Reading
Modernist
Poetry
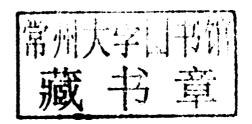
Michael H. Whitworth

Reading Modernist Poetry

Michael H. Whitworth

WILEY-BLACKWELL

Praise for *Reading Modernist Poetry*

"The impressive achievement of *Reading Modernist Poetry* is that it so accessibly explains the poetry (including Yeats, Eliot, Pound and William Carlos Williams) and the very wide range of theories that have been invoked to account for its complexity. Its method is to start from the basics and then proceed in a common-sense manner, and yet it uses that mode to explain why the poetry rejects common sense and insists on the necessity of difficulty. The end result is not only a book that students will be able to use very fruitfully (and its comprehensive section on 'Further Reading' will also help in this respect) but also a genuine contribution to the criticism of modernist literature."

Ian Gregson, Bangor University

Reading Poetry

The books in this series include close readings of well known and less familiar poems, many of which can be found in the Blackwell Annotated Anthologies. Each volume provides students and interested faculty with the opportunity to discover and explore the poetry of a given period, through the eyes of an expert scholar in the field.

The series is motivated by an increasing reluctance to study poetry amongst undergraduate students, borne out of feelings of alienation from the genre, and even intimidation. By enlisting the pedagogical expertise of the most esteemed critics in the field, the volumes in the *Reading Poetry* series aim to make poetry accessible to a diversity of readers.

Published:

Reading Eighteenth-Century Poetry	Patricia Meyer Spacks, University of Virginia
Reading Modernist Poetry	Michael H. Whitworth, Oxford University

Forthcoming:

Reading Sixteenth-Century Poetry	Patrick Cheney, Penn State University
Reading Romantic Poetry	Fiona Stafford, Oxford University
Reading Victorian Poetry	Richard Cronin, Glasgow University

For Roxanne and George

Preface and Acknowledgements

Reading Modernist Poetry begins from two convictions: one, that even at its most forbiddingly difficult, and even at in its most pessimistic moments, modernist poetry can be a pleasure to read and to interpret; the other, that modernist poetry's resistance to interpretation is one of its distinctive features. The book aims to introduce readers to interpretative processes relevant to modernist poetry, and to larger questions concerning the nature of poetry in the modern age. It includes close readings of canonical modernist poems, but it does not intend to deliver ready-made interpretations. Of course interpretations are offered along the way, but it is hoped that the reader will return to the textual evidence and feel free to offer contradictory readings.

In its choice of texts, the present book is conservative in its choice of modernist poets: the most frequently quoted are Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, W. B. Yeats, T. E. Hulme, H.D., and William Carlos Williams. Many of the poems may be found in anthologies of modernist work, and where the texts are available in Lawrence Rainey's anthology *Modernism* (2005), the book provides a page reference. However, the book's emphasis on interpretative processes means that the reader should be able to make independent interpretations of less well-known material.

Some means of circumnavigating the challenges of modernist poetry ultimately avoid what is interesting and enjoyable about it. Literary interpreters often use received wisdom about the author's beliefs or stylistic preferences to guide their interpretations; interpretations which contradict the prevailing view are rejected as invalid or improbable; or difficulties are resolved by reference to something outside the text. While the present study occasionally makes reference to a poet's wider oeuvre, its primary focus is on the texts. Another means of circumnavigating difficulties is to reduce poems to their subject matter: to make the poem the vehicle of a "message," or to make it "about" a contemporary issue. Modernist poets

had opinions, it is true, and they were fascinated and sometimes appalled by the modern world. But they were also aware that to reduce poetry to the bearer of moral content was ultimately to make poetry redundant. To encounter a poem with a preconceived idea of what it is "about" is to be equipped with a filter which will remove its complexities, its contradictions, and its music. Accordingly, although chapters 2–4 concern subject matter, the book is not organized by it. The reader must decide for him- or herself what any given poem is about, and must be alive to the poem's resistance to such reduction.

For similar reasons, the book only tentatively places modernist poetry in its social and historical context. It does, however, indicate points where a certain approach to reading will almost inevitably lead to contextualization. To understand a poem is to understand its language. Language changes through time, and words in different speech communities develop their own specialized meanings. An understanding of a poem's language necessarily leads outwards to social and political questions.

The Introduction outlines the significance of modernity to modernist poets, and how it shaped their poetry. The three chapters of Part I approach three kinds of modernist subject matter, and aim to foreground the ways in which these themes were developments of existing literary themes. In expressing ideas about poetry or about the city, a poet was doing so in a language which had been established by earlier authors. Although such poems successfully express or depict, they also open a window on language.

Part II considers smaller details such as rhythm, diction, and allusion, while all but the last chapter of Part III consider larger questions of literary form. While the book encourages the reader to begin with the words on the page, any reader's interpretation of words is shaped by his or her expectations about the larger shape of the poem. It would be possible to read chapters 12–17 before chapters 5–11, and certainly there would be value in returning to Part II in the light of the later chapters. The final chapter concerns the question of value: though academic readers of poetry are not routinely encouraged to express opinions about value, evaluative criteria silently inform everything we do; the chapter suggests ways in which those criteria might be articulated explicitly.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Roxanne Selby, Jenny Ferguson, and Derek Ferguson, for their comments and advice; to Emma Bennett and all at Wiley-Blackwell, and to the copy editor, Belle Mundy; needless to say, such errors as remain are mine.

Note on the References

In-text references to "Rainey" are to *Modernism: An Anthology*, ed. Lawrence Rainey (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005); references to "Bakhtin" are to Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981).

Contents

1

Introduction

Agency, Modernity, and Modernism

A recurrent image in T. S. Eliot's early poetry can be used as an emblem
of the place of poetry in modernity. The titular character of "The Love
Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" is stricken by indecision, doubts whether he
dare "Disturb the universe," and is concerned what others might say.
In contrast to this constrained world, he imagines a different identity and
a different sort of space:

> I should have been a pair of ragged claws
> Scuttling across the floors of silent seas.
> (Rainey 115)

The sea floor is not compartmentalized by the walls, rooms, streets, and
stairs that characterize the poem, and, silent, is apparently unpopulated by
those who might constrain the protagonist. But "claws" is revealing, and
takes us back to the everyday world of the poem: Prufrock does not say
that he should have been a crab, a lobster, or any other crustacean. He
imagines himself as a disembodied pair of hands. The image is consistent
with his erotic fascination with the women's arms ("downed with light
brown hair!"). Looking more widely across Eliot's early poetry, we see
that the image echoes others of hands and arms disconnected from their
owners: in "Preludes," "the hands / That are raising dingy shades / In a
thousand furnished rooms"; in "Rhapsody on a Windy Night," "the hand
of a child, automatic" that "slipped out and pocketed a toy"; and in *The
Waste Land*, the hand of the typist, she who "smoothes her hair with auto-
matic hand." These hands achieve something, but they seem to do so
independently of their owners. In "La Figlia che piange," Eliot rewrites

Laforgue's line "Simple et sans foi comme un bonjour" ("Simple and as faithlessly as a 'good day'") to read "Simple and faithless as a smile and a shake of the hand." Nor are hands in Eliot always strong: in "Gerontion," the personified figure of History "Gives too soon / Into weak hands," while in "Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleistein with a Cigar," Princess Volupine extends a hand that is "meagre," "blue-nailed," and "phthisic."

Why might the hand, channel for the writer's expression, have become so detached from the mind and the body? Of course the profusion of autonomous hands in Eliot's poetry is partly a consequence of his employing techniques of metonymy, of substituting a part for the whole; but as the hand is the writer's instrument, I would like to suggest that these hands emblematize two important aspects of modern poetry. One is the impersonality of modernist writing: the writer remains detached from his or her creation. As James Joyce's Stephen Dedalus puts it, using another memorable image of hands, "The artist, like the God of the creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails."[1] Joyce's artist keeps control of his hands, but we might take Eliot's independent hands as signs of a creative faculty that is detached from the rest of the human subject.

The other aspect is to do with agency: while in some cases the subject appears to have delegated its work to disembodied hands, in others the hands have escaped altogether. The "automatic" and the weak hands are particularly interesting in this regard, and emblematize the idea that the writer, in common with all individuals in the modern world, has suffered a loss of agency. Individuals either fail to achieve anything at all, because they are too weak, or they achieve something unintended, because something comes between the mind and the hand. Eliot's lines in "The Hollow Men" put it more abstractly and more starkly: "Between the conception / And the creation / Between the emotion / And the response / Falls the Shadow." It is curious to note Eliot's initial experience of writing book reviews using a typewriter: "I find that I am sloughing off all my long sentences which I used to dote upon. Short, staccato, like modern French prose. The typewriter makes for lucidity, but I am not sure that it encourages subtlety."[2] Eliot's hands not only have a mind of their own, but in conjunction with the typewriter they have evolved a prose style of their own.

Precisely why the individual should experience a loss of agency in the modern world is difficult to determine, and there are many conflicting

interpretations and differences of emphasis. It is not the purpose of the present chapter to adjudicate between them. In some accounts, the discovery of the unconscious forced the realization that the rational, conscious will is not in full control of the human subject. In others, the shadow that falls between conception and creation is language: the writer's consciousness that language never succeeds in fully expressing his or her inner vision leads to state of inhibition and, ultimately, silence. Language is an impersonal entity which writers inherit, created through generations of human activity. It is a rich inheritance, and yet words have always already been in other people's mouths. In some Marxist-influenced accounts, the inherited corporate life of language is merely one aspect of a world characterized by vast, impersonal social structures which the individual cannot control.[3] In the humanist tradition "man" was the centre of the universe, and individuals believed that they could exercise a degree of control over their worlds; moreover, the significance of the non-human world was always determined in relation to man. In the era of imperialism and corporate capitalism, decisions are made by unidentifiable committees in charge of monopolies; or, in a more extreme case, circumstances change because of apparently non-human processes, such as changes in monetary exchange rates or the collapse of banking systems. In fiction, Joseph Conrad's novels provide some of the earliest portrayals of the dramatic irony that arises from globalized networks of power. Poetry, however, registered the displacement of agency less directly: it could indicate, for example, in the fracturing of syntax and diction, a human subject that was no longer coherent; by producing poems that resisted simple interpretations, it could force the reader to acknowledge that the world was no longer straightforwardly knowable.

The loss of importance of poetry in the modern world, and the consequent loss of agency for the poet, was also widely remarked. When in 1932 F. R. Leavis began *New Bearings in English Poetry* by saying "Poetry matters little to the modern world," the admission was somewhat shocking for a book of literary criticism, but it was not an altogether novel observation. Like the loss of human agency, the marginalization of poetry has attracted many different explanations. In some explanations, the growth of literacy in the late nineteenth century is the cause. Although mass literacy produced many more readers, they had little or no formal education in literature and literary tradition. They were drawn more strongly to forms of writing which could be appreciated in isolation than to those which required a literary background: to non-fictional writing, especially journalism, and to fiction.

An alternative explanation is that poetry became marginalized not because of the growth of printed matter as such, but because of the growth of a culture industry which is centrally controlled. Poetry would be much more acceptable if it could provide an uncomplicated, readily consumable product, but unfortunately for it and for the culture industry, it too often requires its readers to participate in the making of meaning, if only because it requires them to read it out loud, and very often because it requires them to think. It is worth remembering that the typist in *The Waste Land*, having endured loveless love-making, and having smoothed her hair with her "automatic" hand, puts a record on the gramophone. The culture industry is dependent upon the mechanical reproduction of works of art: what would once have been a unique performance of a piece of music becomes, thanks to the music industry, endlessly repeatable. Poetry had long depended upon the mechanical reproduction of the printing press for its dissemination, but the printed page delivers only the words and not their meanings.

A final strand of explanation concerns instrumental rationality. Modernity, according to this argument, values activities only to the extent that they are means to practical, material ends; it has little time for pure speculation, blue skies research, or the subtleties of poetry. Quantitative knowledge is valued more highly than qualitative, because it deals with the practically orientated, measurable aspects of the physical world. Science is valued in so far as it promises technological or medical breakthroughs, but distrusted when it is simply a realm of abstract speculation. Culture, as a realm of unregulated play, is treated unsympathetically by instrumental reason, but the culture industry, as the manufacturer of culture products, has a definite material aim in mind, and is welcomed. From this point of view, the newly literate audiences marginalized poetry because to them language was a means to an end: utterances were valued according to their content, their "message," not their beauty or their ugliness. From the point of view of instrumental rationality, cultural interpretation is welcome in so far as it can reduce a work of art to a definite message, because such a reduction produces something that might serve a practical purpose; the aspects of art that resist such reduction are distrusted.

There are many ways of defining modernism, and in consequence many ways of establishing what is and what is not modernist poetry. Critics in recent years have emphasized the plurality of modernism, and have grouped modernist writers according to family resemblances rather than a rigid checklist of criteria. The plurality of modernism is constrained by

reference to the experimental quality of the writing and to the experimentalism having a significant relation to modernity. It is not enough simply to experiment with grammar, structure, vocabulary, point of view, or any other element of poetry: the experimentation must serve some purpose in enabling the poet to engage with or cope with modernity. It is relatively easy to mimic the superficial appearance of modernist poetry, and many poets have been labelled as modernists on this basis. Conversely, it is possible to engage with modernity, or at least to depict and discuss it, using only traditional poetic techniques: Thomas Hardy's "The Convergence of the Twain" (1912) is an interesting example. In poems of this sort, the reader hears about modernity, but does not experience it in the texture of the verse. Of course the questions of whether a given technique counts as experimental, and of whether it serves a serious purpose are always open to critical debate, so the formulation given above does not provide a mechanical method for deciding who belongs to the canon of modernist poets.

Ideas of Poetry

Modernist poetry sometimes challenges and sometimes flatly rejects received ideas about the aims of poetry and about the means by which it achieves those aims. Sometimes it continues traditional poetic tasks, but does so using such innovative techniques that the continuity is not immediately obvious.

The idea of poetry as *expression* is the most deeply engrained, because of the dominance of the lyric form; "expression" in this case usually means the expression of personal emotion, though in some cases emotion is mingled with the expression of ideas. It is an idea of poetry economically summarized by William Wordsworth's early nineteenth-century definition of poetry as a "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings." The idea of poetry as *depiction* places the emphasis elsewhere: on "he," "she," or "it" rather than on "I." In practice, lyrical poetry in English has very often moved between depiction and expression. In what has become known as the "empirical lyric," the poet begins with personal observations of the external world before modulating into a more expressive voice; the expressive voice sometimes also modulates from personal observation and expression into first-person plural observations that supposedly include all of humanity.[4] Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach" (1850) is a widely

anthologized Victorian example, while Philip Larkin's "Church Going" (written 1954) and "The Whitsun Weddings" (written 1958) continued the form into the mid twentieth century. Though it has become the critical practice to write of the "speaker" in expressive and descriptive lyrics, the assumption in the early twentieth century was that the speaker could be identified with the poet. Such poems are vulnerable to the criticism that they are valuable not because of the poem in itself, but because of something external to and prior to it: the emotion which the poem expresses, the message it conveys, or the scene it depicts. In opposition to this tradition many modernist poets – most influentially T. S. Eliot in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919) – insisted that poetry should be impersonal. Poetry, wrote Eliot, refuting Wordsworth's definitions, "is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality" (Rainey 156).

The idea of poetry as the *evocation of mood* was at its peak in the late nineteenth century, and exerted a significant influence over modernist poetry.[5] It shares some qualities with the ideas of poetry as expression and depiction, but a mood is subtly different from an emotion: we feel emotions, but we sense a mood; moods have an existence independent of the self. Moods are also more readily understood as something shared; though the idea of collective emotion is not illegitimate, emotion is more readily understood as an individual possession, mood as a collective one. Moreover, a mood can be a quality of a place, and a sensitive individual can feel the mood of a place in ways that break down the boundaries between the perceiving subject and the perceived object. To this extent, the poetry of mood shares something with the poetry of depiction, but the difficulty of capturing mood in exact verbal formulae makes "evocation" the more appropriate term. The poetry of mood had its roots in Victorian romanticism, and in the poetry of the French symbolists and their English-language followers: Tennyson's lyrics such as "Mariana" (1830) provide early examples; W. B. Yeats's early poems are the fully developed *fin de siècle* version. It often includes narrative elements, but the narrative stops short of defined narrative closure; in this respect it resembles the modernist short story. To a reader who expects a narrative form that brings the story to an end, or a narrative voice that will explain the significance of the events, the poetry of mood can appear unsatisfactory and incomplete.

One of the attractions of the poetry of mood was the respect in which the vagueness and unreliability of evocation removed poetry from the demands of instrumental reason. Writing in 1895 Yeats was quite explicit about this: