the poet, the priest, Christ, or King Arthur.\textsuperscript{30}

The cultural, mythic, historical, and religious deposits that make up the history of Britain are brought to the surface and made into signs and assemblages. Wales and Welsh culture are loci, as are the many-layered materials surrounding Arthur, but Jones first imagines the prehuman history of Britain, linking what we know as Scotland, Wales, England, and Ireland via the glacial action that produced their contours and shapes, their seas and shores:

Before, trans-Solway
   and from over Manannan’s moroedd, the last debris-freighted floes echeloned solid from Monapia to Ynys Fôn
discharged on Arfon colles
what was cargoed-up on Grampian Mons.
   Off the ‘strath’ into the ystrad
out of the ‘carse’ on to the traeth.
Heaped amorphous
   out of Caledonia
into Cambria
   bound for Snowdonia
transits Cumbria.\textsuperscript{31}

As is apparent here, \textit{The Anathemata} is studded with ‘foreign’ words and phrases and a great deal of it is given over to richly complex acts of naming, passages that cycle through sets of cognates or pseudo-cognates for gods, places, or figures of myth or of ancient and medieval history. Jones recalibrates names – for people, tribes, places, geographical features – so as to sound their resonances and to bring them in concert with one another, with the larger aim of bringing together the Celtic and Mediterranean (especially Roman) worlds as they have shaped British culture. And the primary motive is to bring all of this material into line with the central ‘find’: the birth, death, and resurrection of Christ.

For all of his intertextual and interlinguistic adventures, and for all of his deep investments in Welsh culture, he was adamant about his
inability in Welsh. After describing himself as belonging ‘in part at least, to the Welsh nation’ in the preface to *Epoch and Artist*, his 1959 collection of prose writings, Jones calls himself ‘an English monoglot and a Londoner’. A footnote underscores this statement: ‘I mean this in the literal sense: I have at my command no language but English.’ This has something of a Yeatsian ring to it, in that Yeats effects the same sort of decoupling in ‘A General Introduction for my Work’: ‘Gaelic is my national language, but it is not my mother tongue.’

Such a suturing of language from nation is even more startling in Jones’s case because of the large amount of Welsh language material that this London-born Welshman includes in his poems (he describes his father as ‘wholly a Welshman from Gwyedd-is-Gonwy’ and his mother as ‘English with some Italian blood’). The Welsh ‘deposits’ that Jones includes throughout *The Anathemata* are, of course, linguistic, but they remain stranded within an English-language ground.

Jones has described this conundrum – in which the deposits of a culture’s tradition are ‘in a language which is no longer their language’ – as one that is particularly acute for ‘all for whom the past means a great deal’. Jones’s version of Welsh culture is almost entirely removed from the contemporary world (there are references to the Second World War and some hints of current affairs, but the majority of the poem takes place outside of the present). In one of the best accounts of the poem, Neil Corcoran suggests that ‘Jones wishes to convey precisely this sense of Wales as “oppressed” by, and “oppositional” to, not only a more uniform and imposed colonial or imperial culture . . . but also to a modern civilization in decadence and decay. . . . The Celtic tradition is being celebrated in *The Anathemata* in assertive defiance of cultural uniformity’. The modern world does not source Jones’s work, and the poet’s energies are often set against the ‘megalopolis’ and its ‘filthy modern tide’. At a quite fundamental level, then, Jones’s poem is unseasonable: it is attuned to a ‘culture-phase’ which is not its own. It wants to convey an earlier Celtic-based culture-phase – ‘the deep things of Wales’ – but all that is ‘subtlest and best and most incantational’ about that culture-phase is unavailable to the maker, ‘locked up in the ancient
tongue of Britain’. \(^{37}\) In the preface to *The Anathemata*, Jones wonders if this incommensurability may mark the poem at every level: ‘It may be that the kind of thing I have been trying to make is no longer makeable in the kind of way in which I have tried to make it.’ \(^{38}\)

Among the many difficulties of *The Anathemata* is that an extremely fractured, dispersed, and synthetically associative poetic texture is put into the service of such a conservative world-view. *The Waste Land* shores fragments against its ruins because in the poem’s world-view all is either fragment or ruin. *The Anathemata* is also composed of fragments and ruins, but underlying them is a world-view of spiritual and cultural unity that belies the disjointed textual surface:

The adaptations, the fusions
the transmogrifications
but always
the inward continuities
of the site
of place.

The *anathemata* that make up the poem, though ‘late in time’, are forms ‘indelibly marked by locale and incidence’. \(^{39}\) The complex deposits of ‘this island’ that Jones arranges are underwritten by a desire for cultural continuity that the poem’s basic constructive strategy continually thwarts. \(^{40}\) He ceaselessly juxtaposes and rotates his various finds — single words or phrases, the names of gods, or rivers, or lands, or kings — so as to locate the multiple ways in which they might fit. What is more often produced, however, are stretches of what we might call radical equivalences, as in this passage from ‘Angle-Land’, the brief third section of the poem that describes the arrival of the central figure to a Saxon-dominated Britain:

Past where the ancra-man, deeping his holy rule
in the fiendish marsh
at the *Geisterstunde*
on *Calangaeaf* night
heard the bogle-*baragouinage*.
Crowland-*diawliaidd*
Here the anchorite — *ancra-man* — is Saint Guthlac, who lived on the island of Crowland in the Fens in the late seventh and early eighth centuries. The desire to bring the disparate strata of ‘this island’ into a unity devolves into a devilish space of cultural confusion and linguistic disorder. Roman, Celtic, Saxon, and Germanic deposits collide, forming a ‘bogle-baragouinage’, which René Hague suggests is a possible Breton-derived term meaning ‘goblin-gibberish’.42 Celtic materials appear primarily in the form of isolated words and noun phrases in Welsh that are brought into concert (or disconcert) with cognates and related terms in other languages in an overall English-language text. Like *Finnegans Wake* but on a smaller scale, *The Anathemata* is largely ‘in’ English, even though it features many words and phrases that are not English words. The ‘foreign’ words of the poem stay, I would argue, foreign. Jones’s footnotes provide definitions and pronunciation guides, but the Welsh words remain conspicuous — deposits that have been dug up and separated from the context in which they were found. This suggests both the aim and the horizon of Jones’s project: lifting up the buried deposits of Britain so as to provide evidence from an earlier ‘culture-phase’ in order to enrich the, to his mind, much less stable ‘culture-phase’ of the modern megalopolis is bound to result in an unseasonable form, one that is torn between its intent and its unfolding. As with the other poets I have addressed, this tearing quite often occurs at the precise point where Celtic or Gaelic ‘deposits’ are brought to the surface.

This particular strand of late modernist poetry culminates with Basil Bunting’s *Briggflatts*, the great British long poem of the second half of the twentieth century. While there is not space here for a full examination of *Briggflatts*’s complexities, I would like to conclude by looking at one of its more inscrutable sections, and the one in which Bunting’s inveterate articulation of a distinct Northumbrian cultural tradition is most specifically tied to Celtic materials.43 *Briggflatts* is both deeply modernist and closely tied to the central line of English
poetry: Wordsworth and Pound serve as twinned presiders, with Eliot as a mediating link. It aims to reinvigorate a distinct Northumbrian sphere, but its geographical range stretches far beyond the small patch of ground near the Rawthey River that is its primal space. The final section locates itself among the constellations as it tries to find a time out of time where it can circumvent the pastness of the past (‘Then is Now’). Committed to the act of memory as a shaping force for poetry, but also to poetry’s ability to chisel new forms out of the long gone past, Briggflatts is unseasonable in quite a number of ways — a sui generis interweaving of romanticism and objectivism, a densely compressed ‘pocket epic’.

The first three parts of Briggflatts, which Bunting subtitled ‘An Autobiography’, move from a scene of childhood love in the Northumbrian village of Briggflatts (part one) to a description of a young poet first in London and then sailing to the Mediterranean (part two), and then to a woodman’s dream vision that recounts Alexander the Great’s interview with the angel on a mountaintop in Persia, which Bunting drew from Firdosi’s eleventh-century epic poem, Shahnameh (part three). Halfway through part three, the woodman awakes from his dream vision to the sound of the ‘slowworm’s song’. The slowworm is one of the text’s central motifs, and its song accompanies the woodman as he is ‘led home silently through clean woodland’. This brings the poem back to the North of England, but the beginning of the fourth section presents an amalgamated space that compacts disparate areas of the Celtic periphery. Bunting’s vision of Northumbria is flecked with Irish, Scottish, and Welsh ‘deposits’ and locales, and the beginning of the fourth section of Briggflatts is the space where these materials are gathered together. Coming just after the poem’s far journey to Persia and just before the final section’s transcendent turn to the stars, the fourth section serves two functions. To take the second first: about halfway through the section, there is a recapitulation. After a stanza about Domenico Scarlatti’s sonata form that serves as an embedded ars poetica (‘It is time to consider how Domenico Scarlatti / condensed so much music into so few bars / with never a crabbed turn or congested cadence’), the poem begins again. We are returned first
to the opening scene of childhood love, and then to the second section’s description of the young poet’s urban anomie (‘Shamble, cold, content with beer and pickles, / towards a taciturn lodging among strangers’). After an inset song of dejection and survival (‘Where rats go go I’), the poem ends with a moment of grim lassitude, which provides a nadir out of which to build the stunning act of poetic repair and recovery that constitutes the poem’s final part.45

What I have just described takes up a bit more than half of the poem’s fourth part (ll. 44–97), and is divided into six variably sized stanzas. The first forty-three lines – long lines organised into one continuous verse paragraph – are up to something quite different. They begin by imagining the aftermath of the Battle of Catraeth (in Yorkshire), a seventh-century defeat of the Britons by the Saxons. The early Welsh poet Aneurin wrote about this battle in his epic poem *Y Gododdin* and he is the first historical figure to make an appearance in the section: ‘I hear Aneurin number the dead, his nipped voice.’ In what follows, Bunting constellates figures from early Britain who are associated with Northumbria, many of whom also have connections to Ireland, Scotland, and, especially, Wales. Along with Aneurin and the early Welsh poet Taliesin (who are described as ‘clear Cymric voices’), there is mention of Ida, Columba, Columbanus, Aidan, and Cuthbert, along with ‘girls from Teesdale and Wensleydale’.46 Peter Makin describes this section thus: ‘the layers of history weave together’.47 This is surely true, but it is also somewhat too tidy. If the layers of history are being woven together here, and if Bunting’s models are – as they are throughout *Briggflatts* – the intricate patterning of the Lindisfarne Gospels and complex musical forms such as Scarlatti’s sonatas, then this long opening stanza of part four is so overly intricate as to be hermetic. Indeed, if the passage about Scarlatti that follows (‘never a crabbed turn or congested cadence’) is the poem’s inset primer, then the forty-three lines that precede it comprise a proleptic counter-example.

After the Welsh poets and what Bunting calls ‘the Anglo-Celtic saints’ are introduced, there follows a brief bestiary in which the violence of the battle is transferred on to the natural world.48 This
long stanza then ends with perhaps the most confounding passage in the poem:

Can you trace shuttles thrown
like drops from a fountain, spray, mist of spiderlines
bearing the rainbow, quoits round the draped moon;
shuttles like random dust desert whirlwinds hoy at their tormenting sun?
Follow the clue patiently and you will understand nothing.
Lice in its seams despise the jacket shrunk to the world’s core,
crawl with toil to glimpse
from its shoulders walls of flame which could they reach
they’d crackle like popcorn in a skillet.49

The Lindisfarne Gospel’s intricate weave appears as a shuttling set of substances and materials – water, web, jewel, dusty desert air – and the question is answered with a refusal to answer: ‘Follow the clue patiently and you will understand nothing.’ A certain kind of readerly path is foreclosed, and, if we are to heed Bunting’s warning, then marking the play of sound and image has to suffice. And yet, the intense weirdness of the stanza’s final image produces an even stronger desire for the reader to ‘Follow the clue’. This pending lice apocalypse apotheosises all that has come before. The poem’s scales are wrecked – a jacket becomes ‘the world’s core’ – and the strangely poised lice glimpse the ‘walls of flame’ that they cannot reach. The bathetic final simile undermines the passage’s destructive momentum, and the earlier litany of Celtic poets and saints is obscured by the ‘walls of flame’ and the grotesque image of popping lice.

Right after this there is a stanza break, which is followed by the utterly limpid passage about Scarlatti that I mentioned earlier. In tracking the oddities of this passage, I am less interested in exactly what is happening in these figural transformations, and more concerned with the simple fact that they happen where they do. Part three comes to a peaceful rest with the woodman walking home as the slowworm’s song echoes through the trees. The second half of part four recapitulates the beginning so as to prepare for the sublimities of section five. The first half of section four, however, is consistently vexing and self-vexed. It aims to build a vision of
historical coherence and cultural unity that it then goes to great lengths to dismantle – to destroy in a miniature instance of apocalyptic fire. The text confounds itself just at the point at which Celtic figures and materials that had been implicit all along are made explicit. Bunting’s *Briggflatts* is perhaps the most internally coherent and formally unified long poem in the British modernist canon, which makes it even more intriguing that this ruptural moment occurs just as its Celtic undercurrents rise to the surface.

By stringing together a series of British and Irish modernist texts by way of their unseasonability, and by connecting this jerry-rigged notion of unseasonability to their incorporation of Celtic materials, I have aimed to provide one path through a body of work that needs readers and critics to forge more paths through it. These often anomalous late modernist poems can tell us something more broadly about how Celtic cultural and linguistic materials were circulating within Britain and Ireland at a mightily complex political and social moment: in the strange middle of the twentieth century; after the major instance of decolonisation in the British Isles and ongoing decolonisation in Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean; amidst two world wars that reshaped global geopolitics and recalibrated the relationship among the different entities that occupy the archipelago off the north-west coast of Europe; after the major Celtic revival had occurred and been superseded; and before anticolonial and devolutionary struggles that occur in Britain and Northern Ireland later in the century. Perhaps, these unseasonable anglophone poems – and others that could be thought alongside of them, by Lynette Roberts, R. S. Thomas, Norman MacCaig, W. S. Graham, and several others – precisely by their internal incommensurabilities and formal torsions map somewhat too well the incongruities and contradictions of their own historical conditions.

Notes

8. For a marvellous reading of *A Drunk Man* that considers the way in which these registers coalesce (and don’t), see Ian Duncan, “‘Upon the thistle they’re impaled’: Hugh MacDiarmid’s Modernist Nationalism”, in Richard Begam and Michael Valdez Moses, eds, *Modernism and Colonialism: British and Irish Literature, 1899–1939* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 246–66.
25. Ibid., 70.
31. Ibid., 70.
33. Yeats, Later Essays, 212.
39. Ibid., 90, 53.
41. Jones, Anathemata, 112.
45. Ibid., 72, 74, 75.
46. Ibid., 73.
47. Makin, Bunting, 145.
48. See Ibid., 146.
How does postcolonial poetry converge with and diverge from modernism? How do postcolonial poems understand their relation to modernism? And what literary historical models are most productive in mapping their relationship? Now that scholarship has breached the disciplinary divide between modernist and postcolonial studies, exposing transnational influences and shared historical terrain, these are among the many questions that still remain to be addressed. To approach them, this chapter alternates between two vantage points: it explores the relation between postcolonial poetry and modernism both intrinsically, from within self-theorising poems, and extrinsically, from the higher altitude of conceptual paradigms for transnationalism. That is, it closely examines poems that thematise the relation between postcolonial poetry and modernism, and it reconsiders the analytic models that schematise it.

Admittedly, any notion of modernist-inflected postcolonialism might well seem a contradiction in terms. Though endlessly debated, ‘postcolonial’ literature is typically ascribed to imaginative works written in the shadow and aftermath of Western colonialism, often in resistance to it, such as Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, and Derek Walcott’s *Omeros*. ‘Modernist’ or ‘Euromodernist’ literature is usually understood as innovative writing developed in early twentieth-century Europe and America, from Joseph Conrad, Gertrude Stein, and James Joyce to T. S. Eliot and W. H. Auden. With obvious exceptions such as Rabindranath Tagore and Claude McKay, and obvious complications such as semi-postcolonial Irish literature, the great efflorescence of postcolonial writing in English is seen as coming after the
Second World War, whereas the heyday of modernism is usually ascribed to the pre-war period. If we believe, as some have argued, that modernism is an extension and cultural manifestation of Western imperialism, then the two literary movements might seem to be incompatible.¹ Does Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* fictively enact colonialist racism?² Does Pablo Picasso’s cubism plunder African and Oceanic masks and sculptural forms? Do Eliot’s *The Waste Land* and *Four Quartets* exploit Indian sacred texts?³ And do W. B. Yeats, Amy Lowell, Ezra Pound, and other modernists demonstrate orientalist exoticism in importing Chinese and Japanese forms, such as haiku and Noh?⁴ If so, neither ‘postcolonial modernism’ nor ‘modernist postcolonialism’ may be any more tenable than revolutionary conservatism, anti-Western orientalism, or Marxist capitalism.

But without denying that orientalism, exoticism, and primitivism played a role in Euromodernist literature and arts, recent scholarship has been showing that modernism and postcolonialism are deeply intertwined: postcolonial writers adapt modernist techniques, modernism is fuelled by encounters with non-Western cultures, and postcolonial and modernist writers work from the shared historical ground of a worldwide modernity.⁵ Critics have revealed continuities between Rushdie’s fiction and Joyce’s, Monica Ali’s and Virginia Woolf’s, Arundhati Roy’s and E. M. Forster’s.⁶ They have shown that Derek Walcott and Kamau Brathwaite extended Eliot’s poetics into Caribbean spaces, and that postcolonial and modernist writers engaged each other in cross-racial networks in radio, publishing, and other cultural institutions.⁷ They have uncovered in Arab, African, and Caribbean novels preoccupations with capitalist modernity.⁸ Although modernism and postcolonialism diverge geoculturally, politically, and historically, and so shouldn’t be collapsed into one another as a uniform cultural formation, their many convergences still remain inadequately explored.

Instead of surveying postcolonial writers’ responses to and continuities with modernism, I explore what further light a few postcolonial poems might shed on this relationship – poems that bring us to the heart of the matter by directly engaging modernism. Because poetry, if it is to be read as poetry, demands close attention
to language and form, I concentrate on two initial examples, from South Africa and the Caribbean, before considering a series of general models for modernist-inflected postcolonialism, and then concluding with a third poem, this one Indo-British. My wager is that these meta-modernist poems—postcolonial works that reflect on their modernist inheritance—may be especially helpful in probing this relationship.

The title of my first example, ‘This is not a riot policeman’, wittily entwines modernism with postcolonialism. As published in South African poet Karen Press’s collection *Bird Heart Stoning the Sea* (1990), the poem was annotated: ‘The title is drawn from a painting by René Magritte of an apple, entitled “This is not an apple”’. Like his similar painting *The Treachery of Images* (1929; *La Trahison des images*), which famously includes the words *Ceci n’est pas une pipe* (‘This is not a pipe’), the Belgian surrealist’s oil painting bears words on its canvas that interrupt the painting’s representational illusion. Each painting is thus a painting of an apple or a pipe and a painting of words about the painted image of the apple or pipe not being a real apple or pipe. Self-consciously ‘drawn from’ Magritte’s example, Press’s poem would seem to evidence continuity between modernism and postcolonialism, transferring the modernist questioning of representational images from painting to poetry and from Europe to apartheid South Africa. Modernism has been transnationally and intercontinentally stretched.

As if ocular epistemology would suffice, the poem begins with a command:

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Look:
three sweet blue riot policemen
standing watching the goldfish in the Gardens
somebody loves these bastards
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But of course readers of the poem cannot literally ‘look’ at the policemen looking at the goldfish, and so, as in Magritte’s surrealist paintings and other modernist works, representational norms are both enacted and questioned. Also as in Magritte’s and other modernisms, the images are uncannily vivid, colourful, sharply drawn.
Magritte pushes realist illusionism so hard that he unmakes it, and so too Press’s policemen, delineated by their colouristic contrast with the goldfish, seem suspended between the real and the imaginary.

But – and this is where the poem may begin to mark a postcolonial difference – Press is not questioning representation for the sake of doing so. Rather, she suggests that in South Africa, the real seems surreal, strangely difficult to imagine – that the brutality and the humanity of the police defy comprehension. She gives a political edge to Magritte’s conceptual twisting of the boundaries between the real and the imaginary. In place of a modernist unsettling of the conventions of the bourgeois consumption of art – calling into question whether these signifiers are tangible, visible policemen rather than verbal signs – Press’s defamiliarisation shows up the irrationality of reality under a colonial police state. The seeming innocence (‘sweet’) of policemen looking at goldfish is difficult to reconcile with their vicious acts, and to think that they are ordinary beloved persons (‘somebody loves these bastards’) is hard to square with their being relentlessly violent. The tension in Magritte’s paintings between conventional reality and its defamiliarisation is transferred here to the disjunction between the policemen’s humanity and their violence. This postcolonial poet adapts modernism’s violation of representational norms – from Picasso and Georges Braque to Magritte, and from Stein and Eliot to Joyce – to probe the representation-warping contradictions of apartheid.

But the difference should not be overdrawn. If Press is sharpening modernism’s political edge, she is no less preoccupied than the modernists with aesthetic craft. She uses the resources of poetry to convey a strangely idealist realism like that of Magritte’s suspended apple or pipe, seemingly real but out of time, hanging in space against a blank background: the repeated participles ‘standing watching’, the assonance of ‘three sweet’, the alliteration of ‘goldfish in the Gardens’, the syntactic repetition, the seemingly innocent figures. The policemen ‘with their sharp moustaches / and their smooth, fat cheeks’ seem almost like dolls, the sharpness of their moustaches contrasted with the plumpness of their cheeks. Heightening the contrast between care and cruelty, Press distils life under apartheid
in a few pellucid images, including words redolent of fairytale: ‘somebody takes the wicked blue cap off at night / and strokes the poisonous brow’. When violence enters directly into the poem, it, too, is suspended in stylised language:

how they must hate
something, to beat and beat
at women’s breasts and the heads of children
until they bleed and crack

Enjambing ‘hate’ to make the emotion seem all the more frightfully unfocused, Press alliterates and repeats (beat, beat, breasts, bleed) and abstracts the policemen’s victims in elemental images of bleeding female breasts and children’s cracked heads. When she closes the poem by repeating and varying the beginning (‘fat, furious riot policemen / watching the goldfish in the Gardens’), the police surveillance seems ridiculous yet all-encompassing. With an unpunctuated starkness, Press redeployes the modernist sense of the irrationality of the seemingly rational to conjure the world of a postcolonial police state. Like fellow white South African writer J. M. Coetzee’s fiction, her poetry often has a dreamlike surreality and isn’t agitprop, documentary, or socialist realism. But even as it abstracts and stylises, even as it surreally suspends animation, a poem such as ‘This is not a riot policeman’ engages a more fully embodied social and political world than do Magritte’s time-and-space-defying images. Modernist-inflected postcolonialism, as illustrated by Press’s poem, builds on modernist defamiliarisation but intensifies its social and political critique.

The terms by which Press’s poem seems to distinguish the postcolonial from the modernist may well be expected, since so-called postmodern literature, coming after high modernism, is often described as politicising and de-universalising modernism and since postcolonial writing is often conceived as being political. But do they apply across the board? Let us look at another contemporary postcolonial poem that is equally deliberate about its relation to a modernist interlocutor. Jamaican poet Lorna Goodison’s ‘Quest’ recounts how a Caribbean schoolgirl – the poet’s personal experience cast in the
third person – responds when she hears a teacher read Eliot’s ‘Journey of the Magi’. Other postcolonial poets have testified to the catalytic role Eliot played in their poetic development, including Derek Walcott and most famously the Barbadian Kamau Brathwaite, who despite his revolutionary, Africa-centred poetics, credited the conservative Anglo-Catholic royalist with introducing into Caribbean poetry ‘the notion of the speaking voice, the conversational tone’. Brathwaite’s poems evidence the impact of Eliot’s satiric couplets, jazz rhythms, disjunctive tone, vernacular diction, multiple personae, and apocalypticism. Like Brathwaite, Goodison describes hearing Eliot rather than reading him, thus assimilating him to Caribbean orature, but her emphasis is quite different from Brathwaite’s.

According to Goodison’s ‘Quest’, Eliot’s ‘Journey of the Magi’ played a pivotal role in a Caribbean schoolgirl’s awakening to adulthood and to poetry:

At age twelve, six days
into the start of a year
this girl was seated

in a whitewashed classroom;
dreaming herself outdoors
and up Lignum vitae trees

and heard a teacher read:
‘A cold coming we had of it’.  

In this initiation scene, a girl at the threshold of change finds her daydream infiltrated by a new language and imagery. The poem is precisely fixed in time by the 6 January feast of the Epiphany that celebrates the visit of the Magi to baby Jesus, and by the girl’s age and the school calendar (when Goodison was twelve in 1959, Jamaica was part of the West Indies Federation – like the schoolgirl, on the verge of independence). It is also firmly located in the space of the classroom and the local environment (the Lignum vitae is indigenous to Jamaica and bears its national flower). But the girl unmoors herself from space-time coordinates, floating imaginatively outside the confines of the stark classroom, and this dreaminess helps open
her to being further dislocated by Eliot’s poem – from Jamaica to a
colder climate, and from her escapist fantasy to an unknown poet’s
and the Magi’s dreams.

In the step-like trimeter tercets that enact her stepping from one
world into another, she says she ‘went on a journey / / with men whose
names / or what they went in search of / never revealed’. By omitting
the auxiliary verb ‘was’ before ‘revealed’ (a change from manuscript),
Goodison accentuates the mystery of this quest and sounds the West
Indian tongue, a hint picked up in the next creolised verb, ‘rung’, which
even rhymes with ‘tongue’:

She only recalls that when
a prefect rung the lunch bell
she was wrenched from the ride

with those men on a quest
and that she tested on her tongue
the words ‘refractory’

and ‘silken’ as adjectives for herself,
as hints for her own journey; girl exited
room with vaulted ceiling, disoriented.14

The schoolgirl’s estrangement echoes the Magi’s disorientation in
Eliot’s poem, feeling ‘no longer at ease’ in the kingdoms to which
they return after witnessing Christ’s birth.15 But whereas the Magi’s
disorientation, like Eliot’s, is primarily religious, Goodison’s is
imaginative. Centrally concerned with the biblical quest story, as
mediated by Lancelot Andrewes’s Christmas sermon (‘A cold com-
ing we had of it’), Eliot’s 1927 poem also echoes Guadeloupan-born
Saint-John Perse’s long poem Anabase (1924): Eliot was translating it
at the time and called it a ‘series of images of migration’ in Asia,
cross-cultural movements that figure in part his own displacement
through his conversion to Anglo-Catholicism.16 Goodison’s imagi-
native migration on the back of Eliot’s words and wandering Magi
thus adds yet another layer to the cross-cultural mix of a modernist
poem already entwined with the Caribbean. Bearing out Eliot’s claim
‘that genuine poetry can communicate before it is understood’,17 the
schoolgirl – stimulated and deracinated by the otherness of Eliot’s
somewhat opaque, syncretic modernism – embarks on her own poetic migration. Instead of responding, as does Brathwaite, among other postcolonial writers, that ‘the imported alien experience of the snowfall’ in British poems has ‘little to do, really with the environment and reality of the Caribbean’, and that in Caribbean education, ‘People were forced to learn things that had no relevance to themselves’, Goodison’s schoolgirl is inspired by that climatic and environmental alienness to strengthen the alternative-world-creating power of her imagination.

Already evidenced by the transitive use of the verb dream (‘dreaming herself outdoors’), the schoolgirl’s imaginative capacity takes on a more specifically verbal and proto-poetic texture as she tests and tastes new words. An alliterative and internally rhymed sequence of words – ‘quest / and that she tested on her tongue’ – both bespeaks poetic awakening to the sensual materiality of words and demonstrates it, signifiers felt in their weight and texture, or what the linguist Roman Jakobson dubbed ‘poeticity’ or the ‘poetic function’. As she tries the words on herself, they point in opposite directions that the poem reconciles: both ‘refractory’, as in Goodison’s self-directedness and immunity to fashion, and ‘silken’, as in her seamlessly incorporating Eliotic diction, Jamaican Creole, and other ingredients. Goodison enacts a kind of reverse exoticism, in which modernism is the mysterious other that stirs the poetic imagination. It is less a tool that sharpens and stylises a social and political art, as in Press, and more a source of inspiration and evocation, closer to the suggestiveness prized in the symbolist strand of modernism. Through its verbal and narrative disorientations, its translocational bridging of distant geographies, modernism helps the poet develop an imagination that spans local experience and unfamiliar cultures elsewhere. Witness her poem’s confluences of tropical warmth and cold snows, Standard English and Creole, Jamaica and biblical Asia, Anglo-American Eliot and the Franco-Guadeloupan Perse. Like Eliot’s poetry, Goodison’s turns among different verbal, geographic, and cultural realms, a code-switching and translocal poetics, but unlike Eliot’s, Goodison’s has a strongly personal dimension, if consonant with Caribbean cross-culturalism.
Whether personalising and translocalising an already syncretic but purportedly impersonal art, as Goodison does, or historicising and politicising the disjunctive knitting together of dream and reality, as Press does, modernist-engaged postcolonial poetry enacts both continuities and differences between these cultural formations.

With these self-theorising poems in mind, let’s exchange our close-up poetry zoom for a wide-angle conceptual lens and consider four general models for the relation between modernism and postcolonialism. While it’s important to discern the intricate verbal and formal strategies by which specific poems engage with modernism, we also need to find a way to talk about such literary historical relations in the aggregate, and here conceptual paradigms prove indispensable. A first way of theorising the relation of postcolonialism to modernism is the idea that Western modernist inventions and techniques spread from the metropolitan centre to the postcolonial peripheries, a variety of diffusionism. In our two examples, Magritte’s surrealism spreads to apartheid-era South Africa, and Eliot’s syncretic modernism to 1950s Jamaica. Metropolitan modernism diffuses outward, whether because it seems formally advanced and inventive, or because an uneven world system makes for outflows from rich to less powerful regions, or because peripheral cultures establish their cultural authority by proving themselves according to Western standards, or because Western works have the advantage of colonial mechanisms of distribution, such as the British Council, which disseminated Eliot’s recordings into the Caribbean and elsewhere. The West-centric diffusionist model, however, also has a number of disadvantages. First, it assumes that all the creative and inventive power resides in the metropolitan sites. But modernism is already permeated by the supposed peripheries to which it is supposed to have diffused, as evidenced by the impact of African and Oceanic art on Picasso, Maghrebi art on Wassily Kandinsky, East Asian writing on Pound, Indian philosophy and Japanese theatre on Yeats, South Asian sacred texts on Eliot, and African and Latin American cultures on Langston Hughes. When postcolonial writers take up so-called Western experiments, ‘they are sometimes “borrowing back” those
styles’ through the detour of the West. As we saw in the example of Eliot’s ‘Journey of the Magi’—influenced, inter alia, by the migratory work of a writer from Guadeloupe—the centre has already been peripheralised. Eurocentric diffusionism occludes the mutuality, dialogism, and interdependence of modernism and postcolonialism. Second, it denies postcolonialism any significant agency. The receiving culture is imagined as being influenced, informed, shaped, remade by the diffusing culture. But as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak puts it, ‘the sources of literary agency have expanded beyond the old European national literatures.’ And as Anthony Giddens states of globalisation, ‘This is more than a diffusion of Western institutions across the world, in which other cultures are crushed.’

As we have seen, Press remakes Magritte’s time-space-suspended surrealism when she South Africanises and politicises it, and Goodison enacts a rather different journey from Eliot’s when she Caribbeanises, personalises, and more emphatically translocalises it. Postcolonial transformation may be no less inventive than is modernist innovation, itself based partly in the transformation of borrowed non-Western materials.

In diametric contrast to Euro-diffusion is a second model, which the title of a primary textbook in postcolonial studies puts succinctly: _The Empire Writes Back_, an abbreviation of Rushdie’s remark ‘the Empire writes back to the Centre’. Western modernism doesn’t spread across the postcolonial world; instead, the postcolonial world rejects it and other alien, Eurocentric, colonial impositions. Struggle, resistance, decolonisation—according to this model, postcolonial peoples and literatures are in a cultural battle with the metropolitan centre, refusing to be interpolated into Western aesthetics, values, and systems of knowledge. Achebe’s rejection of Conrad’s modernism as racist is prototypical, and a range of postcolonial poets with nativist leanings, such as Brathwaite, Louise Bennett, and Okot p’Bitek, would seem to exemplify such resistance. This model grants agency to postcolonial writers, acknowledges differences between their socio-economic circumstances and those of poets from the metropole, and recognises the political stakes of their self-assertion. But poems such as Press’s and Goodison’s at the very least
complicate this model. To see Press’s politicising of Magritte’s surrealism and Goodison’s de-depersonalising of Eliot’s modernism as armies clashing by night is to exaggerate the conflict, imposing a nationalist political paradigm seldom sufficient for the complexities of literary enmeshment. Even postcolonial poets who defy Western modernists are in dialogue with what they oppose, and many others self-consciously embrace, co-opt, develop, riff on, and borrow from them – not only poets we’ve already discussed, but also many others including Christopher Okigbo, A. K. Ramanujan, Arun Kolatkar, M. NourbeSe Philip, Craig Santos Perez, as well as non-anglophone writers such as Léopold Senghor, Nicolás Guillén, and Aimé Césaire. Finally, the ‘writes back’ model presupposes essential differences between modernism and postcolonialism, even though modernist literatures are inextricably interwoven with African, Asian, Oceanic, Caribbean, Latin American, and other cultures. As Arif Dirlik puts it, ‘We are all modern now, whether we like it or not.’

If the ‘writes back’ model exaggerates the cultural and political differences between postcolonial writers and the modernists, another model sees both modernist and postcolonial literatures as more or less the same, in that they constitute a shared response to global capitalism. The ‘fundamental meaning of modernity’, according to Fredric Jameson, is ‘worldwide capitalism’. On this account, the political violence of colonialism is a secondary effect of peripheral societies being economically forced into a capitalist world system dominated by the centre, in Immanuel Wallerstein’s world-systems theory. Propounding this view, Neil Lazarus criticises Edward Said and other postcolonialists for whom ‘“imperialism” is typically cast as a political dispensation’ more than an economic one, involving ‘military conquest, alien governance, systematized top-down violence, social asymmetry, cultural and symbolic domination’. The advantage of the concept of a ‘singular modernity’ is that it reveals the economic connections that traverse the distances between global North and South. And many postcolonial writers, like the modernists, respond vigorously to capitalism’s melting of all that’s solid into air. Walcott’s lament over the tourist despoliation of Saint Lucia, Okot p’Bitek’s critique of the importation of Western fashion
and technology into East Africa, Louise Bennett’s satire on the commodification of national symbols in Jamaica – these and many other examples demonstrate a sharp postcolonial critique of the excesses of capitalism. But this model also risks homogenising vastly discrepant cultural, political, and historical circumstances, as well as literary works, conscripting them into documenting and allegorising global capitalism. Notwithstanding refinements to the base-superstructure model, the cultural and political dimensions of colonialism, as well as responses to it, are seen as economically driven. Works such as Press’s ‘This is not a riot policeman’ and Goodison’s ‘Quest’, neither of which has any interest in commodification or the economic world system, slip into insignificance. More nuanced, less monolithic models allow for the many different facets of modernity and empire – economic but also social, governmental, bureaucratic, technological, cultural, and political.

A fourth and last model, rejected by proponents of the singular modernity concept, is alternative modernities and modernisms, and closely related ideas of cultural appropriation, indigenisation, vernacularisation, creolisation, or hybridisation. According to this paradigm, various cultures reshape modernity and modernism in assimilating them to their regional or local circumstances. Jameson mocks the ‘cultural’ notion that ‘you can fashion your own modernity differently, so that there can be a Latin-American kind, or an Indian kind, or an African kind, and so forth’. And Lazarus dismisses ‘various recent attempts to pluralize the concept of modernity’ as ‘both unnecessary and misguided’. But whereas singular modernity and diffusionism stress standardisation and homogenisation in history and culture, pluralist concepts help to bring out heterogenisation. Rather than positing postcolonial regions as passive recipients of a diffused modernism or an imperial capitalism, they attribute creative energy to the adaptation of modernism, whether in response to local or global exigencies. They credit the possibility of a Jamaican, a South African, an Indian, or an Oceanic creolisation of modernism – each related to but distinct from the others. This isn’t to say that each cultural ‘flavour’ of modernism or postcolonialism is unitary. Indeed, one aspect of the indigenising
model that needs to be guarded against is an insufficiently differentiated concept of the indigenising culture. After all, Jewish South African Press’s hybridisation of modernism looks nothing like Soweto-born Lesego Rampolokeng’s hip-hop, homiletic ‘sermons’ in poetry, with their violently scrambled imagistic sequences, and Goodison’s lyric Caribbeanisations of Eliot’s modernism diverge from Brathwaite’s *Waste Land*-indebted multiple dramatic personae speaking in different voices of apocalyptic loss and transformation. By the same token, the modernisms being indigenised are as heterogeneous as Magritte’s surrealism and Eliot’s religious-conversion-era modernism, and those of Pound and Langston Hughes. And both the indigenising and the indigenised cultures are always already permeated by multiple cross-cultural influences. Other liabilities of the indigenisation model include the possible exaggeration of dialogic exchanges in asymmetrical relationships, and the possible overestimation of the social or material effects of culture (so-called culturalism). Still, this fourth model has the advantage over econocentric models of a vocabulary more responsive to the literary specificities and intricacies of works such as poems, and it allows for continuities and distinctions between modernism and postcolonialism.

Again swapping out the wide-angle for a close-up lens, let’s examine one last postcolonial poem that, like our African and Caribbean examples, flaunts its engagement with modernism and so may help test the hermeneutic viability of these various conceptual frameworks. Written by a ‘black’ or ‘Asian’ British poet of Indian Punjabi parentage, Daljit Nagra’s ‘A Black History of the English-Speaking Peoples’ is cast in the same stanza pattern as Auden’s ‘Spain’, a modernist poem that it quotes and alludes to repeatedly. What do we learn about the conceptual models by looking at them anew from the perspective of this poem? And what do we learn about this and other modernist-inflected postcolonial poems by applying these various critical templates?

The poem provides ample support for diffusionism. Indeed, the modernist poem on which Nagra’s is patterned even describes civilisation as a historical process of ‘diffusion’: ‘The language of
size / Spreading to China along the trade-routes; the diffusion / Of
the counting-frame and the cromlech.’32 As W. J. Perry argued in
*The Growth of Civilization* (1924), to which Auden’s poem is indebted
and which Eliot reviewed, even though ‘the great civilizations are
often assumed to be independent products of development in iso-
lation’, their arts, crafts, and inventions have dispersed and spread
among one another.33 If ever there was a literary exemplar of
diffusion across countless works of postcolonial and diasporic litera-
ture, it is Shakespeare, his plays disseminated from the Globe to
every region of the globe, and ‘A Black History of the English-
Speaking Peoples’ begins with a black actor’s performance of
Shakespeare in London – ‘A king’s invocations at the Globe
Theatre’34 – before declaring the Globe (or globe?) possibly the
poet’s muse.

Demonstrating diffusion, the poem plays on Shakespeare (‘brave
new verse’), refers to Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (‘the Livingstone
spirit turned Kurtz’),35 quotes Tennyson, Arnold, and Macaulay, as
well as modernism’s postcolonial affiliates Walcott and Seamus
Heaney, but its strongest formal and intellectual precedent is
Auden’s ‘Spain’. Like that poem, it is built out of stanzas in an
anvil shape, with two pentameter lines, an indented third line of
trimeter, and a fourth line that returns to pentameter. Like Auden’s
poem, Nagra’s is in parts that focus on past, present, and future. Both
Auden and Nagra reflect on origins – how we got where we are,
whether in the midst of the Spanish Civil War or in a multiethnic,
globalised Britain. More important, Nagra embraces Auden’s
complex view of ethical responsibility in history – the modernist
subject’s self-division as morally complicit in wrongdoing (war for
Auden, empire for Nagra). Although Auden abhors the fascist
nationalists – associated with fevers, fears, invasions, greed, firing
squads, and bombs – he doesn’t idealise the left-wing Republican
struggle he supports: fighting for them involves ‘the deliberate
increase in the chances of death, / The conscious acceptance of
guilt in the necessary murder’.36 Nagra quotes the phrase ‘necessary
murder’, famously denounced by George Orwell and later disavowed
by Auden, transferring it from the Spanish context to Britain’s
imperial wars. But even though Nagra’s redeployment of it has an ironic edge, and even though he questions the empire’s civilising mission and criticises its ‘imperial gusto’, he concedes: ‘My forbears played / their part for the Empire’s quid / pro quo by assisting the rule and divide of their ilk.’ The witty enjambment of ‘quid’, resulting in a cross-lingual pun, calls attention to the material motives of the poet’s extended family. Just as Auden recognises killing for a noble cause in a supposedly just war as a form of murder, Nagra’s divided sense of himself is as both victim and victimiser, from an Indian family that helped perpetrate imperialism even as it bore its scars.

But doesn’t the empire write back to the centre? Surely, starting with the title: the poem announces a postcolonially resistant relation to Western culture in its blackening of Winston Churchill’s multi-volume *A History of the English-Speaking Peoples*, a work that contemptuously belittled India and Indians. While ‘aligning’ himself with Gandhi, the poet bitterly recalls a condensed version of Churchill’s abusive reference in 1930 to the Indian anticolonial leader as a ‘half-naked fakir’. For all its allusions to Shakespeare, the poem, ‘Coming clean’, ultimately turns on player and playwright, ‘this king at the Globe, whose head seems cluttered / with golden-age bumph’, a scatological metaphor that associates him with imperial waste. And for all his reverence for Auden’s ‘Spain’, Nagra’s citation of ‘necessary murder’ ties his English predecessor’s work to the logic of imperialism – the legitimation of killing in the service of ‘the light of learning’.

What about postcolonialism and modernism as reactions to, and encodings of, worldwide capitalism? Here again Nagra’s poem lends support. It ends with the poet strolling along the Thames and remembering the history of an empire, including ‘flotillas of tea and white gold / cotton and sugar’ – a history of violent expropriation of goods and labour (‘sweetness-and-light / / blood lettings’, in an ironic turn on Arnold) that coincides with the history of worldwide capitalism. When he looks ‘ahead’, both physically along the Thames and figuratively to the future, what
he sees may be cause for some hope (the lovers) but also for dismay:

Till what’s ahead are the upbeat lovers who gaze
from the London Eye
at multinationals lying along the sanitised Thames.

The history of British imperialism has culminated in multinational corporations, which perpetuate the empire’s earlier patterns of exploitative accumulation, yet sanitise that history (in the pun on ‘lying’), banishing all evidence from sight. The London Eye resumes the poem’s earlier Shakespearean image of being ‘bound to the wheels / of global power’, updating fortune’s wheel as bondage to the vagaries of capitalism. It is an eye that is panoptic yet blind to the long history erased by global capital. Implicitly, the poet’s role is to recover that history, to remember and attest to its insistence even in the present, and one way of doing so is to think back critically through English literature’s complicity in empire even while extending that poetic tradition. At poem’s end he recovers a literary artefact of empire, Tennyson’s poem about the Indian Rebellion of 1857, ‘The Defence of Lucknow’, which celebrates the heroic defenders of the British residency under Indian siege: ‘Every man die at his post!’ The ancestral literary house into which this Indian-descended poet is writing himself, which once lionised as heroes those who defended British space against Indians, helped prepare the way for the reign of global corporations, now and into the foreseeable future (‘what’s ahead’).

What about indigenisation? Here again Nagra’s poem provides ample corroboration. ‘A Black History of the English-Speaking Peoples’ ingeniously indigenises Auden’s civic modernism for the purposes of an Anglo-Punjabi’s vexed relation to his literary inheritance – a poetics of complicity given a ‘black’ twist, akin to ‘masterful’ Robeson’s mastery of Shakespeare. Like the black Shakespearean performer, the poet assumes a somewhat archaic language, a high literary register that he lovingly mimics and subtly mocks. Nagra resembles the ‘dark pioneer’ in Tennyson’s poem who tunnels his way with a pickaxe into the British residency – or in this
case into British literary tradition.\textsuperscript{41} Self-critically wondering if he hopes the ‘academy might canonise / his poems for their faith in canonical allusions’, presumably in works such as the chapter you are reading, Nagra combines insider and rebel, perpetuator and opponent, mimic and insurgent. He asks in a line of iambic pentameter that both bespeaks and instances hybridisation:

\begin{quote}
Is my voice phoney over these oft-heard beats?
Well if my voice feels vexatious, what can I but pray
that it reign Bolshie
through puppetry and hypocrisy full of gung-ho fury!\textsuperscript{42}
\end{quote}

In a vexed, angry, pumped-up, humorously theatrical voice, Nagra performs the English literary tradition he is a part of, yet restively parts from. Inheriting Auden’s Eliot-derived poetics of self-division and self-criticism, Nagra pronounces them not sotto voce but through a postcolonial megaphone that, like the three exclamation marks in his book’s title, projects rollicking mockery and self-mockery. He blackens, indigenises, hybridises, and postcolonises modernism.

What do we learn, in short, about these critical models from Nagra’s poem? That each can highlight an aspect of such poetry – its diffusionist inheritance of modernism, its writing back to modernism, its critical response to worldwide capitalist modernity, and its postcolonial hybridisation of modernism. Because the stakes in postcolonial studies are often seen as political, debates over theoretical models have an especially sharp edge. But despite what may seem irreconcilable differences in the abstract, conflicting interpretive models turn out, when brought into dialogue with a complex and multidimensional work of poetry, to be surprisingly compatible as tools for practical criticism. Perhaps a pluralist model such as indigenisation is more fully vindicated than monocausal models, such as singular modernity and diffusionism, since it anticipates poetry’s multiplicity; but all these models illuminate an important aspect of a diffusionist yet anticolonial, anticapitalist yet hybridising, anti- yet pro-modernist poem. Postcolonial meta-modernist poems such as Press’s, Goodison’s, and Nagra’s are uncontainable by one or
another conceptual model, revealing the folly of trying to force so complex a literary historical relationship into a single paradigm. And what do we learn about postcolonial poetry from such models? Although postcolonial poetry continues to receive less attention than other varieties of poetry and fiction in English, a method that straddles these different paradigms as well as postcolonial and modernist studies can help make visible the poetry’s formal vibrancy and multidimensionality, its intellectual and emotional complexity, its many-patterned texture and long formal memory and new-making hybridisation.

Notes

5. I explore these issues in *A Transnational Poetics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), chs 5 and 6.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
42. Daljit Nagra, *Tippoo Sultan’s*, 51.
Coda
The notion of writing poetry within a ‘modernist’ tradition today seems like an anachronism. Wasn’t modernism something that happened in the early twentieth century, an ‘epoch fast receding into the cultural past’, as Michael Levenson calls it, which necessitates historical revaluation but which is obsolescent? While it is important to recognise that the ‘shock of the new’, which formed a set of violent and often contradictory responses to the breakdown of the Enlightenment project, cannot be repeated without acquiring the patina of a decidedly un-modernist nostalgia, it would be absurd to presume that the era of global capital in which we live is not part of modernity and therefore does not require a commensurate aesthetic. A persistent line of modernist innovation in music, architecture, and the plastic arts is the rule rather than the exception, and this is resisted in literature perhaps because language is the primary, everyday means of personal expression and shouldn’t be pushed too far beyond its use-value. In Britain, hostility to poetic experiment tends to be felt more keenly than in the United States, which developed a powerful home-grown modernist poetics as well as engaging with European models. British poetry, however, had little of this, as if it were too freighted with the glory of its lyric tradition to cope with the new, and its belated modernist counterculture was largely inspired by the view from across the pond. Yet a similar division between conservative and innovative conceptions of poetry exists in the States, and this chapter, after outlining transatlantic cross-currents, tries to explain the stylistic and ideological differences which keep this division crucial to understanding modern poetry.
In the US it is not hard to see continuities and patterns of influence. Objectivism, which begins in the 1920s, continues long after the high modernist period, with Louis Zukofsky’s major poem “A” begun in 1927 and not completed until 1978 and Charles Reznikoff’s *Testimony* following a similar trajectory. These modernist epics remind us that *The Cantos*, too, sprawls into the 1960s, and the form, which in the hybridity of its use of documentation, prose, quotation, song, translation, makes a decisive break with the lyric, leads to the late modernism of Olson’s *The Maximus Poems* (1950–70). Lorine Niedecker publishes major collections in the 1960s; George Oppen resumes writing in the late fifties, having renounced poetry for politics in the thirties. The mid-century includes the San Francisco Renaissance poets – Jack Spicer, Robert Duncan, Helen Adam, Joanne Kyger, and Gary Snyder – who can be said to be part of the related Beat movement (the Beats, too bardically voiced to be called modernist in style, were clearly part of the politicised avant-garde legacy in the United States, as is also the case with a distinctive African-American strain from Langston Hughes to Amiri Baraka to Harryette Mullen), Black Mountain ‘objectism’ (Charles Olson, Robert Creeley), and the New York School, many of whose exponents, such as John Ashbery, Bill Berkson, Ron Padgett, Bernadette Mayer, and Anne Waldman, are still publishing. (Frank O’Hara, the most audacious member of this community, was killed by a jeep on Fire Island in 1966.) There is also a long tradition of improvisational and procedural work, deriving in part from European sound, concrete, and performance experiments, yet distinctively American in its links with painting, music, and dance (Jackson Mac Low and Susan Howe, to name just two examples). The theoretical, manifesto-driven impetus of the international avant garde is revisited and revised in the Language poetics of the seventies and eighties.

The political, racial, and sexual ferment of 1960s America sees the clear development of modernist practices into a galvanising countercultural force, and the resulting fusion of continuity and diversity fed what is sometimes called the British Poetry Revival.
Until this sea-change in UK poetry, however, there wasn’t much to revive. Modernists tended to be Irish, or anglophile Americans, or Americanised Brits such as Mina Loy, and home-grown modernism comes down to a handful of (until recently) forgotten figures such as John Rodker, Hope Mirrlees, J. G. Macleod, and Nicholas Moore. Post-Second World War neo-romantics such as Dylan Thomas, David Gascoyne, and Kathleen Raine, for all their surrealist and mythical leanings, seem too quaint for modernism, reinforcing the mainstream catechism that whatever modernism is, or was, it is too foreign for the British sensibility (whatever that is, or was). Only Basil Bunting gives us a clear idea of continuity: Bunting was a Northumbrian who met Pound in Paris in 1923, published his first book of poetry in 1930, and was included in Zukofsky’s 1932 An ‘Objectivists’ Anthology. Like Oppen, he had other fish to fry and did not return to the scene until the mid-sixties, when Fulcrum published his major poem Briggflatts. Briggflatts is indebted to Pound yet has a powerfully ‘local’ character, drawing its language from the terse inflections and vocabulary of northern England; it is nevertheless a milestone of late modernist writing and immensely influential in bridging the gap between regional idiom and innovative form, which distinguishes much of the best British poetry since. Other poets at this time (e.g. J. H. Prynne, Barry MacSweeney, John James, Tom Raworth, Allen Fisher) were looking to American and European models to revise or revolutionise over-familiar patterns of English verse; their engagement with the poets included in Donald Allen’s anthology The New American Poetry (1960) was joined by a fascination with the linguistically recalcitrant work of Paul Celan and Andrea Zanzotto, and ‘resistance’ and ‘difficulty’ became watchwords against orthodoxy, even when the tendency was towards a kind of ‘pop’ simplicity. The diversity of the American publishing scene also inspired a new wave of small presses and journals, forging a new spirit of transatlantic cooperation as well as changing the economy of poetry publishing in Britain. One of the effects of this new internationalism was to free the poetry scene from the stranglehold of official culture located in London and its outposts in the ancient
universities. Scotland and Wales, and ‘provincial’ English cities such as Newcastle, became important centres of the ‘revival’, and because their focus was more likely to be New York or San Francisco than London, poets emerged from all places and backgrounds without feeling the need to abandon them. That said, the concept of the ‘school’ continues to derive from the usual centres, notably a London contingent made up of fiercely urban experimentalists, and a less avant-gardiste Cambridge cluster associated with the testy journal *The English Intelligencer* (1966–68). Some poets working from the sixties onward walk a fine line between conservative and experimental forms; like W. S. Graham before them, Tom Leonard, Charles Tomlinson, and Roy Fisher are published by mainstream presses but have little to do with their prevailing culture. Others, such as Tom Raworth, Maggie O’Sullivan, Douglas Oliver, and Geraldine Monk, manage to knit distinctively British idioms with a formal virtuosity that is anything but parochial. Raworth is perhaps less well known in the UK than in the US, where works such as *Ace* (1974) and *Writing* (1982) are as much an influence on the new American poetics as they are influenced by mid-century American moderns such as Robert Creeley and Edward Dorn.

In spite of all this activity, the early twenty-first century condition of poetry, in both the British Isles and the United States, remains locked in a tangible but frequently disavowed battle over the legacy of modernism. The common academic presumption that modernism ended in 1939 and led to the restauration of an organic lyric subjectivity derived from Wordsworth has long been discredited, yet it continues to underwrite the populist claim for poetry as a universal mode of expression that comes ‘from the heart’ and should be accessible to the majority of people unversed in technique or theoretical abstractions. The success of free verse, a naive conception of which has displaced the supposed ‘rigidity’ of traditional metrics, attests to a general acceptance of modernist facture by all but the most conservative poets, yet for the commercial mainstream freedom is identified with the expressive capabilities of sovereign individuals rather than with the objective and semiotic
criteria that characterises the modernist approach to poetry. The reader of a ‘linguistically innovative’ poet such as Maggie O’Sullivan will undoubtedly have heard of Carol Ann Duffy, and might have read her work out of curiosity or academic necessity, but will be unlikely to recognise it as significant poetry. The reader of Carol Ann Duffy, however, is unlikely to have heard of Maggie O’Sullivan and certainly won’t accept her typographically and sonically disjunct work as anything other than gobbledegook. A similar rift may be observed in the United States between the intertextual composition of Susan Howe and the simile-heavy work of Rita Dove. For the mainstream imagination, modernist facture seems little more than pointless, arbitrary rummaging, while for those poets writing out of modernism, much of the work published by the commercial presses, submitted for literary prizes, and read at sponsored festivals, looks hopelessly contrived, narcissistic, and parochial. T. S. Eliot’s contention in ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ (1919) that the poet seeks to escape from personality feeds into a variety of modernist and postmodern practices, from Imagism and Objectivism, to field composition and concrete poetry, to aleatory and process techniques, all of which resist the priority of the subject; but William Carlos Williams’s idea of the poem as a ‘machine made of words’, a non-organic construct that might include subjective effects but cannot be reduced to them, continues to be the sticking-point for those poets and critics who regard poetry as the expression of fundamentally human values.²

This is not to say that the human is simply refused by modernism. On the contrary, its constructivist artefacts, disjunct lyrics, ventriloquised epics, and ludic ensembles can be seen as counterparts to Eliot’s emblem of the wasteland: fragmented forms testifying to the dissociation of subjectivity from the larger ‘wholes’ – history, tradition, politics, religion – which give it meaning beyond the illusion of self-identity. So the poet Charles Olson, who coined the term ‘post-modern’ to mean a way out of the modernist wasteland, argues for ‘a restoration of the human house’ by rediscovering the ecologically tuned energies of archaic ‘man’ supposedly lost to rationalism.³
And, more recently, Allen Fisher, who derives his processual poetics (improvisation on a predetermined structure) from the extended sense of selfhood Olson calls ‘proprioception’, speaks of ‘the nervous makeup, the ears nose tongue, eyes, skin, brain, and spinal system, acting preconsciously, subconsciously, consciously. All of which the process would have to include . . . before that work really becomes human.’

However, coherent or incoherent and politically reactionary or revolutionary one regards these practices (and oscillation between such categories and positions is typically modernist), the point is that subjective responses come to be seen as ‘things’ included in the poem rather than the source and guarantor of poetic saying. For subject-centred poets and their readers, however, anything that disrupts the flow of consciousness tends to be met with hostility. The interminable arguments about the existence of a conservative ‘mainstream’ versus outlawed avant-garde movements, which have been a feature of the transatlantic scene since the 1940s, really come down to the distinction between poetry that represents a discrete, rational, confessional voice, with its metaphorisations and objectifications of the perceived world, and poetry that subjects the subjective voice to forms of discontinuity or does away with it entirely. Jack Spicer’s idea that the poet is a crystal set receiving signals and static from the ether does not prevent his work being intensely personal, and indeed many poets writing out from modernism evince a double ethics of process and voice. Yet the dividing line between continuity and discontinuity (or parataxis) remains the key factor in determining whether a poem belongs to modernism/late modernism/neo-modernism, on the one hand, or might be considered ‘accessible’ enough to be eligible for a major literary prize, on the other. The mainstream is, of course, not a conspiracy perpetrated by a static literary establishment, and the fact that poets as linguistically exploratory as W. S. Graham, Edwin Morgan, John Ashbery, and Denise Riley are respected across the board justifies scepticism. Nevertheless, the tendency of major publishing houses, the media, and the award-giving bodies is to prefer work that explores and reifies the private self.
in iambic-based free verse, which is in turns ironic and sentimental, elegiac and redemptive. Here are the first lines of ‘Voices’, by Sharon Olds:

Our voices race to the towers, and up beyond
the atmosphere, to the satellite,
slowly turning, then back down
to another tower, and cell. Quincy,
Toi, Honoree, Sarah, Dorianne,
Galway. When Athena Elizalex calls,
I tell her I’m missing Lucille’s dresses,
and her shoes, and Elizabeth says ‘And she would say,
“Damn! I do look good!”’ After we
hang up, her phone calls me again
from inside her jacket, in the grocery store
with her elder son, eleven, I cannot
hear the words, just part of the matter
of the dialogue, it’s about sugar, I am
in her pocket like a spirit.6

The line-breaks in this example are casual because they supplement the carefully punctuated clauses; why break the line, for example, at ‘satellite’ when that word already indicates a grammatical and aural caesura, unless you want the artificial act of enjambment to seem invisible? The poem is like a novel or short story in epiphanic microcosm: in first person, it includes reported speech, and shifts decisively from the grammatical poise needed to establish a conceit (the ‘heavenly’ mediation of cellphone transmissions) to the mimetic disorder conveyed by comma splices, just as a novel such as Norman Mailer’s An American Dream toggles between the grammar of ‘external’ observation and that of ‘internal’ reflection. It’s clear we are to take ‘her phone calls me’ and ‘I am in her pocket’ metonymically, because the presence of the simile ‘like a spirit’ indicates at this point that the poem should be interpreted through clearly marked literal and figurative categories. The poem then complicates its frame of reference – it is, after all, a poem called ‘Voices’, not ‘Voice’ – by shifting to a dream state, which includes a reminiscence of how ‘we’ imagined sex in heaven, before concluding with a vision of a map of the globe, where
everywhere a poem of hers is being read. Small comfort. Not small to the girl who curled against the wall around the core of her soul, keeping it alive, with long labor, then unfolded into the hard truths, the lucid beauty, of her song.

The reference to ‘a poem of hers’ is initially puzzling. Perhaps ‘hers’ belongs to the voice on the phone, or to the speaker projecting herself into the dream? The first option seems opaque, and the second self-aggrandising, until we recall that the poem is dedicated ‘for Lucille’, and is in fact an elegy on the African-American poet Lucille Clifton. Now the conceit of the spirit-like, telecommunicated voices reveals a gentle irony: the communicants seem disembodied, just as Lucille’s ‘song’, freed from her mortal body, reaches to all areas of the globe. But Lucille’s ‘soul’, unlike the mediated semblances of spirit, is incarnated in the textual voice of her poetry. The poem resists its own fictions to attempt the sentiment of a literal affirmation of the incorporeal. Lucille’s identity is projected onto stereotypes of African-American poetry as intimately connected with the soulfulness of song (blues, spirituals, Gospel). In this context, elegy becomes a generic affirmation of the taken-as-read, so that ‘hard truths’ unite with ‘lucid beauty’ to stand for the universal condition of poetry, and readers are invited to keep faith with the spiritual/human values enshrined in the fiction of the poem by the nostalgic metaphorisation of song and soul. We needn’t accept this contextualisation, recognising with Charles O. Hartman that ‘no fully recognized voice is ever single’, yet biographical information plays a central role in the reception of subject-centred verse, for example at readings where anecdotal introductions take up more time than the poems themselves.7

Olds is known for her accessibility and directness, yet her work requires readers who have a sophisticated understanding of the ambiguities of reference and metaphor even as they want to cut through these ambiguities to a base level of feeling. Announcing Olds as the first US winner of the British T. S. Eliot Prize for 2012, Carol Ann Duffy (at the time of writing, Britain’s Poet Laureate)
remarked, ‘I always say that poetry is the music of being human, and in this book she is really singing. Her journey from grief to healing is so beautifully executed.’ As in ‘Voices’, poetry’s spiritual value registers as a singing voice, aspiring to transcendence yet constantly falling back into the accommodations of pathos and consolation. In much British and American poetry aligned with the mainstream, song is an elegiac mode which becomes a lament for the self; roads not taken, rueful anecdotes, and consolatory epiphanies are the stock-in-trade of anthologies such as 101 Poems to Get You Through the Day and Night: A Survival Kit for Modern Life, as if a ‘dying fall’ were the mark of authenticity. The voice adopted in this work is essentially rational and continuous, in spite of the numerous academic claims made for the ‘postmodernist discontinuity’ of poets such as Randall Jarrell, Elizabeth Bishop, Jorie Graham, and others; it is a voice which may submit to irony and doubt, which may involve itself in fabulations and conceits, but which is never lost to the signifier. Similarly, Robert Lowell’s ‘Skunk Hour’, the ur-text of 1960s confessionalism, establishes its subjectivity in and as void:

A car radio bleats,
‘Love, careless love . . .’ I hear
my ill spirit throb in each blood cell,
as if my hand were at its throat . . . .
I myself am hell;
nobody’s here –

only skunks, that search
in the moonlight for a bite to eat.

The self-immolating, self-confirming confession searches for and finds its pathetic correlative in the grubbing skunks, with their ‘moonstruck eyes’ red fire’. The poem becomes the template for a mode of address that is modernist to the extent it fashions image-rich lyrics based on interpretative rather than merely decorative uses of metaphor, but anti-modernist in its preoccupation with analogy as a subjectivist prop, so that the movement from the stably unstable ‘I’ to diminished corollaries signalled by ‘only’ and ‘nothing but’ becomes a default setting of the confessional
(compare Sylvia Plath’s ‘Blackberrying’: ‘The only thing to come now is the sea’
10), and readers learn to anticipate these figurative transitions before they arrive. Lowell himself was highly critical of his own work, and ‘Skunk Hour’ is an attempt to bring something of Williams’s ‘simplicity and nakedness’ to a voice hindered by ‘a timeless, hackneyed quality. All this was ended by reading Williams. It was as though some homemade ship, part Spanish galleon, part paddle-wheels, kitchen pots, and elastic bands and worked by hand, had anchored to a filling station.’

Does Lowell mean that reading Williams let in a new spirit of bricolage, or merely that it proved his earlier style to be ramshackle? His emphasis on Williams’s modernist ‘clarity’ suggests the former, though another kind of modernism embraces the latter as a positive assemblage, as in Pierre Reverdy’s description of the poet who ‘thinks in unconnected fragments, separate ideas, images formed by contiguity. . . . [T]he poet juxtaposes and rivets, in the best instances, the different parts of the work whose main merit is precisely that of not indicating too clear a reason for being thus associated’
– which is a far cry from the rationale of the confessional lyric, which says again and again, ‘It was nothing more than an object in the world outside myself, but it took on ironic/redemptive/subtly ambiguous qualities, which bespeak the transformative power of poetry.’ While the confessional voice would have been regarded by the British New Lines poets of the 1940s and ’50s as hysterical, and antithetical to their Augustan sensibilities, Andrew Crozier’s definition of Movement style as the ‘guiding and controlling presence of a speaking subject constructing the poem’s framework of interpretation around its personal authority’ holds for all writing which binds the perceptual to the discursive.

Although less hermetically stringent, the rhetorical mode derives from that symbolist strain in modernism exemplified by Stevens: ‘casual flocks of pigeons make / Ambiguous undulations as they sink, / Downward to darkness, on extended wings.’ Olson castigates this as ‘the suck of symbol’, wedded as he is to a Poundian phenomenology for which objects impinge on us in their particularity and ‘self-existence, without reference to any other
thing’. The idealism of this position cannot stand much critical scrutiny; you don’t have to subscribe to a poststructuralist critique of the subject–object dyad to see Olson’s *Maximus Poems* as a perfect example of a literary work that maintains the subjectivism it claims to have deconstructed, its Jungian distinction between dissociated ego and integrated Self being subject to self-delusion. Yet the principle of letting in to the space of the poem ‘things’ – by which we have to mean objects mediated by signs, or signs presented as objects – not under the immediate jurisdiction of the subject (the speaking subject in the text) remains a powerful challenge to the poetics and politics of identity. And this is a fundamental if evolving principle of modernist poetics, whether in terms of the ‘objectivity’ and impersonality of high modernism, the linguistic, graphic, and sonic experimentalism of the avant-gardes, or the semiosis of neo- or post-modernism.

This does not mean that the symbolic mode is necessarily antithetical to what resists self-identity, projection, and appropriation. Stevens concludes ‘The Snow Man’ with the line ‘Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is’, pushing interpretation to the point of an extreme reflexivity far removed from anthropomorphic projection. When Marjorie Perloff contrasts what she sees as a conservative, organic modernist line feeding into the mainstream with a more radical constructivist aesthetic, she neglects the way Stevens’s poetry constructs a horizon of revealed sense only to have it recede into the hermeneutic distance: ‘Where was it one first heard of the truth? The the.’ ‘For such key words in Stevens criticism as imagination, consciousness, being, and self’, Perloff asserts, ‘Poundians would substitute terms like precision, particularity, image, technique, structure, invention.’ Yet Stevens’s ‘dump is full / Of images’, images that form arguments about consciousness, being, and so forth, but which resist easy assimilation. Perloff refers to ‘critics’, suggesting the way variations in poetic technique form the rationale for ideological camps, which then consolidate differences out of proportion to textual reality. Such ‘Balkanisation’, as some commentators have called it, is a key factor in the reception and interpretation of modern poetry, and
should always be questioned. The mainstream imprimatur granted to John Ashbery, for example, has more than a little to do with Harold Bloom’s influential claims for the poet as heir to a humanist tradition reaching back to Stevens and the romantics before him (and, significantly, excluding the American – as opposed to the Eurocentric – modernism of Williams, Zukofsky, Niedecker, etc.), in spite of the fact that Ashbery’s immediate allegiance is with the camp ventriloquism of O’Hara and James Schuyler, and his polyphonic voicing only resolves into ‘consciousness’ by a wilful act of abstraction on the part of the reader. Nevertheless, there’s no smoke without fire, and the compartmentalisation of poets and critics is complicated by the critical claims made by poets themselves. In the case of Stevens, we find a classic statement of what becomes typical establishment carping at the transgressions of the Pound-Williams version of modernism: ‘the exploitation of form involves nothing more than the use of small letters for capitals, eccentric line-endings, too little or too much punctuation and similar aberrations. They have nothing to do with being alive.’

As Perloff argues, the difference is not simply about stylistic choice, it is ontological: ‘For Stevens, “Form has no significance except in relation to the reality that is being revealed” . . .; for Pound, form is that reality.’ Being alive, staying alive, being human (as the titles of three late twentieth-century anthologies have it) – this is the domain of an anti-modernist concept of the poetic springing from modernism. T. J. Clark’s contention that ‘modernism’s worst discovery’, from the point of view of humanism, was art’s inorganic character, resulting in aesthetically incomplete works ‘haunted by figures of inconsistency and displacement, or by kinds of coexistence (of marks and objects) that are more painful than natural’, reveals just how wide the fissure can be between aesthetic and ethical conceptions of the modern, in theory if not always in practice.

For better or worse, then, poetry in the modernist tradition does not equate ‘being human’ with the personal experience of loss. This statement already looks perverse: isn’t modernism synonymous with the experience of various kinds of loss: identity, certainty,
community, faith, ‘meaning’; Gertrude Stein’s ‘lost generation’, Eliot’s ‘These fragments I have shored against my ruins’, Pound’s ‘I cannot make it cohere’? Historically, modernism is a byword for the artistic representation of alienation, fragmentation, and transience. For David Harvey, the complex and often contradictory practices which form the response to modernity attempt to unite the contingent with various models of alternative reality to what Marshall Berman describes as ‘a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish’. And, for Madelyn Detloff, modernism emerged as a ‘set of discourses that crystallized during a time of escalating loss, retribution, and violence from 1914 to 1946’, and which continues to offer ‘strategies of resilience’ against ‘large-scale collective trauma’. The paradox may be explained by striking out the ‘personal’ from loss: if the reactionary ‘high’ modernism of T. E. Hulme, Wyndham Lewis, Pound, and Eliot involved a hardening of the masculine self against infection by the feminine, the fear that sexual difference would be destroyed along with cultural definition, so that ‘impersonality’ becomes a fetishistic disavowal of loss, it also led to a poetics which challenged the terms of its own identity crisis. Peter Nicholls argues that ‘the concept of aesthetic form as a kind of defence against the “drift” of desire’ enabled Lewis’s novels to expose the narcissism underpinning the desire to annul difference, ‘and while there is plenty in Lewis’s work to evidence chauvinism in these matters, there is also much to show that he was trying to uncover a process of social identification which went beyond the categories of gender’. Meanwhile, Pound’s rejection of the ‘instant’ temporality of impressionism in favour of ‘a tensional relation between past and present’ in the image-complex created ‘a subtle shift of attention away from the object itself towards something else which allows desire to be mediated by a tradition or a set of conventions’. Nicholls suggests that the palimpsestic, collagist facture of The Cantos is akin to Freud’s concept of delayed action, a belatedness creating ‘a complex temporality which inhibits any simple nostalgia for origin and continuity’. This means a turn away from pure objectivity as the antidote to subjectivism towards
a problematic relationship between objects and subjects ‘structured’, as Hal Foster defines *Nachträglichkeit*, ‘as a relay of anticipations and reconstructions of traumatic events. . . . One event is only registered through another that decodes it; we come to be who we are only in deferred action’.26 The poem enacts the loss of subjective presence instead of doting on the personal experience of loss; textual fragmentation registers holes in the symbolic order instead of fantasising a whole.

Of course, Pound and his peers are always fantasising wholes, if not of the self then of a more pernicious ideological kind. Other early modernists, such as H.D. and Mina Loy, deconstruct identity less as a defence against the perceived threat to a larger cultural identity than as the masquerade of a sexuality ruled over by men. And Gertrude Stein invents a sophisticated associative language, which defies controlling interests by risking the pleasures of infantilism. Yet all these approaches to the poem share a critical impulse Foster sees as crucial to the development of the neo-avant garde in the plastic arts, and which is relevant to poetry, too, whether we call it neo-modernism, post-modernism, or something less programmatic: the recycling of modernist techniques and tropes not only in terms of their ‘symbolic disconnections but failures to signify’27 – or, at least, failures to signify stable subjects and clearly delineated objects within a poem presenting itself as a completed artefact. Poems of this kind nod to the tradition of the romantic fragment, with a similar resistance to fixed genres and forms, and exploit the lure of an originary ‘whole’ eluding representation. A late modernist poem such as J. H. Prynne’s ‘Thoughts on the Esterhazy Court Uniform’ looks complete as a discursive unit, winding towards a firm if perplexing conclusion. It poses a question that is not quite a question:

How can we sustain such constant loss.
I ask myself this, knowing that the world
is my pretext for this return through it, and
that we go more slowly as we come back
more often to the feeling that rejoins the whole.
The authority of the speaker suggests that this convoluted and recursive argument will resolve into a coherent theology, as indeed it might if one were to apply enough interpretative pressure. Yet that word ‘sustain’ means both to suffer the blows of loss and to hold on to pain, so that the speaking subject, alternating between I and We, negotiates ‘feeling’ as a splitting of motives, the ‘whole’ a death-drive ‘beholding the / complete elation of our end’. This is elegy as anti-elegy: if the poem is more Eliot-Stevens than Pound-Williams in privileging lyric over collage (‘its propensity is to interiorize as ambiguity or outright contradiction those conflicts that other mimetic forms conspicuously exteriorize’), it studiously avoids pathos by declining the stock response of the dying fall. While Prynne tends to be allied with Pound and Olson, his later work remains lyrical rather than serial, and it can be said to ‘sustain’ attention to the voicing of English poetry since Cædmon. A recent collection is called *Sub Songs* (2010), suggesting that these pieces are pitched below the level of lyric or a subversion of the genre. Titles like ‘Creosote Damping’ and ‘Accept on Probate’ offer keys without locks in which to turn them, and the random contiguity of each chunk of text cannot be translated into matrices which represent the poem as a kind of ‘well-wrought urn’. Always there is the lure of this kind of thematic meaning, but without the revelation of a guiding metaphor or originary voice:

This fever in crisis by the window, shadows excused now by objects presumed inwardly outside, will must cast out inducement abatement it’s a swerve no yet slice contained recluse demurrer, not a trace.

The traits of a critical self supplemented by what remains outside and excluded from it, spliced segments of voices that might be presumed outwardly inward as well as inwardly outward (‘it’s a swerve no yet’), imperative statements that abstract sense while uncannily implicating the subject in emotional and political space (‘will must cast out / inducement abatement’; later, ‘all guesswork capital voids none in / first natural trim’): as soon as I single out a passage or trope as representative it swerves away into something
else, displaying the reflexivity Jacques Derrida ascribes to Mallarméan literature.\(^3\) There is no closure or restitution, and the *retrait*, as Derrida calls it, traces the illusion of a reflexive totalization by a theme or concept... grounded in the representational effacement of their position as marks within the chain that they tend to govern. Because of the re-mark, self-representation and self-reflection never quite take place. A theme or concept can only designate the text *en abyme*; that is, its representation is the representation of a representation.\(^1\)

At its worst, Prynne’s work suffers from the ‘terminal autolysis’ of which he accuses the Language poets – the repetition of similar gestures ad nauseam, which is perhaps the logical outcome of a machine made of words.\(^2\) At its best, as in *The Oval Window* (1983), it makes for poetry of extraordinary tonal agility and visceral materialism. While Mallarmé wanted to exclude what he saw as debased ‘economic’ language from the realm of pure poetry, Prynne jams the parlance of an instrumentalist lifeworld into the confined space of his lyrics, making it function as traumatic detritus. The effect is not unlike Ashbery’s polyphonic style, based on the cento or ‘patchwork’ poem, but it is more acridly quotidian, and processed through intense phrasal units rather than sententious banalities. Both poets risk the failure to signify, but incompleteness and indeterminacy are what give these discursive yet fragmentary poems their writerly frisson. To locate the centre of the poem in a continuous, self-consoling subjectivity would be to abdicate responsibility to a less comprehensible lifeworld in which the self is infected by its transitional objects.

This stand-off between therapeutic ideal and compensatory spleen is a strong element in the work of John Wilkinson, a younger member of the Cambridge school. In Wilkinson’s poetry, the Wordsworthian self, ‘recollected in tranquility’, is always subject to its own part-objects, which are in turn exploited by the drive for consumption in the ‘Human Capital Programme’ he satirises in ‘Saccades’ (2003).\(^3\) In this toxic psychosomatic environment, any hope for healing beyond mere compensation must
contend with what Matt fyttche describes as an objectified and administered world, which is itself an amplified and externalised version of negative ego-processes. Olson’s rejection of the ‘lyric as ego’ remains a guiding principle here, but there is no recourse to an unproblematic self beyond the ego. Any coherence the poem has, according to Wilkinson, ‘gels around moods, whose own coherences are evanescent and of unknown principle’, and even then ‘the kind of deeply displaced and non-communicative core of the person, around which one might construct a preserve of experienced wholeness, is something which “Saccades” . . . anticipates and ironises: “Self knowledge / then is self-seal”’. The poem ‘lifts its song from the dark, back where it yearns to shut’,

deep where the unsingable
cannot be swallowed or hoisted to straddle attendant air,
catches nothing but self-consumes
in panting.

The neo-modernist poem, therefore, seeks various forms of non-intelligibility in an effort to frustrate narrative resolution. As John James puts it, with tongue firmly in cheek:

this will subvert any / deny any / positive / negative
narrative reading
& stress the written surface
with all its opening windows apertures leaks

Sometimes this impulse entails making text into graphic images – so, for instance, is the concrete work of Bob Cobbing and Ian Hamilton Finlay any more or less ‘poetry’ than Cy Twombly’s scribble paintings or Barbara Kruger’s montages? – or sound ensembles and improvised performances in the Dadaist tradition, or by autobiographical disarticulation (e.g. Lyn Hejinian’s My Life (1980), Denise Riley’s Mop Mop Georgette (1993)), or by accidental translation in the manner of Zukofsky’s Catullus (1969) and semirandom procedures such as Jackson Mac Low’s ‘diastic’ method, or satires of official discourse (Stephen Rodefer’s Four Lectures...
(1982)), or by narratives built as much from lacunae as from connections, as in Tom Raworth’s *Eternal Sections*:

- sharply defined periods of individualism
- fade with age, as a rule
- sensation is registered
- expanded around me
- the substrate of emotions
- merely act as gatekeepers
- disrupted by stress
- unlike scientific instruments
- gripped by hands
- reversed right to left
- an inhibition of the recall mechanism
- caused by oxygen shortage
- swamps the cortex
- before we know about the internal world

Raworth’s notational method consists of ‘small stacks of individual minutes or jottings, mostly one line long, pre-intellectual thought-forms that get written down and so extracted from an occasion or situation which goes largely undescribed’. Again, as with Ashbery, there is an uncanny conjunction of intimacy and anonymity, a flattening of voice by cliché and a tonal multiplicity. But Ashbery’s kitsch suburbanism and ambulatory rhetoric yield to a no less playful yet more disturbing and tersely rendered textual patchwork. Raworth can be said to ‘do the police in different voices’, but the difficulty of his work is the opposite of Eliot’s: there is no allusion or traceable quotation, no mythical method or theory, nothing to ‘get’. Neo-modernist poets are happy to let subjective reflections mingle with found text and data culled from a mass of sifted and unsifted cultural material. A dividing line exists between those who believe the poem ‘must resist the intelligence / Almost successfully’ and those who want to resist the intelligence altogether, but in general the principle is not so much of ‘finding a voice’ as avoiding or transgressing the uniformity of voice instituted by orthodoxies and cliques. As Allen Fisher describes his own ‘poetic strategy’, truth to materials involves ‘slow decomposition,
disruption of autobiographical voice through the use of many voices. The danger here is for multiplicity to become a new orthodoxy. If modernism’s ‘general disposition – to radicalise the techniques of art’ means anything today, it is the careful avoidance of self-supporting coteries reproducing stock responses of the ‘innovative’.

Notes

6. Sharon Olds, ‘Voices’. This poem was read at the Academy of American Poets, and is as yet only published online: Academy of American Poets [website], available at <http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/21311>.


16. Jung might be right to argue that the ego, as merely the conscious element of subjectivity, stands in the way of a more achieved sense of self, but the difference between the two states cannot be easily judged by the subject and his or her supporters. The self-diagnosis by highly ambitious individuals of being more ‘in touch’ with the collective sources of the self than ‘repressed’ others must be one of the great delusions of contemporary micro-politics.

17. Stevens, Collected Poems and Prose, 8.


27. Ibid.


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McKay, Marina, Modernism and World War II (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).


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