

A COMPANION TO

# MODERNIST POETRY

EDITED BY

DAVID E. CHINITZ

AND GAIL McDONALD

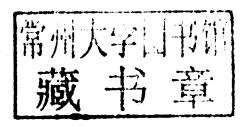
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A Companion to Modernist Poetry

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# Notes on Contributors

Tim Armstrong is Professor of Modern English and American Literature at Royal Holloway, University of London. He is the author of Modernism, Technology, and the Body (1998), Haunted Hardy: Poetry, History, Memory (2000), Modernism: A Cultural History (2005), and The Logic of Slavery: Debt, Technology, and Pain in American Literature (2012). His Thomas Hardy: Selected Poems (Longman Annotated Texts) was reissued in 2009.

Chris Baldick is Professor of English at Goldsmiths, University of London. His publications include *Literature of the 1920s* (2012), *Decadence: An Annotated Anthology* (coedited with Jane Desmarais, 2012), *The Modern Movement (Oxford English Literary History, Volume 10)* (2004), and *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (2008).

Rebecca Beasley is University Lecturer in Twentieth and Twenty-First Century Literature in the Faculty of English at the University of Oxford, and a Fellow of The Queen's College. She is the author of Ezra Pound and the Visual Culture of Modernism (2007), and Theorists of Modernist Poetry: Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot and T. E. Hulme (2007). She is currently writing a book on the impact of Russian culture on British modernism.

Melissa Bradshaw teaches in the English Department at Loyola University Chicago. She is the author of *Amy Lowell, Diva Poet*, which won the 2011 MLA Book Prize for Independent Scholars and has published articles on divas in American culture and on Greenwich Village bohemianism. She is the coeditor of *Selected Poems of Amy Lowell* (2002) and *Amy Lowell, American Modern* (2004), a volume of critical essays.

Sascha Bru (Leuven University) is the author of numerous essays on modernist and avant-garde writers. His most recent book is entitled *Democracy, Law and the Modernist Avant-Gardes: Writing in the State of Exception* (2009). He is the coeditor of various volumes, including *The Oxford Cultural and Critical History of Modernist Magazines*, vol. 3, and *Regarding the Popular: Modernism, the Avant-Garde, and High and Low Culture*. He is currently co-directing the large-scale research project MDRN (www.mdrn.be).

Brad Bucknell is Associate Professor of English in the Department of English and Film Studies at the University of Alberta. He has published on the figure of Salome, on Pater and time, on African-American literary theory, on *The Matrix*, on T. S. Eliot, and on Gertrude Stein. His book *Literary Modernism and Musical Aesthetics* appeared in 2002.

**David E. Chinitz** is Professor of English at Loyola University Chicago. He is the author of *T. S. Eliot and the Cultural Divide* (2003) and *Which Sin to Bear? Authenticity and Compromise in Langston Hughes* (2013), the editor of *A Companion to T. S. Eliot* (2009), and coeditor of the forthcoming *Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot*, *Vol. 6: 1940–1946*. He is currently president of the Modernist Studies Association.

Suzanne W. Churchill is Professor of English at Davidson College. She is the author of *The Little Magazine* Others and the Renovation of Modern American Poetry and coeditor, with Adam McKible, of *Little Magazines and Modernism: New Approaches*. She has published on modernist and Harlem Renaissance magazines, poetry, and pedagogy in various journals and collections. She is also founder and editor of the website "Index of Modernist Magazines."

John Xiros Cooper is Professor Emeritus in English at the University of British Columbia. He has contributed books, articles, and papers on twentieth-century writers, modernism, the culture of modernity, poetry, and the history of modernist publishing.

Stephen Cope is Visiting Assistant Professor of English at Hobart and William Smith Colleges in Geneva, NY, and serves on the summer faculty at Bard College. He is the editor of *George Oppen: Selected Prose, Daybooks, and Papers* (2007). His present work focuses on the cultural politics of literary experimentalism in modernist literature.

Michael Coyle is Professor of English at Colgate University. Founding President of the Modernist Studies Association, he currently serves as President of the T. S. Eliot Society. His interest in modernist poetry and popular culture informs his *Ezra Pound*, *Popular Genres, and the Discourse of Culture* (1995), as well as his work in *Broadcasting Modernism* (2009), record reviews for *Cadence*, and articles on the relation of jazz and rock to folk and popular culture.

Anthony Cuda is an Associate Professor at the University of North Carolina, Greensboro. He is the author of *The Passions of Modernism* (2010) and coeditor with Ronald Schuchard of *The Online Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot, Vol. 2: The Perfect Critic.* 

Julia E. Daniel is an Assistant Professor of Modern American Poetry at West Virginia University. She has published work on the verse drama of T. S. Eliot and is currently completing her book project, *Building Nature*, which explores the influence of city planning and landscape architecture in modern verse. She serves on the board of the T. S. Eliot Society and has worked as book review editor for *Time Present*, the Society's newsletter.

Leonard Diepeveen is the George Munro Chair in Literature and Rhetoric in English at Dalhousie University. He is the author of *The Difficulties of Modernism* (2003); *Mock Modernism: An Anthology of Parodies, Travesties, Frauds, 1910–1935* (2013); and the co-author of *Artworld Prestige* (2013).

Thomas Dilworth is a Professor in the English Department at the University of Windsor, Ontario; a Killam Fellow; and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada. He is the author of *David Jones in the Great War* (2012), *Reading David Jones* (2008), and *The Shape of Meaning in the Poetry of David Jones* (1988), which won the British Council Prize in the Humanities.

Robert Faggen is Barton Evans and Andrea Neves Professor of Literature at Claremont McKenna College and Director of the Gould Center for Humanistic Studies/Milosz Institute. He is the author of *Robert Frost and the Challenge of Darwin* and *The Cambridge Introduction to Robert Frost*, and the editor of *The Notebooks of Robert Frost* and coeditor of *The Letters of Robert Frost*. His biography of Ken Kesey is forthcoming.

Barry J. Faulk is Professor of English at Florida State University where he teaches nineteenth- and twentieth-century British literature. He is the author of *Music Hall and Modernity* (2004) and *British Rock Modernism* (2010), as well as of essays on T. S. Eliot, Walter Sickert, and Nick Hornby.

Karen Jackson Ford is a Professor of English at the University of Oregon, where she teaches poetry and poetics. She has published *Gender and the Poetics of Excess* (1997), *Split-Gut Song: Jean Toomer and the Poetics of Modernity* (2005), and essays on American poetry. She is currently working on a book about race and poetic form in the United States.

Omaar Hena is an Assistant Professor of English at Wake Forest University, where he teaches and researches modern and contemporary world Anglophone literature with an emphasis on poetry and poetics. He has contributed to Contemporary Literature, Minnesota Review, The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics, and The Oxford Handbook to Contemporary British and Irish Poetry. He is currently working on a book manuscript, Figural Democracy: Postcolonial Poetry and the Politics of Globality.

Miranda Hickman is Associate Professor of English at McGill University. Her publications include *The Geometry of Modernism* (2005), *One Must Not Go Altogether with the Tide: The Letters of Ezra Pound and Stanley Nott* (ed., 2011), and *Rereading the New Criticism* (ed. with John McIntyre, 2012). Her interests include transatlantic modernisms, poetry, gender studies, and textual scholarship. Her current work addresses women in cultural criticism between the world wars.

Matthew Hofer is Associate Professor of English at the University of New Mexico. He has published extensively on twentieth-century literature, especially poetry and poetics. His essays have appeared in many journals and collections, and he has recently edited an expanded edition of Edward Dorn and Leroy Lucas's classic 1966

photo-essay *The Shoshoneans*. He also runs the University of New Mexico Press series: Recencies: Research and Recovery in Twentieth-Century American Poetics.

Susan Holbrook teaches North American literatures and Creative Writing at the University of Windsor, Ontario. She is the coeditor of *The Letters of Gertrude Stein and Virgil Thomson: Composition as Conversation* (2010) and author of poetry books *Joy Is So Exhausting* (2009), *Good Egg Bad Seed* (2004), and *misled* (1999).

Walter Kalaidjian is Professor of English at Emory University. His research and teaching focus on transnational modern and contemporary poetry. He has authored four books on twentieth-century American poetry: The Edge of Modernism, American Culture Between the Wars, Languages of Liberation, and Understanding Theodore Roethke. In addition, he is the editor of the Cambridge Companion to American Modernism and the forthcoming Cambridge Companion to Modern American Poetry.

Erin Kappeler is a Visiting Assistant Professor of English at the University of Maine at Farmington. Her essays and reviews appear in *Modernism/Modernity*, *College Literature*, and the edited volume *Critical Rhythm* (forthcoming). She is currently at work on a book project entitled *Shaping Free Verse: American Prosody and Poetics 1880–1920*, which provides the first account of free verse as a historical genre.

Holly A. Laird is Frances W. O'Hornett Chair of Literature and Director of Women's and Gender Studies at the University of Tulsa. Her publications include *Women Coauthors; Self and Sequence: The Poetry of D. H. Lawrence*; and numerous essays on Victorian and modern literature and culture. Her current projects include editing *The History of British Women Writers:* 1880–1920; and a study of modernist suicide and suicidology.

Michael Levenson is William B. Christian Professor of English at the University of Virginia and author of A Genealogy of Modernism (1984), Modernism and the Fate of Individuality (1990), The Spectacle of Intimacy (co-author Karen Chase, 2000), and Modernism (2011). He is also the editor of the Cambridge Companion to Modernism (2000, 2nd ed. 2011).

Christopher MacGowan is a Professor of English at the College of William and Mary. He is the editor of *Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams*, *Volume II:* 1939–1962 and *Paterson* and, with A. Walton Litz, of *Collected Poems*, *Volume I:* 1909–1939. His most recent book is *The Twentieth-Century American Fiction Handbook* (2011).

Meredith Martin is Associate Professor of English at Princeton University. Her book The Rise and Fall of Meter: Poetry and English National Culture, 1860–1930 (2012) received the Brooks-Warren prize for literary criticism. Her essays and reviews appear in Victorian Poetry, Victorian Studies, and Modernism/Modernity. She is the editor of the Princeton Prosody Archive, an online archive pertaining to the study of versification between 1750 and 1923.

Steven Matthews is Professor of English at Oxford Brookes University, UK. He is author of *Irish Poetry: Politics, History, Negotiation; Yeats as Precursor; Les Murray; Modernism; T. S. Eliot and Early Modern Literature*, and of a volume of poetry, *Skying*. He has also edited *Modernism* in the Sourcebooks series for Palgrave, of which he is General Editor.

William J. Maxwell is an Associate Professor of English and African American Studies at Washington University in St. Louis, where he teaches twentieth-century American and African-American literatures. He has published over forty articles and reviews, and three books: New Negro, Old Left: African-American Writing and Communism between the Wars (1999); an annotated edition of Claude McKay's Complete Poems (2004, 2008); and FB Eyes: How J. Edgar Hoover's Ghostreaders Framed African American Literature (forthcoming).

Margery Palmer McCulloch is a graduate of the universities of London and Glasgow. Her most recent publications include Modernism and Nationalism: Source Documents for the Scottish Renaissance (2004), Scottish Modernism and its Contexts 1918–1959 (2009), and in 2011 the coedited Edinburgh Companion to Hugh MacDiarmid and essay collection Scottish and International Modernisms. She is currently Honorary Senior Research Fellow and Leverhulme Emerita Fellow at Glasgow University, and was coeditor of Scottish Literary Review (2005–13).

Gail McDonald teaches at Goldsmiths College, University of London. She is the author of Learning to Be Modern: Pound, Eliot, and the American University (1993), American Literature and Culture, 1900–1960 (2006), and articles on American progressivism, modernist poetry, and pedagogy. A founder and past president of the Modernist Studies Association, she is Director of the T. S. Eliot International Summer School.

Gabrielle McIntire is Associate Professor at Queen's University, Canada. She is the author of *Modernism*, *Memory*, and *Desire*: T. S. Eliot and Virginia Woolf (2008), and has published articles on Virginia Woolf, T. S. Eliot, Nella Larsen, and Joseph Conrad in journals including *Modern Fiction Studies*, *Modernism/Modernity*, *Narrative*, and Callaloo.

Cristanne Miller is SUNY Distinguished Professor and Edward H. Butler Professor of Literature at the University at Buffalo, State University of New York. She has published on nineteenth-century and modernist poetry, including most recently Cultures of Modernism: Marianne Moore, Mina Loy, Else Lasker-Schüler. Gender and Literary Community in New York and Berlin (2005), "Words for the Hour": A New Anthology of American Civil War Poetry (coedited with Faith Barrett, 2005), and Reading In Time: Dickinson in the Nineteenth Century (2012). She also coedited Marianne Moore's Selected Letters (1997). Miller is now preparing a new reader's edition of Dickinson's complete poems for Harvard University Press.

John Timberman Newcomb is Professor of English at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. He has published three books on American poetry, Wallace Stevens

and Literary Canons (1992), Would Poetry Disappear? American Verse and the Crisis of Modernity (2004), and How Did Poetry Survive? The Making of Modern American Verse (2012), along with essays on Edna St. Vincent Millay, Archibald MacLeish, Stephen Crane, W. B. Yeats, and skyscraper verse.

Katy Price is Lecturer in Modern and Contemporary Literature at Queen Mary, University of London. Her first book is *Loving Faster Than Light: Romance and Readers in Einstein's Universe* (2012). She is currently writing a social history of prophetic dreams in the twentieth century.

Susan Rosenbaum is Associate Professor of English at the University of Georgia, where she teaches courses in American literature and culture. She is the author of *Professing Sincerity: Modern Lyric Poetry, Commercial Culture, and the Crisis in Reading* (2007), and she is currently completing a book titled *Imaginary Museums: Surrealism, American Poetry, and the Visual Arts,* 1920–1970.

Kathy Lou Schultz is Associate Professor of English at the University of Memphis where she directs the Honors Program. Her monograph is *The Afro-Modernist Epic and Literary History: Tolson, Hughes, Baraka* (2013). Schultz's recent articles include "To Save and Destroy: Melvin B. Tolson, Langston Hughes, and Theories of the Archive," which appeared in *Contemporary Literature*, and "Amiri Baraka's *Wise Why's Wise*: Lineages of the Afro-Modernist Epic," published in the *Journal of Modern Literature*. Her poetry collections include *Some Vague* Wife (Atelos) and *Biting Midge: Works in Prose* (Belladonna).

Robin G. Schulze is Professor of English at the University of Delaware and a scholar of American modernist poetry and modernist culture. She is the author of *The Web of Friendship: Marianne Moore and Wallace Stevens* (1995), and the editor of *Becoming Marianne Moore: The Early Poems*, 1907–1924 (2002). Her most recent book is *The Degenerate Muse: American Nature, Modernist Poetry, and the Problem of Cultural Hygiene* (2013).

Vincent Sherry is the Howard Nemerov Professor in the Humanities and Professor of English at Washington University in St Louis. His books include *The Uncommon Tongue: The Poetry and Criticism of Geoffrey Hill* (1987), *Ezra Pound, Wyndham Lewis, and Radical Modernism* (1993), *Joyce's ULYSSES* (1995), and *The Great War and the Language of Modernism* (2005). His *Modernism, Decadence, and the Literary History of Lost Modernity* is forthcoming in 2014.

Stan Smith is Professor Emeritus in English at Nottingham Trent University and a foundation fellow of the English Association. He is the author and editor of many books, essays, and articles on modern and contemporary literature, including two monographs on Auden, and is editor of *The Cambridge Companion to W. H. Auden*. Recent work includes a sonnet sequence, *Family Fortunes* (2008), and the Introduction to a new edition of Raymond Williams's *The Country and the City* (2011).

Eve C. Sorum is an Associate Professor of English at the University of Massachusetts-Boston. She has published essays on Thomas Hardy, T. S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf, W. H. Auden, Ford Madox Ford, and the self-elegy, in journals including *Studies in the Novel, Modernism/Modernity*, and *Journal of Modern Literature*, and in *Modernism and Mourning* (ed. Patricia Rae, 2006). She is currently working on a book on elegiac modernisms.

Sunny Stalter-Pace is an Assistant Professor in the English Department at Auburn University, Alabama. She has published articles on modern poetry, drama, film, and song in journals including *American Quarterly* and *Journal of Modern Literature*. She is completing revisions on a book entitled *Underground Movements: Modern Culture on the New York Subway*.

Helen Sword has published widely on modernist literature, higher education pedagogy, digital poetics, and academic writing. Her books include Engendering Inspiration (1995), Ghostwriting Modernism (2002), The Writer's Diet (2007), Pacific Rim Modernisms (coedited 2009), and Stylish Academic Writing (2012). She is Professor and Director of the Centre for Learning and Research in Higher Education at the University of Auckland, where she received a 2007 Teaching Excellence Award for Innovation in Teaching.

Lara Vetter is Associate Professor of English at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. She is the author of *Modernist Writings and Religio-scientific Discourse: H.D., Loy, and Toomer*, and coeditor of *Approaches to Teaching H.D.'s Poetry and Prose* and *Emily Dickinson's Correspondences*. Her edition of H.D's *By Avon River* is forthcoming in the spring of 2014, and she is currently working on a monograph about H.D.'s late-career writings.

Michael Webster is Professor of English at Grand Valley State University, where he teaches American literature and courses in nature writing, modernism, and mythology. He is author of *Reading Visual Poetry after Futurism* (1995) and has written articles on Cummings, as well as on poetic iconicity, visual poetry, Eliot, Joyce, Pound, and Apollinaire. He is also coordinator of the E. E. Cummings Society and editor of *SPRING: The Journal of the E. E. Cummings Society*.

Michael H. Whitworth is Fellow and Tutor in English at Merton College, Oxford, and University Lecturer in the English Faculty, University of Oxford. His books include Einstein's Wake: Relativity, Metaphor, and Modernist Literature (2001), Virginia Woolf (2005), and Reading Modernist Poetry (2010).

Malcolm Woodland is Associate Professor in the Department of English, University of Toronto. He is the author of *Wallace Stevens and the Apocalyptic Mode*, of articles on Stevens, Mark Strand, Agha Shahid Ali, and Trish Salah, and of three review essays on the year in Canadian poetry (2006–2008) for the *University of Toronto Quarterly*.

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# Introduction

### David E. Chinitz and Gail McDonald

Companions, introductions, anthologies, and other aids to the study of modernism necessarily begin with definitions of the term "modernism" itself, and, in the last fifteen years or so, these definitions have become increasingly qualified and uncertain, even dithering, in tone. Periodization has become a particularly thorny problem, with modernism's start date and, especially, its end date – if any – a source of apprehension and not infrequent debate. Some conceptions focusing on what may be summed up quickly as "difficult style" find much in contemporary literature that continues to qualify as modernist. A different, recently influential understanding locates modernism wherever and whenever the rapid and pervasive social changes associated with modernity are ongoing. By this definition, too, modernism cannot be assigned to a historical period.

In contrast, we conceive of modernism in historical terms as the response in expressive culture to a particular global modernity – one associated with, for example, the final phase of Western imperialism, first-wave feminism, the political and ideological developments surrounding the two world wars, and the advent of technologies of mass culture. The art that succeeded it emerged in a drastically altered landscape shaped politically by decolonization and by the Cold War – a landscape over which the possibility of nuclear annihilation loomed, and in which the Holocaust had been perpetrated. It is not that Auschwitz or the bomb suddenly ended modernism, but, rather, that the social conditions that had nurtured modernism rapidly gave way to others. While acknowledging that any periodization is bound to be approximate and to be strained by limit cases, we see our historical circumscription of modernism as expedient for purposes of both selection and analysis.

An immediate consequence of our definition is a decentering of *style* as a criterion for inclusion, a move that may seem anomalous to those for whom particular forms of

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