MODERNISM

A SHORT INTRODUCTION

DAVID AYERS

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For Paul and Hazel

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Introduction

A study of modernism might quite properly seek to spread its efforts across the literature, theatre, music and art of the first half of the twentieth century in Europe, America and beyond. Indeed it ought really to reach back into the nineteenth century, to the poetry of Baudelaire or the music theatre of Wagner. This modest book, intended for readers of literature in English, adopts a more restricted focus, limiting itself to a selection of the English-language literature of the same period, with a fairly marked bias towards the British side of the Atlantic.

This restriction of focus has the advantage that it has been possible to elaborate critical arguments and draw attention to nuances of interpretation and detail in a manner impossible in a study of broader scope. The aim is to help the user of this book to become an informed reader of modernism, and to grasp some aspects of the intellectual, historical and, in particular, *readerly* aspects of the reception of modernism. The coverage is inevitably partial, a feature augmented by the occasional introduction of what I believe to be illuminating sidelights, and the discussion ranges from almost microscopic detail to the broadest generalizations concerning the intellectual and cultural framework of the decades in question.

This approach is not arbitrary. I seek to give a flavour of the variety of materials and methods which are commonly brought to the study of modernism today. The following chapters are designed to be read as a series of interlinked essays. They are aimed at a user who has already embarked on the reading of modernism, and may already have encountered some of the more common claims and approaches

made in the commentary on that literature. So I do not present a history, but try to give enough orienting material to give the novice a way in, while seeking to give a picture of possible responses to the field of modernist criticism as it is formed today. I do not provide the laborious mechanism of footnotes and critical references which are found in more scholarly studies, but I do provide chapter bibliographies which direct the reader to other studies I have consulted, where they will find reference to everything I mention and a good deal more beside.

The method is essayistic, then, but there is a connecting strand which runs through the book. The writers whom we call modernists had all asked themselves a simple and radical question: could art have a real social purpose? This question depended on another and more general one: was there any role for the individual in a society which was bourgeois, industrial, bureaucratically centralized, massified, and in the case of England overshadowed by the imperialist project of the Victorians? The questions were not new, but were present in some form in Victorian and before that Romantic literature. Indeed both of these questions were themselves intertwined in all of their aspects with the broadest general framework developed within the literature and thought of the Romantic period – the apparent loss of nature, or the separation of subject and object. The modernist writers who took these questions most seriously responded to them with literary innovations which seem at first glance to be technical experiments, but are in fact motivated by fundamental social questioning.

Modernism – especially if we include other languages and arts – presents a bewildering plurality of material, so much so that some have preferred to speak of modernisms in the plural. While such an emphasis on plurality is entirely warranted, I nevertheless believe that it is possible to develop an overarching narrative of the apparently fragmented arts of modernism. Broad themes about the nature of selfhood and consciousness, the autonomy of language, the role of art and of the artist, the nature of the industrial world, and the alienation of gendered existence form a set of concerns which manifest themselves across a range of works and authors. With this wide background of modernity in view, it is possible to tell a story which is accurate in outline and which enables the student of modernism to rise above the many local difficulties of modernist texts and see those texts in the global context which they share.

The first four chapters deal with poetry. Detailed remarks on Imagism in chapter 1 are followed by more abstract meditations on modernist reading in chapter 2, which takes Eliot's 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' as its occasion. Chapter 3 juxtaposes Eliot's well-known long poem 'The Waste Land' with two less well-known sequences which are proving of increasing interest to critics: Nancy Cunard's *Parallax* and Mina Loy's 'Songs to Joannes'. In contrast to these works, chapter 4 concentrates on the work of Wallace Stevens, whose detailed attention to the poetic logic of the relationship of subject to object is the culmination of a certain modernist form of textual self-awareness.

The next four chapters turn to prose. Chapter 5 deals with Wyndham Lewis, whose vitriolic treatment of modernity is increasingly seen as central to this period. Chapter 6 attempts to bypass the complexity of *Ulysses* by drawing attention to the theme of love as the work's attempted response to a pessimistic vision of modernity. D. H. Lawrence is approached obliquely in chapter 7 via the topic of jazz, in an attempt to refresh the palate. In chapter 8, I tackle the inescapable subject of Virginia Woolf's politics, by providing a bit of context and suggesting that we should give careful definition to our sense of her feminism.

In the final chapters I present in outline two of the major theoretical influences which have formed part of the reception of modernist literature in recent years, and which underpin, in large part, what I have said in the preceding chapters. Chapter 9 concerns the Hegelian Marxism of Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin, whom I approach via Georg Lukács. Their analysis of modernity is now integral to informed readers of modernism, and I have identified some of the key issues which give shape to their thinking. Finally in chapter 10, I attempt something similar for Jacques Derrida, outlining the basic intellectual necessities which called for deconstruction and set it into effect in the context of modernist reading.

I have been very conscious, throughout, of the limitation of coverage, and even more so of the limitation of argumentative development, which space has imposed on this project. I have indeed made a selection of materials and set priorities, as I was obliged to do, and having tailored this book to a broad readership, I sincerely hope that no one will mistake omission for exclusion. In the same vein, by attempting to set down a palette of argumentative material which might bring these texts and issues to life, I am at times excruciatingly aware of the

periodic loss of subtlety involved. Note that where I summarize, for example, a writer's view on the artist, and use 'he' rather than 'he or she', I am presenting views which I regard as definitely or probably gendered, and I do not wish to rewrite history by making any writer appear more egalitarian in temperament than seems to have been the case.

This is not a history of modernism, but a *critical introduction*. I hope that readers will find it provocative and a stimulus to further study and reflection. With good fortune, they may explain to me, in future years, exactly why my claims are so *wrong*. That, above all, is the nature of the dialogue we call *criticism*.

Contents

CHAPTER 1

H. D., Ezra Pound and Imagism

The poetic movement of Imagism is often the first glimpse that the general reader gains of the poetry of Ezra Pound. The short history of the Imagist movement occupies a key moment in Pound's career, providing important insights into a long and complex development. It also gives access to a series of other careers, English and American, which were temporarily brought together in an attempt to impose themselves on the literary world as the next big thing.

It is worth pausing over the notion of an artistic movement of any kind. In English letters, the notion of a movement which would announce itself through manifestos designed to shape audience taste was not a novelty. William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge attempted something similar in *Lyrical Ballads*, especially with the addition of the famous 1802 'Preface' which appears to us now as a permanent document of Romanticism. However, Wordsworth and Coleridge did not *call* themselves Romantics. Really, the notion of a group of artists announcing themselves to the world as a movement with a collective identity had come into fashion again in the first decade of the twentieth century, as various avant-gardes in the different arts sought identification for their particular style, or combined with other arts to insist on a collective identity. Italian Futurism was perhaps the most recent movement to impact on England in the early 1910s, offering a brash, anti-bourgeois modernism, an alliance of all the arts, and a commitment to creating an art of modernism which looked forward to an increasingly industrialized world. Futurism had the advantage of a very noticeable leader and theorist in the person of the abrasive and outspoken F. T. Marinetti, who took a delight in

provoking an audience and confronting received notions about the proper nature of art and audience.

Imagism was first given shape in 1912, and kept going in a series of Imagist anthologies until 1917. Ezra Pound himself, though substantially the creator of the movement, jumped ship and aligned himself with Wyndham Lewis's Vorticism in 1914, probably because Vorticism offered the seduction of an alliance between painting, sculpture and literature, and because Lewis's movement more resembled Futurism in its confrontational approach to existing aesthetic practices and to what were perceived as being the sedentary bourgeois tastes dominating all of artistic production and consumption. Imagism as a literary movement did not adopt the global and confrontational stance of Futurism. Nevertheless it was an umbrella for an interesting range of writers, and the occasion of an important moment of literary theorization.

The term 'Imagist' was conjured by Ezra Pound to characterize the style of recent work by his friends and collaborators, the American Hilda Doolittle (H. D.) and the Englishman Richard Aldington. Pound sent three poems each by H. D. and Aldington to Harriet Monroe, editor of the Chicago-based journal *Poetry*. Pound wrote to Monroe: 'This is the sort of American stuff that I can show here in Paris without its being ridiculed. Objective – no slither; direct – no excessive use of adjectives; no metaphors that won't permit examination. It's straight talk, straight as the Greek!'[1] Pound would reformulate and develop this manifesto on several subsequent occasions, but in essence all of the central claims are in place. Of course it is not all American, though this claim is not only there for Monroe's benefit. Imagism aims to bring modern speech into poetry, and rejects the English late Victorian style which it considers has become verbose. The comparison with the Greek is very important. Aldington and H. D. shared an interest in classical poetry, and they found in Greek poetry – especially the surviving fragments of the Lesbian poetess Sappho – a directness which they felt had no equal in contemporary modes of writing in English. They sought to recreate such writing for themselves as the basis of a new modern idiom, and in doing so helped provide the basis for a key element in English modernism – neo-classicism. 'Classicism' became the favoured term behind which such anti-Romantics as T. S. Eliot, Pound and Lewis would organize their projects. It later came to take on a whole swathe of political and

cultural meanings, but in its aesthetic dimension the point of reference is always Romanticism. These writers believed that Romantic art was over-subjective, and argued for a renewed emphasis on the object-like nature of the art-work. The intellectual ramification for this came from the poet F. S. Flint and the philosopher T. E. Hulme (both contributors to the weekly magazine *New Age*), and is reflected in such literary critical notions as the 'objective correlative' briefly expounded by Eliot in his essay on Hamlet;[2] Pound, H. D. and Aldington gave the movement an aesthetic reality which in its sheer delicacy seems surprisingly different in scale to the theorization of 'classicism' which eventually followed.

One of the Imagist poems first published in *Poetry* and subsequently in the first Imagist anthology was H. D.'s 'Epigram'. The poem demonstrates several interests of the Imagists, and establishes not least that the notion of the 'image' does not refer simply to the visual image. The poem is an adaptation of a Greek epigram of unknown authorship:

> The golden one is gone from the banquets;
> She, beloved of Atimetus,
> The swallow, the bright Homonoea;
> Gone the dear chatterer.[3]

H. D.'s method is best understood with reference to the original from which she is working. This is an epitaph which appears in the *Greek Anthology*, and which can be found as epigram no. XLVI in the 'Epitaphs' section of J. W. Mackail's *Select Epigrams from the Greek Anthology* (1907). This tiny volume, which does not include translations, is itself almost a model for the Imagist anthologies, presenting the most gracefully concise writing to be found in ancient Greek literature. The original occupies six lines, and can be found in translation in this form:

'On Claudia Homonoea'
Author Unknown

I Homonoea, who was far clearer-voiced than the Sirens, I who was more golden than the Cyprian herself at revellings and feasts, I the chattering bright swallow lie here, leaving tears to Atimetus, to whom

I was dear from girlhood; but unforeseen fate scattered all that great affection.[4]

We might also set this against the version of this poem which H. D.'s editor includes in her *Collected Poems* of 1983. It features an extra line which the author had deleted before publication:

> The golden one is gone from the banquets;
> She, beloved of Atimetus,
> The swallow, the bright Homonoea;
> Gone the dear chatterer;
> Death succeeds Atimetus.[5]

H. D.'s version is more economical, more oblique, and more neutral in tone than the literal translation. She is not simply rendering the Greek epigram, but transforming it into an idiom which is, if possible, even more epigrammatic. The content of the original is certainly simplified and reduced, and this is done with a view to removing its overt emotion. The translation exploits the pathos of the dead speaking her own epitaph, but H. D.'s version, in which the first person has disappeared, is in this respect closer to the original. The classical references in the original (to the Sirens, Bacchus and Aphrodite) have been removed, to avoid a deadening 'classicizing' effect, with only the names of the lovers remaining. The fifth and unpublished line is an attempt to avert direct emotion with a figure that requires unpacking, condensing as it does the metaphor of death succeeding Atimetus as the lover of Homonoea. This notion was H. D.'s own and does not appear in the original, and was probably excluded not because the idea is a bad one, but because the repetition of Atimetus is clumsy (it is enough to give his name once), and since Homonoea has already twice been said to be 'gone' it seems unnecessary to point out that she is dead. In fact, the repetition of 'gone' is itself redundant and ought, by the canons of Imagism – to 'use no unnecessary word' – to have been eliminated.

H. D.'s poem is not a translation, but a loose version in which aesthetic goals related to the ideals of the Greek epigram are reconfigured as a modern poetics which specifically seeks to substitute a laconic detachment for what was perceived as the emotional effusiveness of the late Victorian poets. In fact, there are few Imagist poems

which really fulfil the criteria of Imagism. Aldington's 'To a Greek Marble',[6] though a featured work of Imagism, is littered with 'thee', 'thou' and 'thy', runs for 23 lines, and seeks to evoke pathos too directly. Imagism is interesting not so much for the range of work which it produced as for the intentions which shaped it and for its theoretical underpinning, which Pound, in particular, developed into a whole poetics that in a variety of forms would buttress the work which occupied him for the whole of his writing life from 1917 onwards – *The Cantos*.

Like H. D., Pound at this time was seeking to create a modern mode of writing which would provide a flexible alternative to the Victorian mode, and satisfy a new aesthetic criterion based not on emotional indulgence but on the precision of the practice of writing itself. Pound pursued this goal over a number of years with incredible single-mindedness. In doing so he developed not one but many ways of writing a modern poem, and the extent of his achievement and of his art should be lost on no one – though Pound was evidently so successful, and so influential on the major practitioners of poetry, that aspects of his art might be invisible to first-time readers.

Pound's 'The Return' is a fully realized exercise in the kind of free verse tempered by metrical precision that he made into the centrepiece of his art. This poem is ostensibly about hunters returning to a hunt in which they once participated gloriously, but who now are tentative in their approach, perhaps wary of trying their powers once again. The content is given a classical air, but there is no reference to any specific and ready-made mythological situation. The situation has no explanation outside the poem, as if the idea were to evoke an atmosphere without reliance on any external scenario. Moreover, the uncertainty of the returning hunters is matched by the uncertainty of the reader who tries – and fails – to recognize a familiar situation in this poem. It is above all the sense of uncertain motion that Pound tries to create – the writing is much more about the mode and movement of the poem than about any supposed content:

> See, they return; ah, see the tentative
> Movements, and the slow feet,
> The trouble in the pace and the uncertain
> Wavering![7]