Chapter 1

Why write like this?

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

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

> I want a holophrase
>
> NORD-SUD
>
> ZIG-ZAG
> LION NOIR
> CACAO BLOOKER
>
> Black-figured vases in Etruscan tombs
>
> RUE DU BAC (DUBONNET)
> SOLFERINO (DUBONNET)
> CHAMBRE DES DEPUTES
>
> Brekekekek coax coax we are passing under the Seine
>
> DUBONNET
>
> The Scarlet Woman shouting BYRRH and deafening
> St John at Patmos.[1]

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

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

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

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

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

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

Oppositions and unities

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

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

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

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

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

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

Fragments/Unity

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

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

Inner-driven/Outer-driven

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

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

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

Individual/Collective

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

Present/Past

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

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

> Paradise cannot hold for long the famous dead of Paris . . .
> There are les Champs Elysées!
>
> Sainte-Beuve, a tight bouquet in his hand for Madame Victor-Hugo,
> Passes on the Pont-Neuf the duc de la Rochefoucauld
>
> With a superbly leisurely gait
> Making for the *salon d'automne*
> Of Madame de Lafayette;
>
> They cannot see each other. (ll. 367–74)

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

Ends/Means

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

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

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

Modernist style and modern society

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

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

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